



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Sunday September 25th, 2016 – Trinity 18

✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Ghost ✠

Dale Carnegie, the arch-apostle of self-improvement, contended that the vital key to success was the ability to win friends and influence people. And he made a fortune practicing what he preached and teaching other people to do likewise.

Yet when we examine the career of Jesus Christ, the most charismatic leader the world has known, we see that the one thing he resolutely refused to do was to win friends and influence people. Judging by today's Gospel (*Matt. 22:34-46*), one might reasonably conclude that he went out of His way to do just the opposite.

There was nothing unintentional about Jesus' penchant for alienating people. He did it deliberately. And his targets were more often than not folks whom one might reasonably assume to be his natural allies, devout people, like Pharisees eagerly awaiting the Messiah. His mother and stepbrothers were so worried about him turning off potential allies, they paid Him to a visit specifically to ask: "Why are you alienating these good people?" (*Mark 3:31-35*).

That said, the incident recorded in today's Gospel reading happened just three days before the crucifixion when he was in dire need of friends. And, as usual, the people he was deliberately dissing were Pharisees, natural allies, at a time they were bending over backwards to make a quarrel with Him.

Earlier in the day, they'd been so angry with him, they had made common cause with the Herodians, to entrap him with a loaded question: "Is it lawful or unlawful to pay taxes to Caesar?" If he had

answered "No", the Herodians, Roman allies, could have arrested him for treason. If he answered "Yes" the Pharisees could have charged Him with blasphemy.

Jesus escaped the trap by invoking an ancient Rabbinic legal ruling that the person depicted on the coinage ruled the state. "Render unto Caesar," he declared, "the things which Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's." Game, set and match, but not one necessarily calculated to win friends and influence people.

Next at bat were the Sadducees, the Pharisees' religious rivals. The Sadducees were modern-minded folk who didn't believe in superstitious stuff like a life hereafter, so they asked him a question calculated to demonstrate how silly the idea of an after life was. Jesus' answer made them look incredibly stupid.

"Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God," he said, . . . As touching the resurrection of the dead, have you not read that which was spoken to you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not God of the dead, but of the living."

The Pharisees couldn't have said it better, and they tried to make up their quarrel. To start a dialogue, one of the lawyer's among them delegated to ask a very simple question, one they knew he had answered quite satisfactorily many times before. The question was: "What is God's most important commandment to us?"

Jesus answered: "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 neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

This amplified the answer to the same question by Hillel, the Pharisees' legendary rabbi, who said: "Thou shalt not do unto thy neighbor that which thou wouldst have done unto thyself. That is the law. And the rest is merely commentary upon it."

If Jesus had left it there, it's reasonable to assume that the Pharisees would have declared themselves his unflinching allies. He had, after all, not only paid tribute to a religious hero – one of the greatest of all Old Testament scholars – but he had amplified on his teaching, casting it from a negative to a positive. This established his credentials as a second Hillel,

Jesus, however, wasn't content to leave it there. When the Pharisees went into a huddle to decide the next step, Jesus called out: "Hey, What do think about the Messiah, Whose son do you think he is."

Jesus knew they would answer: "The son of David." While the Scriptures, in fact, foretold the Messiah would be the Son of God, the leading theologians of Jesus' day interpreted this as an allegorical statement referring to the great King David – the legendary Jewish monarch, especially beloved of God.

In challenging this interpretation – in declaring the Messiah to be the divine Son of God and, thus, proclaiming his own divinity – he was deliberately picking a fight that could only lead to one conclusion. Jesus was well aware that the Pharisees would condemn the statement blasphemy. Thus, he was irretrievably offending the last group of potential allies powerful enough to save his life.

Why, one must ask, did he calculatedly offend people who so earnestly strove to live according to God's law? Why, instead recognizing their strong points – their conscientious piety, their generosity to the poor – did he constantly harp on their deficiencies, making fun of their smug self-righteousness and petty hypocrisies? Why didn't

He make friends and gradually convert them to his way of thinking?

The problem was the Pharisees utter lack of humility, the awareness of their position in their relationship with God. Underlying the Pharisees piety was a sense of superiority – a belief that they, and they alone, were implementing God's agenda. Their piety was inspired as much by their disdain for those who disagreed with them as it was by their love of God. After all, when you have coopted God to your side, who can gainsay you?

The Pharisees did not do anything unto their neighbors that they would not have done unto themselves . . . except one thing. They did not treat them as their equals before God. They did not recognize their neighbors as fellow sinners in equal need of redemption. They usurped God's prerogative and passed judgment upon them.

As long as the Pharisees equated their own political/religious agenda with God's agenda, there was no way the son of God could endorse them. As long as they regarded themselves as God's sole representatives on earth, they were irreconcilably separated from Him.

Jesus' message is as important to Christians today as it was to our First Century counterparts, the Pharisees. It is vital for us to understand we are not God's policy makers or even his "Spin Doctors." God, and God alone, is responsible for making the divine agenda. Our job is not to alter it, or interpret it in ways that serve our own ends and ambitions, but, rather, to do his will to the best of our ability.

Jesus' message to the Pharisees back then, and to us today, is exactly the same as the one he gave to his mother and his stepbrothers when they begged to stop offending good people.

"Who is my mother and my brethren?" he asked, and then, answering his own question, he declared: "Whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and my mother." *AMEN*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN..