

Trinity 18, 2019

Tricks of the Trade

St. Matthew 22:34-46
St. Andrew's Church, Jacksonville, OR
By Fr. Bill Baker

*"... when the Pharisees had heard that he had put the Sadducees to silence, they were gathered together. Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, Master, which is the great commandment in the law? "Let's stop right here for a moment. This is a bigger question than most casual readers would extend themselves. There are 613 commandments in the Torah, the Law. To ask someone off hand to think of the most important of these is clearly a set up for failure. If Jesus were to pick any one of these 613 laws as the greatest commandment he would leave a playing field so wide open to interpretation that he would be seen at just another voice in the crowd with a particular set of values. But, Jesus, knowing the true heart of the matter, responds beyond all expectation. *Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*" You want the greatest commandment? Well, Jesus just gave you the top two and they cover all 613. The Pharisees and Sadducees have finite reasoning, but Jesus sees beyond...to the eternal, where true love conquers all.*

In today's Gospel we see two main groups of leaders who consistently engage Jesus in attempts of trickery. For one man to hold the attention of such powerful forces fear must be upon their hearts and in the very thoughts of their minds. What is it that they are afraid of?

First let's uncover who these men are who find it their business to bring Jesus down. Pharisees are made up of scribes and sages (Jewish record keepers and those considered highly intelligent) and refer to those who, for religious purposes, are separated from gentiles and even irreligious Jews. Pharisees believe in Torah as well as oral law and tradition and hold to a belief in resurrection after death. The Sadducees on the other hand did not hold to oral law or tradition and lived solely by Torah and

disregarded resurrection at death while holding to the soul entering Sheol, a place of darkness to which all the dead go, both the righteous and the unrighteous, regardless of the moral choices made in life, a place of stillness and darkness cut off from life and separated from God.

Two very different and influential sects, whose philosophies concerning the Torah pitted them against each other. They would also have differing views of the role of government in the affairs of Jewish life. The Pharisees believed God was punishing them for refusing to follow Torah and in response God sent the pagan Romans to dish out their sentence. Their reaction was to create their own laws, in conjunction with the Torah that would prevent them from adopting the lifestyles of non-Jews...**religious legalism at its best.** The Sadducees on the other hand, while also believing in Torah, were more supporting of the prevailing rulers because of the political and economic benefits that could be gained. **Religious flexibility at its best.**

But where a common enemy exists camaraderie clouds differences...at least for a time. Throughout the Gospels we see these two groups banding together to confront Jesus. Jesus is a threat to both. He challenges both their religious and political perspectives. But, try as they might, their tactics always backfire and as we saw in the final verse of our Gospel reading today, *"And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions."* I hope I'm not the only one who thinks that's funny! Back into the shadows with their tails between their legs. But the day would come eventually when Jesus, ready to fulfill his purpose, would give them what they wanted all along and they would be able to crucify the man who would rise from the dead revealing His divinity to the world...God made manifest that we may rise victorious!

But, we are getting ahead of ourselves. Jesus Christ spent His adult life being tested. It began in the wilderness where Satan sought to foil God's plan by turning Jesus from His purpose. In the Wilderness Jesus is tempted 3 times. These temptations were different from the trickery of the Pharisees and Sadducees...the devil knew who he was dealing with while they could not fathom the truth right in front of them. Maybe Pontius Pilate was beginning to understand, *"What is truth?"* he would ask as he was forced to follow the decree of this band of self-righteous

undertakers. Satan, knowing who Jesus was, tempted Jesus by posturing Jesus's human nature to rely upon His divine nature for worldly comfort and gain. First, turn these rocks into stones to satisfy your hunger...forty days is a long time to go without food...you must be famished. In his second temptation, Satan appeals to Jesus to throw himself off the Temple pinnacle that He might expose the power of God for all to see. Popularity is a virtue to which many succumb. And thirdly, Satan takes Jesus to a high mountain, showing Him all the glory of the kingdoms of the earth and promising that they will all be His if He will bow down and worship him (the devil). Satan is smart, he is conniving and he is a powerful force in this world. Without Christ we would not have a chance against the *craft and subtlety of the devil*. But Jesus, without hesitation, puts the devil in his place; *"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."* *"You shall not put the Lord your God to the test."* And finally, *"Be gone Satan! For it is written, you shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve. And the devil left him and behold, angels came and were ministering to him."* If Satan got nowhere with his temptations of Jesus these poor unsuspecting Pharisees and Sadducees were experiencing a grand exercise in futility equal to trying to dig a hole in the ocean.

Finally, after so much torment from the Pharrisees, Jesus poses a simple question to them. *"What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?"* They said unto him, *"The Son of David."* He said to them, *"How is it then that David, in the spirit, calls him Lord, saying, "'The Lord said to my Lord, "sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet?"' If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?"* And it is at this point that they stop asking him questions. Why?

While David is not part of the Torah of which both the Pharisees and Sadducees adhere, he is part of the oral tradition of the Pharisees and a great political leader revered by the Sadducees, so this question of Jesus hits home to both and in their ignorance they have no way to answer. In Jesus they see only the man and a man can be defeated if the right buttons are pushed. That He was the Son of God was not opened to them and because of this they mocked him, scourged him and eventually crucified the man not knowing the divine nature that lay within would resurrect Him from the dead and bring judgment to some and glorious resurrection to others. They judged Jesus by His outward appearance

and missed the beatific vision. Now, there are many controversies over the meaning of the words Jesus says here. But if we listen closely I think the words of Jesus are clear. Jesus is proclaiming his divinity to those who are willing listeners. There are those today, (and this is the point of today's sermon) who like the Pharisees and Sadducees, need a sign before they will believe. Many make a mockery of the scriptures to cover their ignorance and illuminate a false intelligence. They want to dissuade others from the truth of God so that they do not have to submit to the truth. For them salvation is in their own hands...a dangerous and lonely place to be. It is FAITH in JESUS CHRIST that opens eyes and opens doors. No person has ever been healed, nor will one be saved, who denies Jesus Christ as Lord of their lives.

May we continue to glorify God Almighty by resting in the truth that Jesus came to bare. Salvation is found in no one but Christ alone...the Incarnate Word of God manifested that we may come home to a place prepared for us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.