

## **‘Being ‘nice’ won’t save you’ Mat 22:34-46**

**But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”**

Today’s Gospel reading is all about the Law. I know it sounds strange. Today’s Gospel reading is all about the Law. The Gospel is about the Law. How could the Gospel be about the Law? Isn’t the Law and the Gospel two very opposites?

Let’s clarify this first. There are two meaning for the word ‘Gospel’. First one is the good news about the Kingdom of God - that almighty God, the Creator of Universe, comes to us, to His fallen creatures, - to save you from sin and death and to grant you eternal life. No merits required. That’s a God’s gift for you.

Second meaning refers to the four gospels which we have in the New Testament. These are not four different ‘gospels’. These are just four different accounts of the same Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God.

They describe what God did for us, for you in Christ. In our midst. In our history. Two millennia ago. These are testimonies of eye witnesses, who experienced all that is written in the four gospels firsthand.

Now, back to our today’s topic. Today’s Gospel is about the Law. What the Law is. Eyewitness Matthew has written down this conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees. They asked Him:

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” It was an appropriate question to ask to a teacher like Jesus. This was one of discussion going on among the Pharisees and others who studied the Scriptures? Which is the great Commandment in the Law?”

To clarify it again, when they asked about the Law, what they meant were the five Books of Moses. They used to call them the Law, for they contained many different commandments, which were given to Israel by God through Moses.

This is what they asked. Which of the commandments in the Books of Moses is the most important? Fair question. Except, they probably didn’t ask it to receive a fair answer, but to trap Jesus. How?

This question was already the third question they asked trying to catch Jesus in His words. There was an ongoing debate among rabbis about which of the

commandments are more important, and which less. Different schools had different opinions.

Regardless of Jesus answer, the Pharisees would be able to argue against Him saying that actually there are different commandments of equal importance. But what did Jesus do in His divine wisdom and authority?

He lifted their conversation to the whole different level. Dealing with the hearth of the matter. Jesus answer was: **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.**

**This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”**

Let’s see, what exactly was asked, and what was given in Jesus answer? The Books of Moses contain 613 different commandments. Many devout Jews tried to live according to these commandments. For them it had turned into way of salvation.

If one could keep them, that’s in minds of many would lead to salvation. This would merit them the Kingdom of God. These commandments had become like a check list. If you can tick all boxes, then you know that you have done well. God was supposed to be pleased with you.

Sure, these 613 commandments are not binding to us anymore, for they were given to the nation of Israel in their particular situation. However, even if those given in the Old Testament do not apply to us, there are God’s unchanging commandments that are binding to all people at all times. We know them as the 10 commandments.

How do we understand them today? Aren’t they for many like check list? We look at them, if we do it at all, then we tick all boxes according to our own understanding and then assume that we are good. We haven’t done anything terrible wrong, so God must be please with me.

But was Jesus understanding – what is the great commandment? “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” What does this mean?

You can simply say – with all that you are and with all that you have. It doesn’t sound like checklist anymore. What do you do when you love someone? It is not about ticking the box. Done. No. It is about continuous relationship.

How do we express our love? We want to be with our loved ones. We want to enjoy their company. We want to make them happy, serving them with all we have. We are happy to sacrifice anything for the sake of our beloved.

This is what God expects from you. That you will love Him more than anyone and anything. It is not a checklist. It is about being in relationship. About being together. In conversation, in prayer, in the community of His saints, where He Himself is present. This is what it means to love God.

“And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” As yourself. Not as much as your God, the Creator and Redeemer, He comes first, but not less than yourself.

These days we so often misunderstand this commandment. You may have heard people saying that you don’t need to bother with keeping 10 commandments, it is fine if you simply love others, that’s all that is required.

It is not what Jesus said. He said that “on these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” It means that these two include all the other commandments.

We sometimes think that God’s law, or commandments are some kind of religious rules, given by God. It’s so wrong. To really understand what the Law is, what the 10 commandments are, we need to go back to the creation story.

God created and ordered this world. He established the laws how this Universe is to function. He also created man for specific life. Remember, man was created in God’s own image and likeness.

What this image means is that you are here as God’s representatives, as His stewards. Sent by Him, provided by Him, protected by Him. Think about it, we may not be of too high opinion about ourselves, but this fact, that you are created in God’s image, gives you ultimate value and dignity.

Nothing can make you more valuable a person than the fact, that you, each of you, are created in God’s own image. And likeness part, in its turn means that we are to act like God Himself would act. Loving and serving those around us. Denying ourselves, and living for others.

The creation of man shows that we are created for two-dimensional relationships. With God and with others. This is God’s design for your life. This is who you are. Your identity, if you will. Very precious and unique identity.

We can see this very identity described in details in the 10 commandments. First three describe our relationships with God. He is our God, He is our Creator and Redeemer, He has revealed His name to us, so that we can have access to Him, and He comes to us in the Divine Service to bless us.

Others describe our relationships with our neighbors. They show how to live in family and society, how to cherish and protect life, marriage, sex, material goods and good standing in community, how to live in contentment and joy.

You see what Jesus did in His answer to the Pharisees, - He showed that the Law, God's law is not about a checklist, it is not a way to salvation, it is about who we are created to be. The Law is God's gift to us, and it is "very good."

We are created to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Now, let's reflect on how well do we do it? ... Think about 10 commandments... Have you done what your Creator expects from you? Have you lived up to your God given identity?

This is where we can see how God's law works. It is very good, but... because of our sin, it shows us that we fall short in so many ways. When this happens, the Law of God accuses us. Then we don't like the law.

It makes us feel guilty. But this is not the Law's fault. There is nothing wrong with it. It is very good. The problem is within us. For this is our very hearts that want to act against God's will.

That's why the law can be so unpleasant. And still, we need to learn it. So that we can understand what God's will for us is. Then we need to do our best to keep it, for Jesus affirmed that this is who we are, and what we need to do.

By doing it we'll bless our neighbors, and our love will mean a lot to them. But, and we need to be clear about one thing - our attempts to keep God's Law will not earn us the Kingdom of God. They will not earn it. No!

Actually, the harder we try to keep the Law, the clearer we see how much we fail. If not in deeds, then in words, if not in words, then in thoughts. If we try it from all our heart, it will lead us into despair.

This is why Jesus had to come into this world. This is why we need the Gospel. And the Gospel says that actually - you don't need to fulfill God's law anymore to receive His favor.

Someone has done it on your behalf. Someone has prepared the most expensive, the most valuable gift for you. The gift, which you wouldn't be able to purchase.

Remember, our first parents failed to keep the Law, and they were expelled from God's presence. Their rebellion against God's design brought death into the world, and destruction upon us all.

But Triune God would not put up with this. He wouldn't watch as His beloved creatures are kept slaves to sin and death. That's why He came as Jesus Christ to save you from sin and destruction.

Today, because of Jesus perfect obedience and love, the Kingdom of God is open for you. He did, what we couldn't. He fulfilled the Law and the prophets. He loved God and He loved us. Truly.

When He had done it all, and He did it for us, then He chose to reveal how deep His love to you is. He chose to die the death that we deserve. He stepped in our place. Being without sin. Righteous. He took our death upon Himself.

Now He offers life to everyone. Eternal live. To everyone who realizes that we can't obtain it on our own. To everyone who only desires His salvation. He offers it to you. Today.

Today the Kingdom of God is open. Anyone can come in. Anyone is invited. You are invited. Anyone who desires to be with this God. And what a God He is! You see, He doesn't wait for you to fulfill the law.

He knows that you will not be able to love Him with all your heart. Therefore He loves you first. He shows us what true love is like.

For He loves you with all His heart and mind and soul, as you are. He wants to share His love with you, for He wants His love to change your heart, so that you could love Him back, so that you could be what He created you to be.

Amen.