



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity 1 Corinthians 1:4-8 & St. Matthew 2:34-46

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The first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, “What is the chief end of man?” What is man’s greatest duty in life? What main purpose did God have in mind for us when he created us? The answer that the catechism rightly gives is that “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” I imagine that the Westminster Divines put that question at the beginning of their catechism so that right from the get-go we know where we stand. Think about that. God created us to glorify him and to enjoy him forever. But that’s *not* what we do. Instead, every one of us follows after our first parents—after Adam and Eve; we reject God as our good and sovereign Creator, we reject him as our caretaker and friend, and we sin—we commit treason against him. The question, right at the beginning of this document that teaches the essentials of the Christian faith, shows us the stark contrast between how God made us and where we stand because of our rebellion against him. From the start it reminds us that we need a Saviour to save us from our sins and to turn our hearts back to God.

Now, if it’s true of each of us as individuals that our chief end is to glorify God, how much more do you think that’s true for the Church? We aren’t surprised when non-Christians sin and reject God. That’s our inheritance thanks to the Fall. But the Church is made up of those of us who have been redeemed from the Fall and from its consequences. The Holy Spirit has replaced our hearts of stone with hearts of flesh. He’s turned our hearts and given us back the love for God that we were created with. Like dead wood grafted into a living vine, the Spirit joins us to Jesus Christ—to God himself—and so we are the living body of Christ. And, brothers and sisters, what does Jesus do? What is his mission? He glorifies his Father. In John 14 Jesus explained to Thomas and Philip, “Whoever has seen

me has seen the Father.” That’s not just a statement of Jesus’ divinity. It sums up Jesus’ mission: He is the Father’s revelation of himself to men and women. And that means that as his Body we have the same mission. We should be revealing the Father to the world by glorify him in our life collectively. When the world sees the Church, it should be seeing Jesus at work. That’s why the Holy Spirit grafts us into Jesus. The life of the vine flows into us and revives us, the dead wood, and makes us like the vine. The Holy Spirit gifts and empowers us to fulfil that mission of glorifying the Father and showing Jesus to the world. But when the world looks at the Church, is that what it sees? Sometimes, yes. But sadly, often, no.

This was the problem of the Old Testament Church. The Jews were called to be a chosen and special people—to display God’s glory to the gentile nations. They were a type—a precursor—of what the New Testament Church is supposed to be. But for most of the history of the Old Testament Church, she failed. Our Gospel lesson today might be seen as the final warning to the leaders of the Jewish Church. Today’s Gospel comes from Matthew 22, beginning at the thirty-fourth verse. Jesus was teaching in the temple, but this was the *last* time he would teach publicly. In two or three days he would be crucified. In verse 34 St. Matthew tells us:

**But when the Pharisees heard that [Jesus] had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together.**

The Sadducees and the Pharisees were the two religious parties of the day. The Sadducees were sort of the “liberals” of the day. Their defining doctrine was a denial of the resurrection. The Pharisees were the “conservatives” who opposed them. They stood for the “faith of their fathers”. Neither group liked Jesus, but the Sadducees had just challenged Jesus on the resurrection and Jesus had shut them down. He defended a doctrine that the Pharisees knew was clearly implied in the law of Moses. And since the Pharisees loved the law and Jesus had defended it, they warmed up to him. And so one of the Pharisees came to Jesus to see if he really did see the law their way. Matthew goes on:

**And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which is**

**the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:35-39)**

But notice that Jesus doesn’t stop there. In verse 40 he makes one of the most vitally important connections in all Scripture:

**On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”**

Jesus connecting those two great commands, love of God and love of neighbour, with “the law and the prophets”—basically, with Scripture—and heads off two of the most common errors that people make.

First, Jesus reminds us that it’s not enough just to claim that you love God or that you love your neighbour. I think it’s safe to say that most people would agree with both of these commandments whether or not they’re Christians. Hindus and Muslims, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormon, and even people practicing primitive tribal religions agree that their god or gods are at least worthy of our respect if not our outright love. Even a lot of atheists agree that we should love our neighbours. And yet the Moabites worshipped Moloch by sacrificing their own children on his altar. The Greeks worshipped Aphrodite by having sex with temple prostitutes. Just this week I was on the website of a former parish of mine listening to a sermon on loving God preached by their new “priestess” who is an active and unrepentant lesbian. How many people do we all know who claim to love God and yet live in all sorts of open and unrepentant sin? How often do we say that we love God while *we* live in unrepentant secret sin? By the same token, how often do we claim to love our neighbours—who could be anyone with whom we come into contact—while really doing things that hurt them? Maybe we protect our children from the consequences of sinful or foolish decisions instead of teaching and disciplining them. We protect them in the short term, but set them up for long-term trouble. Maybe we see brothers and sisters in sin, but we’d rather ignore what we see, or because it’s our friend and we

“love” him or her, we don’t want to make trouble. We do this in all sorts of ways.

Friends, Jesus takes our nebulous and undefined expressions of love for God and for neighbour and grounds them firmly in the truth of God’s revealed will in the Bible. He tells us, “If you love God, *prove it*. He’s given you an entire book that tells you what he loves and what he hates. If you truly love him, show it by doing the things he loves and by turning away from the things he hates. And if you claim to love your neighbour, that same book tells you what that love looks like to God. If you love your son or daughter, real love means that you do the hard work of teaching and discipline. If you love your brothers and sisters, you’ll not only exhort them when they do good, but you’ll also exhort them to do good when you see them sinning. And, churches, don’t be “Evan-jellyfish”! Preach God’s Word even it isn’t warm and fuzzy and hold your members accountable.” Be pure and display a pure image of Christ to the world by living according to the Scriptures he has given. We can look to Jesus as our model, and Jesus reminds us that real love is hard work and requires sacrifice. Like him, we need to give up ourselves and submit our wills to the perfect will of our heavenly Father. Not only that, we need to do the hard work of giving of ourselves for others, not just taking the easy way out with each other.

But I said Jesus confronts *two* errors here. The second error was that of the Pharisees—and sometimes our own error. It’s the opposite of the first. Sometimes we forget that God shows us *how* to love him and each other, but other times we remember the rules but forget their *purpose*. We approach God’s commandments as if we can earn his love by following them. We forget about grace.

One Sunday as I was preaching I mentioned a fairly obscure passage from the Old Testament. There happened to be an obscure sin mentioned in that passage and there just happened to be someone listening that day who had committed that particular obscure sin. I had no idea. The next day I got a phone call from that person that started out, “Well, I guess I’m going to hell!” Once they explained what they were upset about I had to ask, “Assuming you one day arrive at the gates

of heaven, on what grounds will you appeal to them to open the gates for you?” In response there was just dead air between us. I’m pretty sure that this individual had somehow missed the gospel, even after years of being a church member. They were convinced that they were heaven-bound because they’d kept God’s commandments. Now they were suddenly confronted with one that they hadn’t even known about and had inadvertently broken. They thought it was all over.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus reminds us that we are *not* saved by our works—by keeping God’s law. None of us can do it. If we think we can, we’ve got the same problem the Pharisees had. We are saved by grace. Jesus kept the law for us and by trusting in his sacrifice on the cross for us we are declared righteous before God. St. John reminds us that we love God, because *he first loved us*—loved us when we were his enemies and completely unlovable. We’re all sinners. We can’t earn God’s favour no matter how good we are, because it only takes one sin to justify our condemnation. We keep his commandments because he has lovingly forgiven us and because our desire is to return his love by living in a way that is pleasing to him.

Now, in St. Mark’s account of this encounter we read the lawyer’s response. He said, “You are right, Teacher!” He agreed with Jesus. And so Jesus told him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” “Not far from the kingdom of God.” Not “Great! If you believe that then you’re a Christian,” but “You’re not quite there.” Why wasn’t he there yet? What was missing? As a Pharisee he knew the law. And as a Pharisee he even understood that the purpose of the law was to teach how we’re to love God neighbour. What he was missing as a Pharisee was the knowledge of a need for a Saviour. The Jews *were* looking for a saviour, but the saviour they were looking for was a political saviour. The idea of the need for a spiritual Saviour wasn’t even on their radar. The only problems they saw were temporal—not spiritual. It looked like they understood the law—and they did to a point. But the fact that they didn’t realise they needed a Saviour meant that they might be close to the kingdom, but they weren’t there yet. And brothers and sisters, that’s a sad and dangerous

place to me. As they say, “Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades. Close doesn’t get you into God’s kingdom. Close will leave you in hell and eternally apart from God. So Matthew goes on:

**Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” (Matthew 22:41-42)**

Again, they *were* expecting and looking for the Christ, the Messiah. And they knew the prophecies well enough to know that he would be a descendant of David. But the idea that the Messiah was also the Son of God? As far as they were concerned, that was blasphemy. That’s why the people were happy to praise Jesus as their Messiah on Palm Sunday. They thought he was going to march into Jerusalem and overthrow the Romans. That he was going to re-establish the kingdom of David in whose line he stood. But that wasn’t the Messiah’s mission. His mission was so much bigger than that. He didn’t come to usher in a kingdom made with hands. He came to usher in a spiritual kingdom of men and women redeemed from sin and who would live in the world as ambassadors of that heavenly kingdom.

So Jesus asks, “Who is the Christ, the Messiah?” And they say, “He’s the son of David.” So close, but still so far. Jesus goes on in verses 43-45:

**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?”**

Jesus refers back to Psalm 110 where David writes about the Messiah. David describes the Messiah, having accomplished his mission and having defeated his enemies, now taking his place at the right hand of the Lord—at the right hand of Yahweh, of the Father. The Jews were expecting that of their earthly messiah. The Jews loved this psalm. But Jesus points to the fact that David, when he wrote the psalm, he referred to the Messiah—who would be his own descendant, as “my Lord”. And Jesus

asks, “If the Messiah is the son of David, why in the world would David refer to his descendant as his Lord? My ‘son’, yes. But a son can never be lord over his own father.” What Jesus is doing is pointing to the divinity of the Messiah. And that’s what makes all the difference. To drive out the Romans, they just needed a man—a good military strategist. But to deal with our sins, we need a Messiah who is both man *and* God. If the Jews had understood that the Messiah was equally both the Son of David *and* the Son of God, they would have understood that the Messiah had come not to save them from the Romans, but to save them from their sins.

Jesus was about to accomplish his redemptive work on the cross. In fifty-two days, he was going to ascend to heaven and take his seat at the right hand of the Father, where his enemies would be made his footstool. He was just about to fulfil the prophecy that David spoke in Psalm 110. He was about to establish his kingdom. And these men were so close, but still so far. This one final time Jesus asked them the most important question of all: “Who am I?” And Matthew says:

**And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.**  
(Matthew 22:46)

Brothers and sisters, Jesus went on to accomplish his work as Messiah and he now sits in heaven at the right hand of the Father with all power and authority as he rules his kingdom. In the Epistle today from 1 Corinthians St. Paul writes about that power as it is manifested in the Church—in the kingdom—through the gifting of the Holy Spirit. Jesus still works through *us* to grow and spread his kingdom and he gives us power to accomplish that mission. He gives us his life so that we can display that life to the world and draw it to him. We—you and I—are now the witnesses of the kingdom.

That was the calling of the Jews—to witness the kingdom and to witness the grace of God to the world. And we see from Jesus’ questions to them that they failed. When the Messiah came, most of them rejected him. We have received him as Messiah. (At least I trust we all have! If you haven’t, you need to take that next step and enter the kingdom.) That’s good that we’ve received the Messiah. That

means that we’re not just close to the kingdom—we’re in it. But now that we’re in it, we need to be asking ourselves every day, “Am I being a good ambassador of the kingdom? When people see me, can they tell that Jesus is my Lord? My desire is to spend my days loving God and loving my neighbour out of gratitude for the loving and saving grace I’ve been shown, but am I steeped in the Scriptures and living according to the real measure and model of love? Or do people see me making my own rules? I was created to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. He’s saved me from my sins. He’s saved me from eternal and everlasting damnation and given me an eternal and everlasting crown of glory that I don’t and can never merit on my own, but in response to that amazing grace, am I truly living for him, or am I still living for myself?” And brothers and sisters, as a church, living together in the grace that is in us by Christ Jesus, as a people enriched by him in every good gift, and as we wait for his coming, are we being faithful stewards of his grace and faithful stewards of his message? There are clubs and societies for every conceivable thing under the sun, but we’re not just a club, we’re not just another society. We are the body of Christ and our mission is to image—to mirror—the glory of God.

Let us pray. Lord, we asked earlier in the collect for you to give us “grace to withstand the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and with pure hearts and minds to follow you.” We ask that again. Make us truly faithful mirrors, not only of your love and grace, but of your holiness that we might give you glory and draw men and women to your kingdom. We ask this in the name of our Saviour and Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.