

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Quincy, IL
Rev. Martin R. Eden

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saturday, October 22, 2011 at 5:00 p.m.
Sunday, October 23, 2011 at 8:30 a.m. & 10:15 a.m.

“So Many Questions”

Matthew 22:34-46

Last week, we turned our attention to the classic questions of the people of God struggling in this sinful world, “Why, Lord, do you tolerate evil? Why, Lord, do you let these things happen? How long, O Lord, will you allow this to go on?” We even heard that in the hymn we just sang.

And we were reminded through the prophet Isaiah that no matter how out of control our life seems to be, God is in control. All things have and will continue to work for your ultimate good. And you are the center of His attention.

Today, we hear other questions. The Pharisees had some questions for Jesus. “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment of the Law?” When we think of commandments, the number 10 comes to mind. The Pharisees had identified 613 commandments. How would you like to be in that confirmation class? Recite number 412, and its meaning – and the dedicated Pharisees could do that.

Now we laugh at their “devotion to the Law”. But, compared to them, our sinful nature has not improved over the years. As is described in Luther’s Catechism, original sin is “the total corruption of our human nature passed down from Adam through

our parents” – a statement that I require all my confirmands to know.

By nature, the Pharisees were totally corrupt. By nature, we are totally corrupt. Their only hope to be saved was Christ who was with them and speaking God’s Word to them. Our only hope to be saved is Christ who is with us and speaks His Word to us. His Word then and now was a word of love, and mercy, and forgiveness.

Our corrupt human nature doesn’t want to be saved. Our human nature wants to save ourselves. The Pharisees asked, “Which is the greatest commandment of the Law?” Notice Jesus’ answer. He gives them two quotes from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” And “love your neighbor as yourself.”

These are more words that I require all of my confirmands to know. This is known as the summary of the first and second tables of the Law. Again, notice Jesus’ answer. The Pharisees wanted to know Jesus’ answer to what the Law demands. He had been asked this question before in various forms – with the “teachers of the law” wanting to know what they needed to do to keep God’s Law. Because, by keeping God’s Law, they would save themselves by being right with God.

Our attitude has not changed. Our human nature has not gotten better over the years. We just ask the question in a more subtle or clever way. Over the years, my confirmation classes have been famous for asking, “What is the minimum I can do and

still get confirmed?” “How many questions do we have to answer?” “How many questions can I miss on the final test and still be OK?” I tell them not to worry. They will know the answers to all the questions.

But it's not just them. Our sinful nature is always asking, “What is least I can do and still be considered a good neighbor?” “What is the most I can get away with and still be considered a good citizen?” “How many times can I miss church and still be considered an active member?” “How much can I do against God's commands and still be right with God?”

And all of those attitudes and all of those questions are contrary to what Jesus says concerning God's commands. The heart of the Law is not what you do or don't do. The heart of God's Law is love. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind.” “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Love for God and love for your neighbor takes away minimalist thinking. Now, my confimands over the past 16 years have not performed perfectly. Much grace has been poured down upon them. Their place within the church has not been secured by their hard work or their memorization of all the commandments and their meanings.

Just like you, they have a place within Christ's church because Christ who is with us, speaks to us His Word of love, and mercy, and forgiveness. And then, after pouring out His grace, He asks the question, much like He did to the Pharisees, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose Son is He?”

There is a need for a confession of faith. It is the reason we confess the Creed each week. We must know who the Christ is – that He is the only-begotten Son of the Father; begotten, not made – He is no lesser creation of the Father; He is of one substance with the Father; even more so, He was made man; was crucified “for us” under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; He rose again and will come with glory to judge both the living and the dead.

You have already answered Jesus’ question today. You have confessed what you think about the Christ. Your answer to the question concerning the commandments is your response to the grace and forgiveness which you have already received.

Do not ask “What is least I can do?” “What is the most I can get away with?” Rather, fill your days asking yourself, “What can I do right now to demonstrate my love for God?” “What would be pleasing in His sight?”

“What can I do right now to show my neighbor that I love him?” What can I do so my neighbor knows I will not take vengeance or bear a grudge? -- as the Lord spoke through Moses.

You have been saved already – right now. It is not a question. The only question is, how do you respond to the love, grace, and forgiveness poured out on you? We confess our faith. And through our words and our actions, we reflect God’s love for us back toward God and to our neighbors. And if you ask yourself the question, “When can I do this?” The answer is, “Right now.” Amen.