FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

"WHAT HOLDS THE WHOLE THING TOGETHER?"

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 22: 34-46

This sermon was preached by Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, October 25, 2026 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Matthew 22: 34-46

The Greatest Commandment

34 *When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together,* 35 *and one of them, an expert in the law, asked him a question to test him.* 36 *"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"* 37 *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.'* 38 *This is the greatest and first commandment.* 39 *And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'* 40 *On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."*

The Question about David's Son

41 *Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question:* 42 *"What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David."* 43 *He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,*

44 *'The Lord said to my Lord,*
"Sit at my right hand,
until I put your enemies under your feet" '?

45 *"If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?"* 46 *No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.*

What Holds the Whole Thing Together?

Leader: The word of the Lord.
People: Thanks be to God.

If you were here last Sunday, you will remember that we spent our time considering some of the earlier verses in Matthew 22, the ones where the Pharisees and Herodians came together and tried to trap Jesus with the question about paying taxes to the emperor.

And Jesus gave the answer: "Render unto the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and give to God the things that are God's."

Well, here, in the latter part of chapter 22, Jesus is asked another question meant to test him. "Teacher," a lawyer asks, "which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

Now, that sounds like a straightforward question on the surface, especially when we consider that there were hundreds of laws. What's more, faithful Jews had long discussed how those commandments related to one another. So, which one is the greatest?

With so many commandments, so many competing demands upon our lives, with so many ways to understand what God requires, is there an essential truth? Is there one greatest commandment that gives coherence to our faith and can shape the way we live?

Those are fitting questions for us to ask on this Reformation Sunday because the Reformation was, at its heart, a call for the church to rediscover certain basic Biblical truths, to recover what mattered the most in the midst of so many things that really shouldn't have mattered at all.

The Reformation proved to be the church's opportunity to reaffirm it's understanding of the grace of God and the authority of God's Word!

Our opening hymn, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, was written by Martin Luther, that sixteenth-century reformer whose work helped set the Protestant Reformation in motion. It happened that on October 31, 1517, Luther famously posted his Ninety-Five Theses for debate on the castle church door in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther's hope was that the church would reform its teachings and practices. For example, if the sale of indulgences remained a practice in the church today, we would be able to attain forgiveness and other spiritual benefits for our deceased loved ones, all for, shall we say, a modest sum of money. The problem was that there's just no justification for the sale of indulgences in the Bible.

That was Luther's point! It wasn't that he wanted to start a new church, he wanted the church that he loved to recover the truth about God that had been revealed in the Scriptures! He wanted the church to understand the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ, he wanted the church to be reformed, not through his efforts, but "according to the Word of God."

From this period of church history there emerged a mantra that remains at the heart of our reformed identity to this day: "the church reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God."

And those final words matter, because the truth is: not every tradition or reformation or behavior is in accordance to the Word of God. One of the great gifts of the reformation was the assertion that, if we are ever going to correct our errors and renew our lives, it will only happen by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit and in accordance with the Word of God written, the Bible.

So, back to the question that was asked of Jesus – in the breadth and scope of the Bible, in the entirety of the Scriptures, what matters the most? "Which commandment is the greatest?" In Jesus' answer he first quotes from Deuteronomy, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."

"That is the first and greatest commandment," Jesus says, but then He adds a second commandment, and does so by referencing words from Leviticus, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus then concludes by saying, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Now, we often hear those words of Jesus, and we imagine the law and the prophets now hanging there like an old jacket might hang on a rickety coat rack. But Jesus has said elsewhere, "I came not to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them?" In that spirit, neither do we disregard the biblical heritage that has preceded our reading this morning.

And perhaps you too have noticed that Jesus was basically summarizing the Ten Commandments when he gave us these two commandments? After all, if we love God, we are effectively following the first four commandments and if we love our neighbor, we are effectively following the next six? I like to imagine these two commandments – the ones on which Jesus says the law and the prophets hang as the supporting beams of a great house.

A house may have many rooms, each with its own furnishings, its own pictures, and its own purpose, but beneath all that variety, there is a structure that gives the whole house its shape and stability.

To be clear: the law and the prophets are not a collection of disconnected teachings or competing demands. Jesus is not replacing the commandments nor is he setting aside the church's prophetic witness. The moral law remains, and God's promises remain trustworthy.

To better appreciate that, we step back and consider the larger story in which this chapter takes place, because God's story did not begin with Jesus' earthly ministry, and it certainly does not end when his earthly ministry is over.

As many of you know, I love taking church pilgrimages – visiting those places that have shaped our faith and our identity and reflecting on the ways God continues to use those places to deepen our understanding of who we are and whose we are. It's why I'm so excited about the work of our 300th anniversary committee and the planning that is beginning to happen for a Scottish Heritage Pilgrimage in 2031, our anniversary year!

During one of our recent Holy Land Pilgrimages, which I co-led with Dr. Massie, we stood where the story or our Old Testament Lesson actually took place! We were able to stand on top of Mount Nebo, which is where Moses stood near the end of his life, and from where he could look over into the Promised Land, but he was not permitted to go there.

It would be Joshua who would lead the people across the Jordan and that's important for us to remember, because this new generation of God's people, while they would undoubtedly enter the Promised Land, they would not do so because of Moses.

What I mean is, Moses' story basically ends here, but God's story does not, and this is important for several reasons, not least of which is that this story serves as a humble reminder that none of us are ultimately responsible for being the ones through whom the promises of God will ultimately be realized!

In other words, we are not the ones who hold everything together! We have responsibilities, for sure, and certain things have been entrusted to us; but not unlike Moses, we give ourselves faithfully to a calling whose ultimate purposes we will never see, at least not on this side of heaven.

Which brings us back to our Gospel reading, because the foundation of God's love, His faithfulness, His covenant, His determination to redeem His people, it has now become flesh, and the purposes of God have come into perfect focus!

Now, this doesn't mean that everything that came before Jesus has been cancelled. Sure, there are dietary and other ceremonial laws, civil laws that the coming of Jesus transformed, but Jesus did not abolish God's moral law! The commandments that God gave to Moses – they remain an essential part of the Christian life for a number of reasons, not least of which is that they reveal God's character, they show us how to live, they expose our sin and restrain us from doing wrong. But they cannot forgive us, nor can they make us righteous before God.

The commandments can tell us what love looks like, what love requires; but they cannot, by themselves, make us loving. They cannot actually equip us to love God and neighbor! On our own, we fall miserably short of the expectations of God. We tend to love those who love us, we give generously when generosity costs us little. We struggle when love requires patience, forgiveness, sacrifice. We hesitate when love requires a willingness to put someone else's needs ahead of our own.

Here again, the law, the commandments, they help expose the gap which exists between what God commands and how we actually live. But the law cannot bridge the gap! We need more than a summary of the law to do that. We need the One who fulfills it!

Immediately after answering the question about the greatest commandment, Jesus asks the Pharisees about the Messiah. "Whose son is He?" And they answer, "The son of David."

But Jesus presses them further by quoting Psalm 110, in which David speaks of the Lord God, saying to David's Lord, "Sit at my right hand."

The point that Jesus was making is this: if David calls the Messiah "Lord," how can the Messiah also be David's son? Jesus is reminding them and us that the promised King is greater than David himself. Jesus is David's son – he clearly comes from the line and lineage of David, but He is also David's Lord. This is a wonderful example of the implications of that reformation mantra, "the church reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God," because even in the stories we have referenced this morning, we can see how the threads of Scripture begin to come together to form a Biblical tapestry of covenants and grace!

Moses points toward a promise he will not experience, and David receives a covenant whose fulfillment stretches far beyond his reign and Jesus stands before His questioners as the One in whom all of Israel's hope converge!

But know this, Jesus does what neither Moses nor David could ever hope to do. He does not merely point toward the kingdom of God; he brings it near, and he does so by embodying a perfect love of God and neighbor. And then, in the fulness of time, the ultimate expression of God's love, Jesus, the Christ, He goes to the cross, and it is there that we see, all at once, both the seriousness of our sin and the astonishing depth of God's grace.

The seriousness of sin is that it fractures our relationship with God and with one another, and it carries the terrible consequence of death. Indeed, if our sin could simply be dismissed, if God's justice could be satisfied by pretending that nothing had happened, then Jesus wouldn't have gone to the cross?

Justice required a cross, and yet that is precisely where we also experienced God's mercy. The One who perfectly fulfills the law gives himself for those who have failed to keep it, and through his death and resurrection Christ reconciles us to God, forgives our sin, and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, forms in us the love he commands from us!

And those two commandments – to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself – they give shape to our lives and direction to our faith and our obedience. And here is the good news: the strength of the very household of God, it does not ultimately depend upon the strength of our love. What holds the whole thing together is the love of God made known to us in the person and work of Jesus Christ, for He is the One who reconciles us to God, He is the One who shows us what perfect love looks like.

In the end, we do not love God in order to earn God's love and we certainly do not love our neighbor in order to prove that we deserve God's grace.

No! We love, because God first loved us! Oh, it has never been about the unshakable strength of God's love for us. And it is in that love and in that grace that we are called to love God and neighbor.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.