

Love Your Neighbor

Matthew 22:34-46

One of the ongoing challenges of ministry is this: How do we deal with tough questions and with those who ask them? The lawyer in this scripture may have been trying to do any one of three different things in questioning Jesus. First, he may have been showing his opposition to Jesus and trying to outwit Jesus by a supposedly unanswerable question. Second, he may have been trying to prove to all that the Pharisees were smarter than the Sadducees. The Pharisees and Sadducees were apparently rival parties in first-century Jerusalem. Perhaps he hoped that Jesus would confirm to the crowds that Pharisees asked better questions than Sadducees. Third, the lawyer may have been genuinely seeking to understand what the law required of him. What he had heard may have inspired him to believe that Jesus was able to answer the strongest questions of his heart.

This scripture deals with the greatest commandment (vv. 34-40) and the question about whether the Messiah is David's son (vv. 41-45)—are related. Both provide a summary of Jesus' identity and message.

After Jesus' messianic entry into Jerusalem (21:1-11) and his prophetic attack upon the temple administration (21:12-17), the scribes and Pharisees publicly confronted Jesus in order to discredit him. This question of the greatest commandment followed questions concerning the legitimacy of paying taxes to Caesar (22:15-22) and the resurrection (22:23-33). As in the previous disputes, Jesus confounded the scribes and Pharisees with his biblical knowledge and logic. When asked which commandment is the greatest or, "What sort of commandment is of great import" is perhaps a better way of translating the question. Rabbinic commentary is filled with discussion of the relative importance of the "light" and

"heavy" commands among those given in Torah, of which there are 613, according to Jewish tradition (248 positive injunctions and 365 prohibitions). Jesus quoted Judaism's most fundamental, ancient, and widely recited biblical passage, the Shema: "Hear, O Israel" (*shema*) that always begins worship in the synagogue. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Deut. 6:5). However, unwilling to leave it simply at that, Jesus added another Scripture that is "like" the first: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18).

These two Scripture passages together provide a summary of Jesus' mission and ministry. They are alike in the sense that they interpret one another. In quoting the Shema, Jesus points out that the aim of the law is to orient one's entire life toward God. However, one cannot love God without loving what God loves! One cannot love God and oppress or exclude any of God's creatures—even one's enemies. Jesus joined these texts in order to smash all the limits and boundaries of neighborliness. Jesus' concise summary of the law is strikingly similar to the answer Rabbi Hillel gave to the same question. When a man challenged Hillel to teach him the whole of Torah while standing on one foot, the Babylonian Talmud reports Hillel's response as follows: "That which is despicable to you, do not do to your fellow, this is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary." **Patrick Gray**

As Jesus pointed out in his Sermon on the Mount, "God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:45). Therefore, one who truly loves God will also love his or her neighbors and enemies. It is the only way to "be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). To love God is to love in the way that God loves—indiscriminately. To love God is to love what God loves—everything. Because God is the source of all being, and God loves all God's creatures, "true

virtue most essentially consists," according to Jonathan Edwards, "in *benevolence to being in general*."

Jesus proved himself to be the true and faithful interpreter of Scripture, silencing his critics with knowledge and wisdom. In the end, Jesus is the Messiah who loves his enemies, who loves as God loves, who is "God with us" (Matt. 1:23).

God's purposes are larger than any single people as shown by Jesus' discussion of the Messiah. The Messiah's mission transcends the salvation of any particular group. Those who love God must love all God's creatures, even at great cost to themselves and their own privileges. Those who follow the Messiah must subordinate all particular interests, identities, and purposes to the Savior's universal mission. Jesus refused to identify love of God with rigid religious requirements or to identify faithfulness to himself with loyalty to a particular community of people. Jesus made clear what it means to love God and be a follower of the Messiah: "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40).

While the Gospel of Matthew is colored by the estrangement between Christians and Jews that characterized its own time, we should not imagine that Jesus' criticism is limited to the Jewish leaders. We Christians are just as prone to the sort of religious traditionalism that uses faith in the service of power, prestige, and exclusion. Jesus' words and deeds are as relevant to us today, and as painful, as they were to the scribes and Pharisees in first-century Palestine. We too need the Messiah. **Tim Beach-Verhey**

Love of neighbor – in the midst of a week where innocent veterans, soldiers not in war zones, and police officers were killed, when Ebola in the States was on everyone's lips – I heard a story of love of God and love of neighbor on yesterday. There is a four-year-old little boy in Utah who has been battling cancer over half

his short life. His family has been told by the medical professionals that the boy will not live for long. His parents wanted to give him pleasant experiences last week in fear that he would not live through the week. So, the community came together and gave the boy Halloween and Christmas last week. He dressed in his costume and went trick or treating, and the neighbors dawned up their Christmas decorations and Santa Clause and the police chief came to bring him Christmas presents.

When we love God with all our being, when we love our neighbor as ourselves, when we make Jesus Lord of our lives, we experience the true meaning of life and religion – to orient our lives toward God. Love God – love neighbor – make Jesus Lord.

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