



Ordinary Sunday 30

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# THE NEW SHOFAR

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**Matthew 22:34-40 - Christians are defined by love**

## What is the minimum God demands of each one of us (and our parish)?

This question of “the greatest commandment” comes to us as a battle between groups within Judaism, between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Matthew includes it here in his Gospel, not just because it allows Jesus to offer a decisive guide to Christian living but also because the same question has been a source of conflict within faith groups from the very beginning. Christ has been a cause of divisions between Christians more than he has been the target of hatred from unbelievers. Heresies and heresy hunting has long haunted the Church and as we are aware from the divisions between Eastern and Western Christianity and the horrors associated with the Reformation, a divided Church has never been a part of the divine plan.

***For reflection:** Share the many ways we divide our Christian communities through divisions and by internal lovelessness. How easy is it to pass judgment on others – evangelicals, catholics, Roman Catholics, liberals, conservatives, etc? What does divide us and why do we allow it to continue?*

This question in today’s Gospel is an important one but it is not a question limited to just the Pharisees and the Sadducees. This search for a list of the fundamental demands of God is a very human one and over the last two thousand years many of those of us who claim the name “Christian” have found ways of maintaining this minimalist approach to Christian living both in our personal spiritual lives and in the way we engage with others in our faith communities. The debates, however were more torrid around the time of Jesus.

## From 613 commandments down to just two

Some of the Rabbis had reduced the 613 commandments they believed Moses has received from God at Mt Sinai down to eleven. Others argued for the six they were able to highlight from Isaiah 33:15-16. Micah had the number down to just three (Micah 6:8). There was also another group of Rabbis who pushed for the two by Isaiah 56:1... “*Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed.*” Both Amos and Habakkuk had reduced it to a single commandment... Amos 5:4...<sup>4</sup> *This is what the LORD says to Israel: “Seek me and live; ... Habakkuk 2:4... “See, the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not upright— but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness.* Providing Jesus was not too outrageous, they were never going to come up with anything more than general objections. The problem here for Matthew’s readers is: when you reduce our religious life down to the level of commandment, disobedience is not an option. There are ways of living and acting Jesus expects and these demands must become the defining characteristics of every believer and the marks of a true and faithful Church community.

## **Love God and Love others with the fullness of life and being**

This has profound implications for the life of all believers, especially when the definition of *neighbour* is extended beyond the traditional categories of Judaism to include every man and woman created by God. More specifically to every person we encounter in our own journeys through life, those we meet physically as well as those we encounter through other means – news, television, papers, radio, etc, those around the world of whose situations we are aware.

What it means is that we are called upon to reach out in love to all in the world who struggle with injustice, poverty, sickness, persecution and so on. They are our neighbours, just as are the people down the road, the one's in our own faith community we rarely, if ever, even acknowledge. Unless we love them then it is not possible to love God as we are called to do.

***For reflection:*** *Who is our neighbour, who is in need of our love? Read Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7) and the Last Judgment scene in chapter 25 where "neighbour" includes at a minimum – the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and those in prison. In what ways am I/we – our parish – active in loving these people as Christ demands? Who else would we add to the list of our neighbour in need of love? How might it apply to the way we respond to refugees?*

### **Christ demands an active discipleship rather than an avoidance of sin**

The only shock here for the Pharisees and the Scribes would have been the emphasis Jesus puts on an active response to the world rather than a negative *do no sin* approach. He teaches the need for a proactive approach to love, the searching out of those in need rather than a waiting for the poor and the needy to come to our door. This love commandment is therefore a missionary mandate rather than a pious nicety meant for internal reflection among Christians.

It shifts discipleship from being a *Church focused* way of living to a *world focused* way of living. God is worshipped, not just in our Sunday services and private prayers but in all that we do in the world, by the Gospel ways in which we act. At the same time God is dishonoured in our failure to take the initiative to love as he loves.

The real challenge is the exploration of the ways in which we (individually and as faith communities) can do this. It is one thing to "feel the pain" of the poor and the suffering of others but another indeed to take the step and reach out to them in their pain. It is meant to be an incentive as we search for where God is at work in our own world. It is a way of defining the meaning of Church in dynamic ways, in language that moves us beyond the institution into what we do through the whole of our day. As Paul teaches, it is when we love that we are fulfilling the Law and that "love" is defined in the Sermon on the Mount.

***For reflection:*** *The setting for this teaching of Jesus is the Temple. He has entered Jerusalem for the last time (Palm Sunday) and has been chastising the Jewish leaders for Israel's failure to bear fruit for God. He has just cleansed the Temple and challenges Judaism as a whole to do the same. Here is the question: as faith communities, do we spend more time on our own "temple tables" than the real works demanded by Jesus – love? How might we change? What should our parish priorities look like? How do we implement them? What are the characteristics of a loving faith community?*

