

## “The Lord our Teacher and Rabbi”

LaPorte New Church Swedenborgian  
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### Scripture

Leviticus 19:1-4, 9-10

Matthew 7:1-5, 7-12

### Hymns or Songs

"Trust and Obey" 224

"How Gentle God's Commands" 111

"O Love that Wilt Not Let Me Go" 552

### **Leviticus 19:1-4, 9-10**

#### ***The Lord is Holy***

**19** And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy. <sup>3</sup> Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father, and you shall keep my Sabbaths: I am the LORD your God. <sup>4</sup> Do not turn to idols or make for yourselves any gods of cast metal: I am the LORD your God.

#### ***Love Your Neighbor As Yourself***

<sup>9</sup>“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. <sup>10</sup> And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God.

### **Matthew 7:1-5, 7-12**

#### ***On Judging Others***

**7** “Judge not, that you be not judged. <sup>2</sup> For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. <sup>3</sup> Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? <sup>4</sup> Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? <sup>5</sup> You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.”

#### ***Ask and It will Be Given***

**7** “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. <sup>8</sup> For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. <sup>9</sup> Or which one of you, if

his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? <sup>10</sup> Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? <sup>11</sup> If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"

### ***The Golden Rule***

<sup>12</sup> "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets."

### **Insights for Worship**

*Heaven and Hell* 127 by Emanuel Swedenborg

"Heaven's light is not natural like the light of our world, but spiritual. It actually comes from the Lord as the sun in Heaven, and that sun, as explained in the preceding chapter, is divine love. While what emanates from the Lord as the sun of Heaven is called divine truth in the heavens, in essence it is divine good as one with divine truth. This is the source of light and warmth for angels: they get their light from the divine truth and their warmth from the divine good. We can therefore conclude that Heaven's light, in view of the nature of its source, is spiritual and not natural, as is its warmth."

### **SERMON: "The Lord Our Teacher and Rabbi," by Rev. Kit Billings**

Christians all over the world refer to Jesus Christ by many revered and holy names, but those who knew Him the best (meaning the disciples) called Him "teacher." Of the ninety or so times that Jesus was addressed directly in the New Testament, about sixty of those instances show the Lord being called, "teacher," "rabbi," "great one," or "master." Throughout the Gospels (of *Matthew, Mark, Luke* and *John*), the majority of ministry activity Jesus did was...teaching. The Lord taught people while walking on dusty roads, at dinners, at a wedding, on hillsides, in a fishing boat, while washing the disciples' feet, inside of a locked room not long after He had risen from His grave...and, quite beautifully, by a campfire while roasting some fish.

He taught people one-on-one, His inner circle at daytime and at night, large crowds and small groups, and He taught both His friends and His enemies. And isn't it intriguing that the only story we have in the Gospels involving Jesus' childhood happened around Him listening to and teaching Jewish scholars of His day? After being lost for three days Joseph and Mary finally catch up with Him, and there He was by the Temple, "sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard Him was amazed at His understanding and His answers." (Luke 2:46-47)

The Gospel accounts then give us more than a ten year break in the journey of Jesus Christ, and then some forty days after His baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist, we see the Lord beginning His public ministry helping to lead a worship service in Nazareth where we find Him, **teaching**. And His words so upset His neighbors that they ran Him out of town! He built His redeeming ministry on the road, an itinerant spiritual leader, preacher and teacher unlike anyone before or since His time on Earth. He lived and died a teacher.

The word in the Gospels that we typically translate as “teacher” was “rabbi” or “rabbouni.” That word in the first century was only just coming into common usage. It was actually a revolutionary term, which meant much more than today’s word for a Jewish clergyman or clergywoman. It was a special term for those whose spiritual wisdom and teaching bore spiritual authority. It was reserved for those who were sages, gifted storytellers, a deeply insightful interpreter of the Law, or a particularly wise elder. Within the writings of those times, Jesus’ name was the first one connected with that title of rabbi. That word, “rabbi,” was reserved for those very special teachers who were crafting a new and revolutionary approach to the Hebrew scriptures, texts and traditions.

Perhaps one of the most fascinating things about the Lord Jesus Christ was that He was known in both Jewish and Christian circles as a Rabbi. But what set Jesus apart from all other teachers was not only that He understood how to express spiritual wisdom in words and in stories that were brilliantly crafted—it was also that the love and truth behind each word He spoke and every story He told was Divine! But then all throughout His life Jesus then backed up His words by living the truth each day: in short, He loved and cared for everyone, even His worst enemies, who plotted and carried out His death upon a cross. The Jewish people back then had been severely oppressed by the Romans for many years. Romans ruled their subjects with an iron fist and crucifixion was a common form of suppression against zealous rebels. It was no surprise to anyone that Christ wound up dead one day by way of crucifixion—because He inspired hope within the peasant Jews and His love gave them inspiration to call Him Lord, rather than Caesar in Rome. What was remarkable was that while dying on the cross Jesus was heard still praying to His Divine Father and that He asked forgiveness for His murderous enemies.

For me, Jesus Christ revealed His divinity by both the words He spoke and by how He backed up His teachings by His life of faithful love, truth and compassion. The life lessons and eternal wisdom that flowed out of Christ’s sayings, parables and teachings glowed with intense love, meaning and truth. The commoners back then knew their lives could be snuffed out like a candle wick tomorrow or next week. But the truth and wisdom that came out of the very innermost being of Jesus the Rabbi helped them feel whole again, cared for by a God who divinely loved them, and instructed and at times appropriately reprimanded for the sins they were committing. Listen to the Lord’s great words again as we imagine together that it was God-Himself, our Lord

incarnate within the human teacher named Jesus speaking: "Judge not, that you be not judged. <sup>2</sup> For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. <sup>3</sup> Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? <sup>4</sup> Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? <sup>5</sup> You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." (Mtt. 7:1-5)

And then almost with the same breath the Lord then teaches: "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. <sup>8</sup> For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened." (Mtt. 7:7-8) What we find within the teachings of God-in-Christ are clear spiritual laws that stand the test of time. Christ as divine teacher helped people understand what they should and should not do. He taught them to be seekers, deeply alive and engaged in their spiritual growth. His love and wisdom are as true today as they were over 2,000 years ago. The Lord instructs us on how we need to treat people and how we need to follow Him. Like all great teachers He made sure that we would know the rules of a Heaven-bound life.

And like any truly given word from God's great mind flowing into history, Jesus was able to distill centuries of spiritual wisdom into powerfully short sayings, as in His teaching of the "Golden Rule": "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." (Mtt. 7:12) Both here and in the Two Greatest Commandments Jesus preached, which were distilled from ancient Jewish texts, we are given the whole of Jewish and Christian wisdom within one pithy saying. Jesus understood that from our inherited selfish tendencies from all of humanity we lean easily toward caring the most about ourselves. Most of us know quickly how it is we would like to be treated. So, the Lord masterfully takes a hold of this ancient leaning towards loving ourselves only and helps us turn our focus outwardly towards caring for others!

I am supposed to treat others with the same depth and power of caring as I would like everyone else to treat me. This may sound very simplistic, but put it into practice every day of your life, and you will suddenly become a very unselfish individual! God's part for you and for me is handled by being the best Divine Teacher of spiritual wisdom we will ever need, and He taught us to love Him and lean into Him if burdened. But then, we also have our extremely important part to play in this awesome partnership.

It is up to me to make the choice every day to expose my heart, mind and life to His holy words and wisdom, and then after that it is up to me to not let His words and parables to spill out of my other ear and onto the floor. As adult learners, we know what we need to do—I know what I must do as a follower of the Lord. I need to make time in my life to read or listen to God's words and then take them as my Divine source

of Light that sheds clarity of truth upon my path each day. Our Old Testament lesson this morning, dealing with God's laws of compassion, is an excellent example for us to use right now.

This means that we need to ask questions like: "What does this particular law tell me about God, about His relationship with us and our relations among each other?" It tells me that I need to keep my own heart soft and supple and full of compassion and sensitivity—what Jesus called "mercy." Remember what the Lord taught us about mercy? He said, "**Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy**" as well. (Mtt. 5:7)

Going back to *Leviticus 19:9-10* again we read: "**When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. <sup>10</sup> And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner....**"

So, what is my God and your God trying to teach us about good spiritual living?

First and foremost to be living in God's Spirit we must have concern for the vulnerable people in our towns and cities. When we read the regulation to leave part of the harvest for poor people to collect food (*Leviticus 19:9-10*), most people cannot do this literally because we do not own land. Yet this rule does teach us about God's care for the poor and makes us think about ways to involve them in gaining a living. They are enabled to participate in finding food and this prevents them from being just "victims." This law also makes clear that God cares for the vulnerable in society, who in other laws are often referred to as "the orphan, the widows and the alien." They are every bit as human and as powerfully loved as God's children as you and I are—and so it is up to me to shine the Lord's teachings here upon my own heart, attitudes and thinking processes.

Lastly my friends, as adult learners, we need to understand the essence of His regular use of parables. The Lord's parables are fictional short stories that are open-ended tales; they invite us into them, which Christ our Divine Teacher used so that we would need to struggle with their meaning. They call us into wonderment, helping us to look at and perceive the world from a new angle. Renowned Jewish scholar, Amy-Jill Levine, tells us that they are "**mysterious!**" They are stories that "**challenge us to look into hidden aspects of our own values, our own lives. They bring to the surface unasked questions, and they reveal the answers we have always known, but [we] refuse to acknowledge.**" (Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, 2014, p. 3)

Two favorite parables of mine are when Jesus describes what the Kingdom of Heaven is like.

## The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl

<sup>44</sup> "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

<sup>45</sup> "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. <sup>46</sup> When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it."

~Matthew 13:44-46

Now, I'd like for everyone here to take these one at a time, and as you hear our Lord Jesus Christ sharing His Divine-spiritual teachings here, pretend like He is teaching them to you, for your journey of life today. Read it once to get familiar with it, and then a second time for your growth's sake. First and foremost, what is this parable that Jesus told saying to you, today? How does it relate to *your own personal journey of spiritual growth*?

Now read the second parable: the first time to get familiar with it. Now read it a second time. What spiritual truths are you seeing and feeling in it? How does it relate to your spiritual growth journey today?

**In conclusion**, perhaps the biggest challenge facing modern Christians today is, was Jesus Christ just a very gifted morality teacher, or, was He what He claimed to be—the Son of God or God-manifest in Divine-Human form? I believe this is a very significant question, which in truth can only be answered by the one asking the questions. If I believe that Jesus was merely a great prophet and moral teacher, then I might spend some time reading or listening to a handful of His more famous teachings, but I will also find it easy to give up on them when they cause me stress. But if I choose to take Jesus at His word, that He was and is God-made-visible in human form, then that means His words, truths and stories have infinite value and are of Divine importance for my gradual, lifelong journey of spiritual regeneration. They impact my salvation.

This church we are in right now is affiliated with the Swedenborgian (New) Church of North America, and as an ordained minister of this denomination it is my responsibility to teach you God's Word in its literal and symbolic meanings—but also, it is my calling to always make sure that you are fully free inside to accept the truth as you feel called by God to know and follow it. I believe fully that God gave you your brain to use it, and in spiritual freedom, I believe He trusts each of us to learn the historical-critical background of each story, apply the language of symbolism if you wish known as the "science of correspondence," and seek out your own spiritual enlightenment as God's child. May the Lord our Savior, Jesus Christ, our greatest teacher of spiritual wisdom and love continue to guide and teach us all from the treasures of wisdom flowing from Heaven. Amen.

**PASTORAL PRAYER**

O Lord our Divine Friend and Savior, thank you for reaching out to us in loving friendship, centered in trust. Help us, though, to enjoy one of your other major roles in our lives—that of a Master Teacher. May come to you often, reading and meditating on your words of life and regeneration. Help us to trust that it is your Spirit that directly grants us the enlightenment, vision and understanding we need to grow forward step-by-step, one day at a time—as we develop into angels full of heavenly love and character. May your teachings and truth help us be more loving, forgiving and faithful, born to be useful and good each day. We pray this in your holy name, O Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Children's Sermon** “Jesus Is My Best of Friends”