

## When tricked by Law, treat with Love

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Reflecting on Matthew 22: 34-40

On Halloween's Day last year, few children on our street went around the houses asking "Trick or Treat?" and they really looked forward for a treat of chocolates, which they enjoyed doing. Tricking people with difficult questions is in a way trying to confuse people in agreeing to one's requests. Way back in Jesus time, particularly as recorded in Matthew chapter 22, we see Jesus being tricked by the Pharisees and Sadducees with certain difficult questions. In this chapter we notice three trick or treat questions that Jesus had to encounter from the religious leaders. The first of those was a political question, 22:15-22, where they ask about paying taxes to the emperor. The second was a doctrinal question in 22: 23-33, where they ask about levirate marriage, husband and resurrection. The third set of tricks or treat question to Jesus is from the passage from this week's lectionary reading 22:34-40, which is an ethical/legal question about the greatest of the laws in the Torah.

In verse 36, we read that in the presence of the religious leaders of the temple and law, a certain lawyer was asking Jesus, "Teacher, which commandment in the Law is the greatest?" By asking such a question about the greatest commandment, this certain lawyers and the religious leaders' lust for power and privilege is only exposed. Since the lives of these religious people in the temple are always conditioned and led by power, principalities, privilege and prestige, they try to look for the greatest in everything including the commandments. This question is also like a legal expert asking today among all the Acts of the Parliament (as UK doesn't have one codified written Constitution like in other modern States), which Act is the greatest? It is surely a difficult question to pin down to one particular law or Act, and name that as greatest. As each and every law or Act that was made has a history, context and situation, certain discussion on it, by which they had to come into effect. For example, in the UK, the Equality Act 2010, is an Act of the Parliament that legally protects people from discrimination in the workplace and in the wider society. It replaced previous anti-discrimination laws with a single Act, making the law easier to understand and strengthening protection in some situations. By bringing this example, the point I am trying to make is that each Act or a law has a background that needs to be taken into consideration, and one cannot put against another Act or law as the greatest. The expert in Law, a certain lawyer when asked Jesus, "which commandment in the Law is the greatest?", they were really trying trick Jesus, fix Jesus with Law which the religious community held very sacred and dear to them.

There were 613 laws in the Torah, and to pick one law as the greatest law was not only a herculean task for Jesus, but also was an awkward task of pulling one among all important laws. Jesus as always rose up to occasion and replied to this lawyer, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (37-40v) For Jesus, when the lawyers, scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees and other religious leaders of the temple tried to trick with the Law, Jesus always treated them with love, which is love for God and love for neighbour, for he emphasised that these two commandments are like two pillars on which the entire laws and prophets hang.

These two pillars, therefore becomes the core pillars where Christian discipleship finds its basis. There are five important directives for our discipleship in understanding these two pillars. Firstly, without any of these two pillars, the entire Law and the prophet's messages will simply fall and cannot withstand. For me both these pillars are in perfect equilibrium, by which I want to say that neither of these pillars are taller than the other, for both the pillar of loving God and the pillar of loving neighbour are of equal height, equal width, equal length and equal in every measurement. Secondly, both these pillars, co-exist, for neither of them can exist on its own. Loving God is directly proportional to loving neighbour, and loving neighbour is a reflection of loving God. Neither the Law nor the prophets can hang on just one pillar. Thirdly, it is important to recognise that it is love that is the common material on both these pillars, love for God and love for neighbour, for the message of law and the prophets have all been entwined on this core foundation of love. Fourthly, with both these pillars of loving God and loving neighbour, it is love which becomes the hermeneutic in interpreting the law and the prophets. Fifthly, with love being the core and common for both these two pillars, love becomes the commandment of life, of Cross and of the Kingdom of God.

In drawing a relevance of this text, today we recognise there are many tricks that are being played against our Christian living and discipleship. In whatever situations and with any kind of tricks, the gospel of Jesus Christ is to treat with love, and only with love. The first learning for us as a church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is, love should be the hermeneutic of interpreting our scriptures. Today, there are many people who try to trick people and situations quoting scriptures out of their contexts. Love should be the interpreting principle in every situation and to every person. Love for God is not expressed by hatred towards neighbour based on any text, in any given situation. Scriptures need to be understood as love letters of God to a faith community in a given context with a relevance to the readers in demonstrating love for God and for neighbour. Anything that discounts love, cannot stand the test of understanding scriptures. The second learning for us as a church is today when we are tricked by forces of market in accumulating more and more material goods, when we are tricked by forces of racism to enjoy privilege and power, when we are tricked by forces of greed to overpower the creation, we as followers of Jesus Christ are called to treat with love, again by demonstrating love for God by loving our neighbour as ourselves. Love for God and love for neighbour is in affirming equality, justice and peace for all in the creation. Love is always about selflessness and self is all about lovelessness. The third learning for us as a church today is, when we are tricked by the forces of secularism, downplaying the role and relevance of faith in the public sphere, we are called to treat with love, and demonstrate love in action. The test for our love for God is only visible in our love for neighbour. In my love for God, I will never lose my love for neighbour, and in my love for neighbour I can ever lose my love for God. For both these two pillars are so intrinsic and important in my understanding of faith in Jesus Christ.

In the context of growing child hunger, particularly when the government in the UK has voted against providing food to children during holidays, we as a church are called to treat it with love. For child hunger is a reality today, and it needs justice and compassion as expressions of love. When we as a church collected food and opened a food pantry at a local school today, it was our expression of love for God by showing our love for our neighbour. We as a church should not compromise in showing our love in action, for the call for us as a church is only to

love God and love our neighbour. A church that is self-seeking about its own survival and which is not demonstrating the love of God to all neighbours, loses its relevance and significance in a community, for it is only love for God and love for neighbour that matters for the being and becoming of church led by the Spirit of God.

I want to conclude this reflection with the cartoon from Rev. David Hayward from Canada who draws his cartoons in the name of @nakedpastor, where he explains love in the context of texts. When people try to trick us with laws, we are called to treat with love.



May the God of love who is embodied in Jesus Christ fill our lives with love for God and love for neighbour, so that we are indefatigable in demonstrating that love towards all of God's creation. May the world know us as Christians by our love, yes, they will know that we are Christians by our love.

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