

**Yr. B, Proper 26**  
**October 31, 2021**  
**Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan**  
**St. Peter's Episcopal Church**  
**1538 Words**

**Lessons: Deuteronomy 6:1-9**  
**Psalm 119:1-8**  
**Hebrews 9:11-14**  
**Mark 12:28-34**

So, how did *you* do this week? You know, out of the 613 commandments in the Torah, how many did you keep? Of the 248 positive decrees—“You shall do this...and this...and this...” with how many did you follow through? And among the 365 negative statutes—“You shall *not* do this...or that...or the other...” how well did you hold the line?

Hmmm. This feels a little bit like the times when I did not read all my homework and my teacher began class by simply saying, “Take out a clean sheet of paper.” Do you remember all those audible groans when a pop quiz was announced? They were interspersed with the sound of about 30 different pages being torn from about 30 different spiral notebooks. Vump, vump, vump-vump!

Oftentimes, someone would say, “But, but Ms...” And my teacher would silence the excuse, snatching those words out of mid-air even before her name was spoken. In the eyes of my teacher, there were no good excuses for not doing what you were supposed to do.

So what did you do this week? How well did you follow through on the 248 positive decrees of the Almighty?

Do you remember that terrible heaviness you felt when your teacher turned her back to the class, and picked up a stick of chalk? Tap, tap, *tap-tap-tap*. It was a loud staccato. She seemed angry, at least frustrated that her students *needed to be* held accountable for simply doing what they were supposed to do.

As the first question appeared on the black board, you realized you had *no idea* how to answer it. And so you looked down at your blank piece of paper and nervously wrote your name and the date at the top. You’ve got to start somewhere!

Well, how *did* you do this week? How well did you keep the 365 ‘shall not’ statutes of the LORD?

It’s hard not to see it this way, sometimes. The Law of the LORD...and the judgment of the LORD. The Commandments of God...and the punishment of God.

“Happy are they,” sings the Psalmist, “whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD.” We wonder—“what about those of us who come up short?”

The Psalmist continues, “Happy are they who observe (the LORD’s) decrees...” Well—“What happens if we don’t even *know* what those decrees are?”

The Psalmist rejoices, “I (will) not be put to shame when I regard all of your commandments.” But the rest of us *are shamed* that we have so little regard for so few of the commandments...*maybe* the top ten...on a *good day*.

Some of us are trying to come up with a good excuse...“But, but LORD...” Others of us are groaning—feeling helpless, staring at our blank sheet of paper. Still others of us are so quick to pin all our failures on Jesus that we never even bother to learn the Commandments that *he* regarded so highly.

Remember, in his famous sermon when Jesus said, “...not one *letter*, not one *stroke* of a letter, will pass from the law...”

So, how much do we have to do in order to ‘pass the test’? Or, put another way—“How little can I get away with, and still pass the test?” These are *not* the right questions for disciples of Jesus to be asking. This is not how disciples (students) of Jesus are supposed to be thinking.

Before we rush to claim Jesus as our Savior, I hope we will first pay attention and *learn from him* as our *Teacher!* So, let’s take a look at what Jesus is teaching, and see what we can learn.

So, one of the scribes walked up and asked Jesus a ridiculous question: “Which commandment is the first of all?” You see, even the most slack, disobedient Jew in the world would know the answer to *that question!* Because even the most negligent Jews probably repeated the *Shema* out loud, several times a day, every single day of their lives.

The *Shema* is this: “Hear, O Israel! The LORD our God, the LORD is one; you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and all your mind, and with all your strength.”

I mean the scribe does not need to waste breath asking such an easy question with such an obvious answer. Your teacher would not have wasted chalk writing out such an easy question on the board.

But Jesus—*our teacher*—takes this easy question from the scribe, and makes it *harder*. Jesus—our teacher—takes the *obvious* answer—the *Shema*—and he streeeeeeeeetches it out and wraps it all the way around the neighborhood.

The scribe, the expert, only asked about one commandment; but Jesus is giving him (and us) *two* commandments. “You shall (ALSO) love your neighbor as yourself.” It sounds like Jesus is saying, “It’s not good enough for you to *just love God* with all your heart and mind and soul and strength.” It sounds like *our teacher* instructing us that we should love our neighbors...as much as we love ourselves. Imagine *that* for a moment!

You should also know that this was not a new idea with Jesus. If you had done all your homework this week you would know that in the ‘Holiness Code’ of God’s laws recorded in chapter 19 of the Book of Leviticus we are instructed to love our neighbors as ourselves. And this word for ‘neighbor,’ by the way, is an expansive term which includes not only your *friends* in the neighborhood, but also your adversaries. Imagine *that* for just a moment!

There was a great rabbi named Hillel. He was a wise teacher and elder when Jesus was a young boy. There is a story of a prospective convert to the Jewish faith who arrogantly asked Hillel to explain the whole Torah to him while he stood on one foot. Don’t laugh, that’s about how much attention and energy we’re willing to give to those 613 commandments of the Torah.

So Hillel says, “What is hateful to you—do not do (*that*) to your neighbor: this is the whole Torah; the rest is (just commentary); go and learn (what this means)!”

Do you notice how Hillel’s interpretation of the Law is easier than Jesus’ interpretation? If we were disciples of Hillel, we could simply refrain from doing hateful things to other people.

But *we are disciples of Jesus*, and he expects more than that from us. For Jesus, this law is not a negative decree—“you shall not.” For Jesus, this is a positive statute—you *shall*...you shall *love*...your neighbor as much as yourself. And that means actively doing and giving and sharing all that is good and wonderful, not *just* avoiding doing what is bad and hateful.

Furthermore, Jesus elevates this second commandment to a place of equal importance with the first commandment. “There *is* no other commandment,” Jesus says, “which is greater than these *two*.”

What our teacher says which is different from both the holiness code in Leviticus and the teaching of Hillel—is that loving your neighbor is *equivalent* to loving God. Dear people, that’s not just a radical lesson; it’s a really hard assignment! That is a difficult test...*for anybody!*

At the end of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus clearly connects these two great commandments. He knits them together perfectly in a lesson that reveals the true equivalence between loving God and loving neighbors. Jesus describes *his vision* of the people who pass this test...and those who fail it.

Jesus—our teacher, our Lord, and our God—has a dream. And in this dream he sees *himself* as our neighbor—the one who is hungry or the one who is thirsty. *Jesus* is the refugee, the immigrant. He’s the person left out in the cold without enough clothing. Jesus *is the person* who is sick and dying or stuck in prison.

Jesus *dreams* of welcoming lots of righteous people into the Kingdom of God...and those righteous souls *cannot even remember* all the times they fed the hungry or gave water to the thirsty or welcomed the stranger or gave warmth to the homeless or sat and prayed with the sick or those in prison.

They simply loved their neighbors...*and by doing so*—they loved God also! It’s *just that personal* with Jesus.

Look, what every wise teacher knows and wants her students to realize...is that it’s not about the test. It’s not about the grades. It’s about learning the things which will make us wiser and better people. When it comes to our teacher, *Jesus*—it’s about learning...to love God...by practicing...loving our neighbors.

The Good News is this. *Every single day*, you get to take out a *clean* sheet of paper. That’s not a reason to groan. *That’s a reason to rejoice!* The Lord of love has forgiven your trespasses and debts inasmuch as you have forgiven those of your neighbors. And you get a clean sheet with all the potential in the world to get it right.

You can think of it as a test if you *want to*. But it’s really just *practice*—learning to love...and to be loved...now and forever more.

Amen.