

Sadducees, Pharisees and Love

A sermon for October 26, 2014 by Ray Trygstad

Twenty-two years ago this month, I became a professor. In all that time I have taught many courses in multiple subjects, in four different departments at my university. But of all of the courses I taught, the one I enjoyed the most was a history course. In our Gospel today Jesus engages in debate with the Pharisees, because they had heard that he'd bested the Sadducees. Before we examine the words of our Lord more closely, we're going to have a little history lesson—because I like teaching history. But please, stay calm: there will NOT be a quiz.

Everybody has heard of “Pharisees” and “Sadducees,” and most Christians have a vague awareness that they were some sort of division within Judaism at the time of Jesus. These two groups represented philosophical, theological, liturgical, and cultural differences in Judaism during an era in Jewish history commonly referred to as the Second Temple period. This dates from the return of the nation of Israel from the Babylonian captivity when they re-built the temple, until the Romans destroyed the Temple in about 70 AD. So let's get some context here: who were these people?

The Sadducees were the priestly class, and most of the aristocracy and the wealthy among the Jews were members of this group. They placed strong emphasis on formal worship at the temple, in the role of the priests in offerings and atonement, and in strict and formal adherence to the Torah. Because the Babylonians did not allow a restoration of the royalty of Judah when the Jews returned from their captivity, this element stepped up to fill the power void, so temporal power and wealth also came to the Sadducees. Many of common folk of Judah saw the rebuilding of the temple as something foisted on them by foreigners, the Babylonians, and consequently they didn't quite trust the Sadducees.

The Pharisees represent a different strain of Judaism, one that grew out of their exile of the nation in Babylon. Since there was no temple there, the common people among the Jews gathered to worship in assemblies—in Hebrew called a *beit kneset*, but you're probably more familiar with the Greek term: a synagogue. They collected and began to write down the oral interpretations of the Torah, a document which in time became known as the Talmud. In many senses the Pharisees were very egalitarian, as they valued learning of the Torah and the Talmud most of all, and elevated their most learned men to the position of teachers, with a title of Rabbi. Despite their exile “only” lasting seventy years, for most Jews it produced profound changes in how their faith was expressed.

Sometimes the most fun in learning a little history is being able to see how it has shaped the world we live in today, and learning a bit about the Pharisees and the Sadducees is no different. Did you ever wonder why there's been no truly strong move in the reborn Israel of the modern day to rebuild the temple? (I mean, of course, apart from the fact that the second holiest shrine of Islam happens to occupy the site...) And did you ever ponder why, despite the return of Judaism to Jerusalem, there are no Jewish priests—particularly in light of the important role they played in the stories of ancient Israel and Judah, and even in the life of Jesus? When the Romans destroyed the temple and once again exiled the Jews from their homeland, with no temple there was nowhere for the priests to perform their priestly duties. Consequently the Sadducees disappeared as a tradition in the Jewish faith, and they're just not around to press for a restoration of the priesthood. But the rabbinical tradition of the Pharisees, created in exile, was built to order to survive in exile. So those we know as Pharisees in the stories of Jesus became what is now modern Judaism.

Our story today opens with Jesus responding to a group of Pharisees. They had heard that Jesus had responded to a group of Sadducees who had come to him with a question about resurrection—since the Sadducees didn't believe in physical resurrection—and the Jesus had answered their question in a manner very different from what any of them had expected. So a Pharisee identified to us in the text as a lawyer asked Jesus a very rabbinical question: “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” This is the type of question rabbis routinely ask of each other and their students in an honest attempt to explore the depths of the law, but the intent here was to pose the question in such a way as to ensure that any answer he might give could be interpreted as being wrong. (Sounds like a classic lawyer kind of trick to me; I'll bet this one was a litigator.) But Jesus doesn't respond with one of the Ten Commandments. The version of the Ten Commandments I grew up with, from the King James version of the Bible,



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are a veritable litany of “Thou Shalt Nots.” But instead of picking any of those, Jesus reaches into other two other parts of the law to sum up the intent of all of those commandments in a far more positive manner.

Jesus starts off with a slight rewording of a verse—Deuteronomy 6:5—that was so familiar to his listeners that it is part of a scripture passage that even has a name: Jews call this verse the *Shema* from the first word of the phrase “*sh'ma Yisrael*.” The entire Shema is Deuteronomy 6:4-9 “⁴ Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. ⁵ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” This passage is often the first verses a Jewish child learns; today it is said twice daily in Jewish prayers, and probably was then as well. The most pious Jews in the time of Jesus wore small boxes on their foreheads and their arms, known as phylacteries, containing these verses as an physical expression of verse 8 “Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead.” So this was mighty familiar territory.

But Jesus changes one word of this oh so familiar phrase: he says “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your *mind*.” *Might* becomes *mind*, expressing that this is something you have thought about, and that you have not only committed your heart and soul to, but your reason and intellect as well. I wonder if John Wesley may have considered this when he propounded the four sources as a basis of theological and doctrinal development that we now know as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: scripture, tradition, experience and *reason*?

Jesus then followed this verse with part of another verse from the Law: Leviticus 19:18 “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”

He sums the two passages up by concluding, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” His second verse and his conclusion are very similar to a quote from Rabbi Hillel, who said when asked to by a Gentile to explain the Torah to him, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn.” This sometimes even leads to accusations that Jesus plagiarized Hillel.

But Hillel only restates the Golden Rule; even in their day it had been around for long time. Jesus, on the other hand, attempted to show through the primacy of love, that instead of worrying about doing things wrong—the “Thou Shalt Nots...”—that by living our life in love, love for our God, for our neighbor, and for ourselves, we could not but help but to live out the law. Thanks to the death and resurrection of Jesus, we no longer have to count on adherence to the law for our salvation, but instead are called to live our lives as He would have us as a response to the grace we have been granted. And we see that Jesus also made living in the light of His grace far simpler than rote observance of ten lines written on stone tablets: enabled by our faith in Him, all we have to do is love.

At the risk of being facile, I think an easy summary of what Jesus said we should do can come from the words of Paul. No, not Saint Paul; but rather Paul McCartney:

All you need is love
All you need is love
All you need is love, love
Love is all you need

May you go and love: love God, love your neighbor, and love yourself. Illuminated by the grace of your Savior and empowered by your faith, love is all you need. Amen.

