

There are six basic situations presented to Christ in the New Testament where His enemies tried to 'trap' Him. These were direct, pre-planned attempts to cause Christ to slip up in front of his followers by those who had become very jealous of His popularity. The situation was so crucial that sworn enemies like the Pharisees and the Herodians worked together to form a slate of questions that (they thought) could not be answered without Christ losing credibility. They analyzed all of the possible answers and were satisfied that there was no escape. But each time they approached Jesus with this load of dynamite it went off in their own faces. They were just not well enough equipped to do battle verbally with the Son of God. These traps all deal with certain ethical situations that fall roughly into two major categories. Three deal with the theme of obedience to the law, and what that really means in God's eyes.

The first situation is the woman taken in the act of adultery (John 8:1-11). The law in this case (Leviticus 20:10) definitely demanded capital punishment. Christ could side with perfect justice and the law and condemn her to death, but in doing so he would incur the wrath of the Roman government. His other choice was to ignore the law and deal in perfect mercy and love, which would incur the righteous indignation of all the Jews. How could he decide between these two equally untenable positions?

Christ makes them wait for his answer while he writes in the sand, perhaps to get them to think about what they were really doing or to put them off their guard. Christ knew that the adulterous man was not brought with the woman to be judged, and that this law had not been regularly obeyed in many years. Christ then chooses obedience to the law; but by putting things in terms of the sinfulness of the accusers, they themselves have to demand mercy. And they leave one by one, from the oldest to the youngest. Christ entwines justice and mercy in a way that reveals the principle that 'mercy triumphs over judgment' (James 2:13).

Next the Pharisees asked the seemingly simple question: 'Which of the commandments of the law is the greatest?' But they were really asking Him to choose which one of the ten commandments was the greatest. No matter which one He chose, they would have someone claim that one of the others was greater. Christ, showing the powerful wisdom of God, jerks the rug out from under them by choosing something that the ten commandments themselves were based upon. He chooses the beloved 'Shema' passage of Deuteronomy 6:5 to show that they had really missed the point about the true meaning of the law. They were stunned into silence because it was obvious that Christ was right, and they could not argue against it. Then Christ went further by giving them the second greatest law, that of loving mankind as ourselves. But this was something that the Pharisees could not or would not understand.

These two commandments and ideals were present in the old law, but the superstructure of traditions that the Pharisees had built up was so high that few could see them. Christ demolished that obscuring wall to reveal what was there all along. And the people who were really searching after the true God could immediately realize the worth of it.

In the third situation, a man put Christ to the test when he asked him what he must do to be saved (Luke 10:25-37). Christ turned the question back on him by having him answer for himself. Perhaps the man was present in the exchange discussed above, for he answered correctly. The emphasis of his question, though, was on 'doing' something. This way of thinking plagued the Pharisees, for they felt that salvation could be earned through obedience to a list of rules. The questioner, after finding approval for his answer to the first question, next asked about whom this love really applied, and Christ related the parable of the Good Samaritan. Christ again revealed the inseparable connection required in our love for God and man. A similar lesson is found in the story of the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-22).

No matter what was used to try to trap our Lord, He escaped it by the great power of His wisdom and understanding. We must remember that there is a way of escape for us as well through the power of God (1 Corinthians 10:13). We also need to remember that we should be pursuing what God really wants. The application of rules to our lives results many times in an exterior shell that only 'looks' good. What God wants is someone who does the right thing because they know it is right and good and pleasing to God. We must change our hearts to love the Lord our God with every fiber of our being, and to love our fellow man as well.

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