Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The other day I heard someone say that Covid-19 is such a big deal that future history books will talk about time as BC and AC – Before Covid and After Covid. Others, though, think that Covid-19 is getting way more attention that it reallyy merits. And these competing opinions are typical of just about every aspect of Covid-19 – its origin, herd immunity, closing the border, quarantine, treatment, shutting down the economy, changing alert levels, social distancing, and testing; there are differing opinions on all of these things. Take testing as an example. Some countries are trying to test all or most of the population, while others are just testing those with symptoms. And this has been a topic of debate here in NZ. Every day we are told how many tests were done yesterday and as of Thursday, 128,000 people had been tested. But I saw one report that suggested that up to 80% of those with Covid-19 have no symptoms at all, not even a cough, which means they won’t even know to ask for a test. Another report said up to 30% of testing may produce false negatives, which is when the test says you do not have Covid-19 when you actually do have it. And then there is how they test for Covid. Have you seen it? The long cotton bud being pushed way deep into a nostril? When Mrs H and I first saw this, we looked at each other and said, No thank you!

But you have probably heard what some are saying, which is that the best approach to Covid-19 is to **test, test, test**. Have you heard that? Test, test, test. But while only time will tell whether test, test, test, was the right approach with Covid-19, when it comes to diagnosing our spiritual condition, test, test, test, is essential. It is what we saw last Sunday when we looked at Q/A 2; The first thing we need to know in order to enjoy the comfort of belonging to Jesus is how great our sin and misery are. And to know this, we must test our spiritual condition. And we are going to see that the test that the Lord has given us is the Law, and that unlike the test for Covid, which allegedly delivers false negatives or false positives, **the law of God Test always delivers a terminal diagnosis**. And we will see this as we **think about the** **test**, and then as we **take** **the test**.

1. So the first thing that we need to do is to **think about** **the Test**.
   1. And this is important because, as I mentioned earlier, there are some questions about the accuracy of Covid testing – false positives and false negatives. For example, if some bloke on an Avondale street said, “Hey! You wanna buy a Covid test? 2 bucks. And he pulled a cotton bud out of his pocket, the chances of that test being accurate are not nearly as high as a test done by a health professional at a clinic. And it would be the same with any other health test we needed to take; we would want to be sure that it is the right test and that it gives an accurate diagnosis. And if that is important for our physical condition, then it is even more important for our spiritual condition. So, without in any way wanting to put ourselves above God, we need to be sure that the test for our spiritual condition is the *right* test and that it will give us an accurate diagnosis.
   2. And the place that we must begin to answer this question is **who provides the test**. Well, we will say more about Matthew 22 as a summary of the law soon but how does the Bible describe the law? It is the law of? **God**. So we have to start with God. If the law test comes to us from God, we better understand the God who gives us the law. So who is God? What is God like?
      1. And the first verse of the Bible tells us what about God? He is the **Creator**. He made the universe; He made this world; He made us. So He is the absolute and independent sovereign of the world. There is no one over or above God that He has to answer to. Ultimate cause/origin/authority/source/majesty/power. **Psalm 115:3**  “*Our God is in the heavens; He does all that He pleases*.”
      2. Is God good or bad? He is good. **Psalm 25:8**  “*Good* and upright is the *LORD.” And* Heis *All* good. *Absolute* good. *Unchanging* good. **1 John 1:5** “*God is light; in Him there is no darkness at all*.” **James 1:17**  “*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change*.” Excellency. Beauty. Splendour. Perfection. Total goodness!
      3. So, as the good Creator, He has prescribed laws for all His creatures. What was His first law, boys and girls? What is the first commandment we read in the Bible? It is the commandment given to Adam, before sin entered creation, not to eat the fruit of the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil. **Was that a good law**, do you think? It must be, right? It came from a good God so it must be a good law! And the Bible is very plain about this in terms of God’s law: **Romans 7:12** “*So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.*”**1 Timothy 1:8** “*Now we know that the law is good*.”
      4. And with that first good law, there was the **possibility of reward or punishment**. If Adam obeyed the law, he would be just and righteous, which would mean entering into eternal fellowship with God. But if he disobeyed that law, he would? Die.
      5. And it is always the same with the law of God.
         1. Think of the **Second Commandment**: “*Visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments*.”
         2. Think of **Deuteronomy 27&28 and Leviticus 23** – long lists of the rewards and blessings that would follow obedience and long lists of the curses that would follow disobedience.
         3. Think of **Psalm 1:1-2**  “*Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD” and* **Psalm 119:1-3**  “*Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD! Blessed are those who keep His testimonies, who seek Him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in His ways!”* Implication? Disobeying the law of God will not bring blessing but curse.
      6. So, God is our absolute sovereign. And He is good. And He has given us His law. And His law is good. And He has said, obey and be blessed, disobey and be cursed.
   3. And the reason we have laid this foundation is so that we understand what is at stake here. **What is sin**? And I want to answer that in two ways:
      1. In terms of the law, sin is when we do not do what the law commands or we do what the law forbids. The word sin, literally, means to miss the mark. Like an arrow that misses the target. We miss on one side when we fail to do what the law requires or on the other side when we do what the law forbids.
      2. But what I really want us to see today is that because the law is the law of God, sin is, as R. C. Sproul put it, **cosmic treason**. And treason, boys and girls, is criminal disloyalty to the King. To sin in any way, by thought, word or deed, is to rebel against God’s goodness and majesty and holiness and glory.
         1. Let me illustrate this for you by adapting an illustration I heard on a podcast the other night: Out the front of the manse are the two Oak trees and the lawn area. And that lawn area is our property. Well, from time to time, without asking for permission, children leaving Jireh cut through the lawn to the footpath or we have had people walk around the lawn collecting acorns. And if I were to ring the police and say that there is someone on my lawn, please come and arrest them, what do you think the police would do? They would ask, What are they doing? I would say – just walking on it or collecting acorns. But it’s my property! They shouldn’t be there. I am pretty sure the police would refuse to arrest them *unless they were doing something illegal or threatening*. But now imagine that you are outside the Prime-minister’s house in Wellington. And you just want to climb the fence and walk on the grass or collect acorns. What do you think will happen? Full SWAT team! Arrested. So what’s the difference? Not the offense, is it; it is the person against whom the offense has been committed.
      3. That’s why sin is so serious – it is against God! Who is sovereign and who is all good and only good, all of the time.
      4. And if you want another illustration of what God thinks about sin, **look at the cross**. It is so offensive and opposite to who God is that His overflowing love for the Son was not able to keep Him from pouring out His mighty and eternal wrath upon Him for the sin of all His chosen ones, which includes you and me.
2. In **Jeremiah 17:10** we read these words, “*I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds*.” The law test comes from God who is good. And to do what He forbids or to not do what He requires is to commit cosmic treason. So now that we understand the test, and the God who has provided the test, we need, in the second place, to **take the test** and discover that the law test always delivers a terminal diagnosis. And here is where we come to our text.
   1. Jesus was engaged in an extended conversation with some of the influential political and religious parties of the Jews in those times. He answered every question they threw at Him. So now a representative of the Pharisees came with a question. And it is not explicitly stated here, but what we know of the Pharisees suggest that this question, like the previous ones, was designed as a trap. You see, the Pharisees recognized 613 commandments in the Law of Moses. According to them, there were 245 positive commands and 368 negative ones. And while they would have generally agreed that every commandment of God is important, they failed to understand what we saw in our first point, which is that any and every sin of thought, word, or deed is an act of cosmic treason against our good Creator King. So they viewed the commandment not to boil a kid goat in its mother’s milk, for example, as nowhere near as serious a sin as the commandment not to murder. So the Pharisees spent their days ranking the commandments. And of course, because they believed that they could earn God’s favour by keeping His commandments, the further up the ranking that a commandment was, the more ‘holy brownie points’ there were in keeping it, and the lower down it was, well, there were less ‘holy brownie points’ at stake. And if Jesus got the ranking of the commandments wrong, they could show Him up with all their learning, or, better yet, expose Him as a law-despiser. So they asked Him, “*Which is the great commandment in the law?*” And He answered with: “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments*.”
      1. And the first thing to note is that the words of Jesus are **direct quotes from the OT law**. The reference to love for God is a quote from Deut. 6, and the reference to love for neighbour is a direct quote from Leviticus 19. So Jesus was not offering them something new; some innovation of His own.
      2. But note also how the summary of the law and the Ten Commandments amount to exactly the same thing. They express the **same moral standard** in two different but equally valid ways. If you worshipped God alone, and in the right way, and you did not misuse His name, and you observed the Sabbath Day, you would be wholeheartedly loving God, and if you did not kill, and did not commit adultery, and did not steal, and did not bear false witness, and did not covet anything that belonged to your neighbour, you would be loving your neighbour as yourself, and the only way to love God and your neighbour the right way is by keeping the Ten Commandments. So, the *greatest* commandment, the *first* commandment, in fact the *whole* of the law of God is summed up in this answer of Jesus.
   2. But there are two parts to this summary of the law that reinforce or magnify the point we have been making about any and all sin being cosmic treason. And these two parts also exposed the faulty thinking of the Pharisees, which, as we shall see, we easily fall into as well. And the two parts are the words “***all***” and “***as* *yourself***.”
      1. The Pharisees thought that they kept God’s commandments, or at least the big ones. But those words, “all,” as in “*with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind*,” and “as yourself,” as in “*love your neighbour as yourself*,” are devastating exposures of their and our utter inability to keep God’s law as we should, and continual breaking of His law.
      2. **1 Peter 1:15** says, “*But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do*.” **Matthew 5:48**, “*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect*.” What we owe God is perfection; and only perfection would merit eternal life. And anything less than perfection is cosmic treason.
      3. And even if we could offer two commandments out of those 613 that we felt we had kept perfectly (which we cannot!), **James 2:10** says, “*For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it*.”
      4. And that is why **1 John 1:8** says, “*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us*.” It is why **Psalm 130:3**, which we read earlier, says, “*If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities [kept a record], O Lord, who could stand?*”

The Pharisees ranked the commandments and were convinced that they were law-keepers in God’s eyes, or at the very least, better than most sinners. So let me end with this question for you: Imagine that you turn up to work or class one day and you are just a few minutes late, and when the boss/teacher asks you why, you blame slow traffic rather than admit that you slept in. And imagine a man who while on P, murders his mother, sets fire to the house, steals a car and then rams it into a group of school children while being chased by the police. Who is the most guilty in God’s eyes – you or him? And if you think, him, even for a moment then you are just like the Pharisees and you don’t understand sin.

To sin in any way, by thought, word or deed, is to commit cosmic treason against God’s goodness and majesty and holiness and glory. And all sin and every sin deserves infinite wrath. And this is why the law test always delivers a terminal diagnosis.

But, as **Gal 3:24** says, “*The law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith*.” It is only when we understand that we are guilty of cosmic treason and deserving of God’s infinite wrath, that we will seek our entire salvation in Christ and Christ alone! That we will understand what Christ suffered that our sins might be forgiven. That we will strive to live a life of thankfulness for such an undeserved deliverance.

In Kevin deYoung’s book on the Catechism, He says, “Christianity is not a religion about a moral code to keep. Christianity is about a God who saves people who don’t keep the moral code.” And that is just another way of saying what John Newton, the Slave trader who wrote Amazing Grace after he was converted, said, “I am a great sinner; Christ is a great Saviour!” Do you know this? Is this your confession of faith? Is Christ your full and only hope? May it be so! Amen.