

# The Second Baptist Pulpit

**“Lawless Love and Loveless Law”**

**Matthew 22:34-46**

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The relationship between love and law is perhaps the most important idea to get right in Christianity; and it is perhaps the most difficult thing to get right in Christianity. Love and law.

Jesus is being tested by the religious authorities on this very matter. In chapter 21 of Matthew Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Immediately after entering Jerusalem the testing begins. This is Jesus' final exam. He will be dead in a week.

The religious leaders begin asking him questions:

By what authority are you doing these things?

Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?

Then, right before our text today, they try their most complicated question yet:

They said:

*There were seven brothers. The first married and died, then his brother married her, then he died and his other brother married her and on down the line so that this poor lady had been married to all seven brothers.*

*Now, when the woman dies, which one of the seven will be her husband in heaven?*

And then, finally, in today's scripture, they ask the ultimate question: Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?

Tough question. It's kind of like in all the presidential debates when the moderators kept asking the candidates which of their promises and programs would they not be able to fulfill, due to our current economic conditions.

And neither one wants to name anything specific that they won't do. Because they know they would get killed for saying they would cut a program that people want. *He's against education or health care or infrastructure, or whatever,* they'd say.

So they end up talking about whether they will cut with a scalpel or a hatchet or a hatchet and then a scalpel. I was waiting for one to say he would use the scissors in a Swiss Army knife. But no one wants to name anything in particular that they would cut.

The Pharisees were putting Jesus in a bind like that, asking him to say which of the laws

was the greatest. How do you name one and leave out all the others?

There were 613 regulations related to Moses' law that the scribes and Pharisees studied. And they tacked on all kinds of additions to each of the 613 regulations. Just on the Sabbath day regulations alone the rules had mushroomed.

A man could ride a donkey without breaking the Sabbath rules, but if he carried a switch to make it go faster he would be guilty of laying a burden on it.

A woman could not look in the mirror on the Sabbath lest she see a gray hair and be tempted to pluck it out.

You could swallow vinegar but not gargle it.

Whatever Moses had said, the Pharisees could improve on. The third commandment was "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord." It became a ban against using the Lord's name at all so that they would write "G-d" not "God" and never speak the word at all.

"You shall not commit adultery" came to mean you can't talk to or even look at women. They called them "bleeding Pharisees" because when they

walked in the streets they lowered their head and bumped into walls. Their bruises were a badge of holiness.

[Philip Yancey, *Amazing Grace*]

*Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest? The Pharisees were the experts on this. They were really putting Jesus to the test. Which commandment in the law is the greatest?*

Jesus answered this way:

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment.*

*And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*

If you were to hang all of those 613 laws on one nail, which would it be? Jesus uses two nails: the love of God and the love of neighbor.

As I said, it is both crucial and difficult to get right the relationship between law and love in Christianity. But Jesus says that they go together this way: the law hangs on the nail of love.

It's not love without law, and it's not law without love.

What Jesus does not want is a lawless love—an anything goes love, love without obedience. At one point, Jesus says, *If you love me, you will keep my commandments.* And when he says that, he is reminding us that the kind of love he is talking about is not an emotional attachment or a feeling of being moved or whatever but it's an act of commitment that results in obedience.

The kind of love Jesus is talking about is not a lawless love.

Love expresses itself in obedience, in keeping Jesus' words. Ignoring those things that Jesus commanded exposes a lack of love.

What Jesus does not want is love without obedience.

As a good Baptist I grew up learning the truth of that statement. I grew up learning that there is a right and a wrong and that God wants us to obey him and that there are certain things that Christians just don't do. And that is right, and I am very thankful for that heritage and those lessons because these teachings do go against today's culture where love too often means you obey nothing but whatever you happen to feel at the moment. Like the commercial says, "Obey your thirst."

We do need to be reminded again today that what we do not need is love without obedience. What this world does not need is a lawless love.

But as we try to figure out the proper relationship between law and love, it is also true that what the world does not need is loveless law. What we don't need is law without love.

We are all too familiar with religious obedience that is loveless. We read in the newspaper that a Muslim woman in Nigeria has been accused of extramarital sex and sentenced by a religious tribunal to be stoned to death after her new baby is through breastfeeding. We shudder at this manifestation of loveless law.

*[Martha Greene, "Jesus' Final Exam," The Christian Century, October 9-22, p. 18]*

The Pharisees who are questioning Jesus about the law make an easy target for us, but the truth is that Christians have always been susceptible to a religion of loveless law. We are not immune from falling into a religion of rules and sin rankings and merciless attitudes that looks nothing like the Christ whom we know from the gospels.

In the 1980s a disease appeared in our country that was mysteri-

ous, contagious, life-threatening and very scary.

It quickly became identified as being related to behavior, behavior that was generally condemned by the Church. To get this disease meant you were probably doing something you shouldn't have, and many believed that God was probably cursing you for your sin.

This disease started panic, in society in general, but nowhere more so than in the conservative evangelical and Baptist world where well-known leaders used this disease to preach fear, paranoia, and rejection.

I know our own Shelby Baptist Association, issued a public statement in 1986 condemning people with AIDS as being recipients of the wrath of God.

My mother was a first grade teacher for a couple of years right after she and my dad graduated from college and got married. One of her students was a little boy they called Skipper. Skipper grew up to be Skip, and Skip's dad was Jimmy Allen who eventually became President of the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1970s.

In 1986 Jimmy Allen learned that his son Skip was gay and had AIDS. Around this same

time, Jimmy Allen's other son Scott's wife Lydia had a blood transfusion during her first pregnancy, contracted AIDS, and unknowingly passed it on to both of her children through pregnancy. Their first child died of AIDS at the age of 13 in 1995. Their second child died in 1986 as an infant. Lydia herself died in 1992.

So how did the churches respond to this family in this heartbreaking situation?

Scott Allen, whose wife and two children contracted AIDS through the blood transfusion, was fired by the First Christian Church (Disciples) of Colorado Springs, Colo., the day after he told the senior pastor about his family's dilemma.

After moving to the Dallas-Ft. Worth area to live with Jimmy and Wanda Allen, no church of any denomination would accept their AIDS infected son and grandson Matthew in Sunday school. In recent years, Scott has forsaken Christianity.

One wonders what things would be like now, what voice the Church would have in our culture, if instead of preaching fear and rejection, we had preached mercy and love and news that was good for those who were facing the worst news of all.

The last thing the world needs is law without love.

Heidi and I went to a dinner Thursday night at the home of Frank and Joyce Thomas. Frank Thomas is the pastor of Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church. It was a group of about 10 pastors and their spouses. Micah Greenstein from Temple Israel was there and Stacy Spencer from New Direction Church was there, and Craig Strickland from Hope Presbyterian and Johnny Jeffords from St. John's Methodist, Andy MacBeth from Calvary Episcopal, and one or two others.

Heidi and I were sitting at a table with Frank Thomas, and he started telling us about one time he spoke to a group in Chicago, and he told them about how his family moved into a certain neighborhood in Chicago when he was a young boy. He said that his family was the first and only black family to live in that neighborhood. Frank is probably in his late 40s, so this was about 40 years ago.

He said that when he would go out to play, all the other children would be called inside by their mothers, and he would be left standing out there by himself. He did finally get to be friends with a boy next door. Soon af-

ter that family packed up and moved one night without saying a word.

The last thing this world needs is law without love.

Frank Thomas told this to a group he was speaking to in Chicago, and then he said to them that after experiencing that as a young boy, he had a hard time trusting white people after that. He told us that when he said that, several people in the audience got up and walked out.

He went on to tell us Thursday night that what those people who left didn't hear was him go on to tell how the power of love had broken through even a hurt like that in his life and how that love had overpowered the division and the bitterness for him.

The last thing this world needs is law without love. Looking back now, knowing what we know now, these examples make fairly easy targets. But the sobering question is, Will we someday deserve to be judged just as harshly when people look back on us? I don't know about you, but I actually think about this a lot. I ask myself, In what situations or with what people are you and I exhibiting a loveless law that when we look back on it 20

years from now, 50 years from now, we will be ashamed?

Do you ever think about that?

What laws are we obsessing over and what opportunities to love are we missing in the process?

When has our religion wandered away from being like Jesus and turned into loveless law?

I have a confession to make: I just about killed myself trying to figure out how to end this sermon. I just could not figure out what to say at this point. I obsessed about it much of the day Friday and all day yesterday. It was enough to put me in a bad mood yesterday—all this thinking about love. You can ask my family. *Will you leave me alone; I'm trying to figure out what to say about love!*

It seems like such a complex thing. Law and love. The Pharisees tested Jesus by challenging him to take the complex system of the law, with its 613 different rules, and see if he could make it concise and simple.

Where I was failing this weekend was in trying to figure out how to preach a simple sermon on Jesus giving a simple answer to the Pharisees.

There is someone who figured out how to do it. In the Guinness Book of World Records there is listed the shortest sermon ever preached. It was given by John Albrecht, an Episcopal priest in Michigan. He walked to the pulpit to preach, paused, and said, *Love*. Then he sat down. Some of Albrecht's members said it was the finest sermon they every heard him preach.

Here's a good rule of thumb, for sermons and for life—when in doubt, go with love.

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