

RUTH 1:1-18 (p. 210)

OCTOBER 31, 2021

MARK 12:28-34 (p. 824)

BLAINE

ALL SAINTS DAY

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Make us vessels Lord, willing, open vessels, eager and able to receive. Fill us with your Holy Spirit Lord, and with your Word. Pour into us your Truth. Flood us with the Wisdom of Solomon, the Patience of Job, the Faithfulness of Ruth, and the Obedience of Jesus Himself! And then, pour us out like a Drink Offering, that we may bless your world. We ask this in Jesus' Name. Amen!

"THE LAST QUESTION"

You're right, Rabbi! Well said! The single most important thing for us is love the Lord our God with every fiber of our being! And then, flowing out of that relationship, to love our neighbor as our self! Everything else we do—all the Rituals, all the Traditions, all of the agendas, all of the preconceived notions of "right" and "good"—simply pale in comparison! And Jesus tells him, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God"!

So, how long do you think people have been asking that question? You know, "What do I need to do?" Or more to the point, more honestly really, "What is the absolute minimum that I need to do?" What does it take Lord, to be okay with you? What one Commandment do I need to keep? And we know the answer, right? We've heard this question asked and answered before, on multiple occasions! And yet we still ask it, don't we? What does it take to be a Follower of Jesus? How should a Believer live their life?

Jesus and His Disciples are in Jerusalem for the Passover. They are somewhere between what we call Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday. It's Monday, or Tuesday, or Wednesday of Holy Week. The Foot Washing, the Last Supper, the Betrayal, the Arrest and Trial, the Passion and Crucifixion, all loom large on the horizon!

Jesus understands that time is short, and He is cramming in as much Truth as possible, when a Teacher of the Law strolls up and asks, "Out of all the Commandments, which one is the most important?" Separate out for me the things of eternal significance, please. Tell me, if you will, what are the minimum requirements to be in a right-relationship with the Father, to be "okay" with God? It's the Sixty-Four-Thousand-Dollar Question! What does the Lord require of me?

Just prior to this, Jesus has been confronted by all of the major Religious Parties, with each one asking questions on various core beliefs! Beginning in Mark 11, the Chief Priests demanded to know by what authority Jesus did such miraculous things. Then in Chapter 12, the Pharisees and Herodians try to trap Him by asking questions about paying taxes to Caesar. Later the Sadducees, who don't believe in a bodily resurrection, which is why they were "sad you see", asked Jesus about the resurrection! It's a trick question, of course, one actually designed to trip Him up! "If a woman has been married several times, then whose wife will she be in the Kingdom of God"?

Everyone has questions for Jesus! Including us! The common folks want to know what's going on! The Disciples want to know what all of it means!

And the religious movers and shakers, well, they mostly just want to prove their own particular religious stance! Which ought to sound familiar! That still happens, all the time! Not a lot has actually changed! But then a Scribe, a Teacher of the Law, a man who is obviously impressed with how Jesus has verbally disarmed all of His previous attackers, walks up to the Lord and asks the quintessential question! “Rabbi! Just cut to the chase! Out of all the Commandments, which is the most important?”

It’s a great question! And notice, if you will, that it is the “Last Question” Jesus is asked by the Religious Leaders! “From then on,” it says, “no one else dared ask Him anymore questions!” Jesus’ earthly ministry is drawing to an end! His Heavenly Reign is about to begin! One chapter of the “Greatest Story Ever Told” is coming to a close. And the next, about to be opened!

And last things matter, don’t they? Last things have lasting importance, often eternal significance! Think back to the last words of a loved one! They could shape your future, in subtle and powerful ways! Last meetings, or last farewells can fill your life with a new resolve, with hope, and meaning, and purpose! Today, we hear Jesus asked one last questions! And His “Final Answer” tells us how to draw close to the Kingdom of God!

How about a visual! There are two lakes, Inland Seas really, in the Promised Land. The first is Lake Kinneret, or the Sea of Galilee. Maybe you’ve heard of it? It’s lush and lavish there. The waters teem with life. All kinds of people live and work around Galilee.

This great sea gets its life-giving water from the Jordan River on the north end. And on the south end, the Jordan flows out of it. Down through the Jordan Valley. All the way to the other sea. The Salt Sea, or Dead Sea. Maybe you've heard of it? Nothing lives in the Dead Sea. There are no fish there at all. No vegetation. The minerals that collect there, the salts and such, smother all life! You see, the Dead Sea has no outlet.

The same freshwater from the Jordan flows in from the north, just like it does in Galilee. The same freshwater that provides life in the north, pours into the Dead Sea as well. But because there is no outflow, it becomes dead. And according to Jonathan Cahn, the author of one of the daily devotionals Deb and I read together, there is a lesson here.

“The Sea of Galilee is always giving what it receives. It's always flowing. But the Dead Sea only receives, and never gives. So, the life that gives of what it receives, the life that always blesses others, that life is the Sea of Galilee. Its waters are always fresh. It's always filled with life. But the life that only takes and doesn't give, that life becomes dead and barren...and all with the same waters. You see,” he says, “its not what you have in this life, how much or how little, that, in the end, will matter. It's what you do with what you have. If you only take, the waters become dead and your life becomes a sea of death. But if you give, then the waters become alive and your life becomes...the Galilee.”

How should a Believer live? We know the answer to the Scribe's question, don't we? We have heard it before! This is not new information! And it wasn't for the Religious Leaders that day either.

Isaiah, prophesying over six hundred years earlier, stated it quite clearly! “Hear the Word of the Lord,” he says! “The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me? When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals have become a burden to me. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you. Learn to do right!”

Jesus is standing in the Temple Courts, within sight of the Altar of Sacrifice, when the Teacher of the Law confesses that this truth is “much more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” That would have been huge, don’t you think! This is a man charged with passing on the Faith to the next generation, like we are. And he publicly declares that all of the other trappings of Religion, all of the Traditions, all of the great debates on the finer theological points of Faith, all of the agendas, all of the social causes, all of the Church minutia, are completely secondary to unconditionally loving our Lord! I picture Jesus, smiling, turning to the Teacher of the Law and saying, “Yes! You understand! You are not far from the Kingdom of God!”

The Scribe gets it! The multitudes, however, do not. And unfortunately, I think that’s still true today too! People are often content to just be part of the curious crowds. Some just sort of play at their Faith. Go through the motions! It’s Religion by rote, or habit, or muscle memory! Oh, some incorporate deep theological thought and contemplation. Some definitely engage their heads! But are their hearts still far away? One guy gets it! And Jesus tells him, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God”!

So, how close would you say you are! Love the Lord your God with every fiber of your being! Love the Lord completely, and personally! Respond to your Blessings with Praise! Talk with your God through the Study of His Word and Prayer! Love the Lord your God from the bottom of your heart! Be in an intimate relationship! And then, because of that intimate relationship, let that love flow to everyone around you! Given those parameters, how far do you think you currently are from the Kingdom of God?

It is “the” question, isn’t it? “What must I do to inherit Eternal Life”? A Rich Man, in fact, just a couple of Chapters earlier, in Mark 10:17 asks Jesus the very same thing! To which Jesus responds, “You know the Commandments”, much like He does today! “Love the Lord your God with all that you are! And love your neighbor as yourself!”

And it’s not just, “Oh yay, Lord, I love you! It’s not just, “I love my neighbor too, or people in general, or people in need! Except that guy at work. He makes me nuts!” It’s not like saying, “I love oatmeal cookies”! Which is really saying, “I want oatmeal cookies”! It’s “Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength”! That pretty much encapsulates everything, doesn’t it? And notice that’s it’s ALL your heart, and ALL your soul, ALL your mind, and ALL your strength. That one little word makes it pretty definitive, doesn’t it!

Now couple that with Matthew 7:21-23, one of my least favorite passages in Scripture! Jesus, as part of His Sermon on the Mount no less says, “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven!”

“But only the one who does the will of my Father who is in Heaven. Many will say to me on that day ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your Name, and in your Name drive out demons, and in your Name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me you evildoers.’”

Think about that! They call Jesus Lord! And they have done all kinds of Good Works! They even prophesied in His Name! They drove out demons in Jesus’ Name! Performed miracles in Jesus’ Name! Supernatural miracles! But none of that is enough to enter the Kingdom of Heaven! An Empty Statement of Faith, Works Righteousness, even amazing Works Righteousness, simply won’t do! They don’t know Him, and Jesus responds, “Away from Me you evil doers! I never knew you”!

How far am I from the Kingdom of Heaven? Do I really know the Lord, intimately? Is my personal relationship with the Maker of Heaven and Earth right where it needs to be? Is yours? Is the Lord first and foremost, above and before everything else? When you look at your calendar, is that what you see? Or your routine? Your day-to-day life? Are my priorities clear by what I do? If I glance at my budget, or my checkbook, what do I see? Is God really first? Always!

Is my Worship authentic, flowing from the depths of my being? Or is it empty and meaningless, as Isaiah warns? How about sacrifices? Do your offerings of time and talent and treasure matter? To you and to others? A “sacrifice”, you know, is supposed to be a “sacrifice”!

Is your love Clear? Is my love clear? Is our love, as a Church, clear, obvious to all who look on? Do you and I really love those around us, everyone around us, even those who have diametrically opposed views and opinions? Are the Blessings that we receive flowing through us to refresh others? Or do they just sort of “collect” at our feet...and die? How far am I, are you, from the Kingdom of God?

It was quite common for the learned, theologically elite, to stand up in the Synagogues, or sit on the Temple steps, and flesh-out questions like this. Regular, everyday folks, like you and me, would gather around them, and then, start in on debates of their own! Spontaneous religious discussions would pop up in the marketplace, or out on the streets, or at the breakfast table at home, sort of like politics does today! And then the truly pious would diligently try to incorporate these truths into their daily lives!

Today’s question was probably very well-known, the subject of much dialogue! Which Commandment is the most important? But here’s the thing. It wasn’t as simple as picking one out of ten. Remember, by the time of Jesus, the religious leaders had assembled 613 Commandments, Godly rules of Religion and Society to live by. There were 365 Positive Commandments, the “you shalls,” one for every day of the lunar year. And there were 248 Negative Commandments, the “you shall nots,” one for each known bone in the human body!

The Religious Faithful wanted to expand the Law, so that it would cover every conceivable situation! That way, everyone would know what God required of them!

But at the same time, they were constantly trying to distill it down to its core! So, the question, put to Jesus, is really more one of priority. What matters most, Rabbi, and what can we let slide? Do we have to keep all 613 to stay in God's good graces? And if not, which ones need to stay? What are the Fundamentals, the Basics? Which one Commandment is Key? You know, Lord, in order to get through the Pearly Gates?

And Jesus' answer is elegant! He quotes the Shema, Israel's daily call to prayer! It comes from Deuteronomy 6:4! "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength." That passage goes on to say that we need to "place these Commandments on our hearts, and impress them on our children, talk about them when we sit at home and when we walk along the road, when we lie down and when we get up!" This is the very first Commandment that God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai! Every single man, and women, and child living in Israel would have recognized it immediately! There is nothing that comes before God! Nothing! Absolutely Nothing!

And after a brief pause, Jesus adds the second most important Commandment, the very cornerstone of civilized society, which is to "love your neighbor as yourself." Everything else flows from these! It's like a pyramid of champagne glasses at a Fancy Weddings! What you pour into the top one, flows down into all the rest! And if you understand that, says Jesus, and live accordingly, then you are not far from the Kingdom of God! It is simple, right! And as the Bride of Christ, each one of us needs to take our Marriage Vows seriously!

Love the Lord with all of your heart, and soul, and mind, and strength! Be faithful in your Covenant Relationship! Be loyal to the Lord, like Ruth was to Naomi!

For millennia, the life of Ruth has been lifted up as a powerful example of true faithfulness! Women in that culture, without husbands or sons, were totally destitute! Inheritance was only passed on to males, as were ninety-eight percent of the jobs! So, times for Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi were astronomically tough! But no matter what transpired, Ruth “clings” to Naomi, we’re told. More importantly, she clings to her adopted Faith in the One True God. She even makes the most profound Statement of Loyalty I’ve ever heard; “Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me!” That’s the embodiment of unconditional love! Maybe that very promise should be included in our Wedding Vows as the Bride of Christ?

And God, in His faithfulness, blesses Ruth! She is a non-Jewish Gentile by-the-way. And yet after she and Naomi go to live in Naomi’s home town, a little place called Bethlehem, Ruth becomes the great, great, great-grandmother of a little boy born in a manger named Jesus. How’s that for faithfulness and unconditional love! Ruth was faithful, to her husband, and to her husband’s family. And as I thought about that, I wondered; Does that imply that as the Bride of Christ, we are to be faithful to Jesus, but also to His family, the Church as well? How would that ploy out in our world today, with all that’s going on? How far am I from the Kingdom of God? And all of God’s people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Your Majesty, Lord, is beyond compare! Your creative mind resides in all that is, radiating beauty on the entire world! Your loving heart whispers to all of humankind, nudging us to better our world in your Name. You are in all that there is. You are behind all that we strive to become. You are truly the beginning and the end.

So, Lord, this morning, we bow humbly in your Presence. We know that we are unworthy of your love. And we know that we have let you down, even this past week. There have been times Lord when we could have done better, and times when we should have left well enough alone. So, each of these, Father, we lie down before your Altar of Grace right now. We ask for your loving forgiveness. We ask that you wipe away these sins, and heal these hurts, and breach the voids that we have created. And we ask you now to look at us through the Atoning Sacrifice of our Savior Jesus Christ.

Thank you, Lord, for loving us so much! Thank you for reaching out to us through Jesus, your Son, and for causing us to reach out to others in His precious Name. And thank you for bringing people into our lives, the saints who have touched us in so many ways, and guided us on the paths to you. Lord we lift up these people before you today with prayers of thanksgiving. And we lift up those who need your touch with prayers of petition. We lift up our celebrations, as well as ourselves. Lord, please be with.....

Thank you, Lord, for this time together, and for your great love, and for these wonderful examples who have shown us unconditional love. And thank you for using us to bless others in this ever-darkening world, by also demonstrating unconditional love. Thank you especially for hearing us as we pray together in Jesus' Name, with the very prayer that He taught us saying, Our Father...

COMMUNION

“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing,” it says in Hebrews 10:25. And in Psalm 100:4 “Enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise”. “They continued to meet together in the Temple Courts,” it says in Acts 2:46, “and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved”. This is the Table of Fellowship. Our Lord meets us here, and welcomes us home. It’s good to come home. It’s good to be in the Body.