

Doing the Math (3rd is a 4 part series – The Role of LAW) Matthew 22:15-22; Romans 1:20-25
Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV – 18th Sunday after Pentecost (October 16,) 2011

Matthew 22:15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' ²¹They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' ²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Romans 1:20 Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; ²¹for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. ²²Claiming to be wise, they became fools; ²³and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. ²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.

Today marks the third sermon a four week series on **GOD'S LAW FOR US**. The first week's sermon set the thesis for the series, namely: **GOD'S LAW IS A RECIPE BY THE CREATOR FOR HOW THE CREATURES ARE MEANT TO LIVE A GOOD LIFE.** The Law (aka TORAH) is the DIRECTIONS FOR GOOD LIFE. That sermon introduced the notion of what would it mean to us, if we **quit treating God like a JUDGE and like a loving parent, instead.**

Last week, we started at the very beginning of the BIG TEN:

- 1. You shall have no other gods before me. And,**
- 2. You shall not make for yourself an idol.**

We looked at the story of the Israelites in the wilderness, who played around with a golden calf, and called it "God." And we, along with them, realized that **God alone is a good enough foundation for life.** We need such a foundation as God to get us through the rough times, the waiting times, the anxious times.

- **TODAY**, we are going to move from the **First Testament** of the past two weeks, into the **New Testament**.
- Today we are going to look at Jesus' exposition on THE LAW.

- We need to remember that Jesus Himself said that He did not come to replace the Recipe God gave for good living (the Law). Rather He came to fulfill it.
- Today's lesson is going to teach us the importance of DOING THE MATH correctly in our living.

Not only is THE LAW a good place to start (as we learned last week) but it is **ABSOLUTELY IMPERATIVE that we begin with the right assumptions, or everything else goes wrong, regardless of how well we think it through.**

Once upon a time there was a young trapper named Peter Dobley, who lived alone except for his great big, faithful dog, named Prince.

Eventually Peter married, but his wife died soon after giving birth to their son. From then on, it fell to the dog Prince to guard the baby boy, while his master went out trapping.

One day, caught in a blizzard, Peter was hours late returning home. Arriving, he found the cabin door half open. A terrible sight awaited him inside: his son was gone and the crib was stained with blood.

As Peter stood rooted in horror, Prince crept from behind the bed, his muzzle also red with blood. With a cry, Peter raised his axe and struck with all his strength, killing the dog Prince instantly.

Then Peter stepped around to the other side of the bed, and found his son alive and unharmed. He also found a dead timber wolf, clenching a piece of Prince's bloody fur in his teeth.

The timber wolf had come in to attack the baby, and Prince had defended the helpless child, losing some of his own blood in his successful defense of the timber wolf. But, for his reward, his master had killed him.

When we mistake the truth for a lie, we compound the error even when we use the clearest of rational thoughts. We have to be careful when we make wrong assumptions, because we might not only be wrong, but that wrongness may lead us to do bad things.

The apostle Paul wrote that in the Epistle to the Romans, that we heard read today. When we move God out of the center, and substitute anything else (*i.e.* "exchange the Truth for a Lie") then every conclusion we reach thereafter, will be wrong.

When my son got to that point in school of learning the multiplication tables, for some reason, he dug in his heels and said, **"not going to do it."** He did not want to

work with flash cards, didn't want to study them, just wasn't going to do it. What he found out later was that his whole ability to do math at all was stunted by his failure to learn these basics. He substituted "doing it my way" for THE WAY. And – for years – he paid the price. (I'm happy to say that he has now come around, but it took him years to do so.)

It is **ABSOLUTELY IMPERATIVE that we begin with the right assumptions, or everything else goes wrong, regardless of how well we think it through.** We **MUST** begin with God at the center of everything!

In the Gospel lesson, the Pharisees are trying to "set up" Jesus. They form a temporary unlikely alliance with the Herodians for this escapade. (The Pharisees and the Herodians never were on the same side. It would be like the Socialists for a Better America joining forces with Sarah Palin and the Tea Party.)

They offer false flattery to Jesus and then try to put Him into an impossible dilemma: ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?

- ✦ **If Jesus says, "No," then the Herodians (the Jews who share the bed of power with the Romans) can have Jesus arrested for treason.**
- ✦ **If Jesus says, "Yes," then the Pharisees will demonstrate to the Jewish throng standing by listening that Jesus is a turncoat and an enemy of the people.**

So Jesus makes true the flattery they meant as false, and told them what He does.

And we must ask, "What DID He mean by that: 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'"

- **"Since everything belongs to God, pay nothing to the emperor.**
- **"It may mean that the emperor has a certain domain and God has a certain domain, and they should not be confused.**
- **"It may mean: taxes to the emperor are permitted as long as they do not infringe on the laws of God.**

Whatever it means, it is not the end of the conversation but a catalyst for further dialogue. The discussion in the Gospel account may come to an end, but the discussion among those who read the Gospel continues.

Clearly, Jesus is saying the same thing that Paul says: **DON'T EXCHANGE THE TRUTH FOR A LIE. DON'T SUBSTITUTE ANYTHING FOR GOD AT THE CENTER, AND MESS UP YOUR MATH FOR LIFE.**

But, as I delve into Jesus' living out the LAW – Jesus' fulfillment of the LAW as the recipe for a good life, I also see more.

The Pharisees and the Herodians were trying to put Jesus onto the horns of a dilemma **IN ORDER TO MAKE HIM WRONG**. Jesus demonstrates here that **THE TRUTH is more important than MAKING SOMEONE WRONG**.

How many times in life, do we confront **situations of seeking the Truth** and end up **turning them into situations of making sure we win and someone else loses?**

Christian teacher and story teller **John Shea** shares a story from which he learned about such a reality in life:

ONCE UPON A TIME, A MAN IN ONE BOAT SEES ANOTHER BOAT COMING AT HIM THROUGH THE FOG. HE YELLS AT THE MAN IN THE OTHER BOAT TO STEER ASIDE. BUT THE BOAT CONTINUES TO COME AT HIM. HE THEN CURSES AND SWEARS AND RAGES AT THE APPROACHING BOAT. WHEN THE BOAT IS CLOSE ENOUGH SO HE CAN SEE IT CLEARLY IN THE FOG, HE SEES THE BOAT IS EMPTY. THERE IS NO ONE IN THE BOAT. IMMEDIATELY HIS ANGER CALMS, AND HE EASILY STEERS HIS BOAT AWAY, AVOIDING COLLISION.

Shea commented that, "To avoid the trap of theological exploration becoming an ego contest, **I [have] tried to become an empty boat**. From years of practice, I know one thing for sure. It is easier to **fight to be right** than it is to **be empty to be true**."

Becoming an empty boat is a good way for us to not get in God's way.

When we exchange **our need to be right and to make someone else wrong** for the **TRUTH ABOUT GOD**, then we upset the Law's Recipe for living a good life.

In essence we make it **ALL ABOUT US**, which **makes us unable to know the Truth**, because **IT REALLY IS ALL ABOUT GOD**.

A **SECOND THING** that Jesus teaches us in thos Gospel lesson about **THE LAW** as a **RECIPE FOR LIFE if we keep God in the Center is: DON'T LIMIT YOUR CHOICES.**

[I repeat:] **DON'T LIMIT YOUR CHOICES.**

There are some times when only two choices are available, when a simple “Yes” or a simple “No” are the only answers.

⌘ **e.g.** Today, in this place, at this time, it is Sunday October 16, 2011.

⌘ **e.g.** I am holding up four fingers and a thumb.

⌘ **e.g.** One team will win the 2011 World Series (I did not said “which team” – I only said “one team” will.

But, in spiritual things, in theological things, one of our biggest problems is when we try to limit our options to two.

- God is constantly offering up a myriad of options.
- God really loves diversity.
- If you don't think so, count how many shades of red and orange you see on the way home. Or look into your lawn and see how many shades of green God uses.

It is critical for us to keep God at the Center, but not to limit the number of correct options God allows. We get stuck on the horns of a dilemma, when we allow ourselves or someone else to only give us two tips of the horn. God usually offers more.

In the final chapter of this series, next week, we will discover the RIGHT TOOL for how to discover all the options and how to pick the correct one for that particular circumstance.

But we must not get ahead of ourselves. For this week, the important lesson to remember is: **GOD IS ALWAYS AT THE CENTER. IF WE EXCHANGE THE TRUTH FOR A LIE AND PUT ANYTHING ELSE IN THE CENTER** (including a desire to be right) **THEN WE WILL MISS THE RECIPE FOR LIVING A GOOD LIFE.**

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.