

The Greatest Commandment

Matthew 22:34-46

Yesterday I attended the Regional board meeting. We spent a great deal of time talking about the business and challenges of the region. By the end of the meeting we got down to the real issues of the church...using our gifts to build up the church; demonstrating godly stewardship; and love for each other, regardless to our differences. Naturally there were differences of opinion around the table, but we are all members of the Body of Christ.

So, how do we deal with tough questions and with those who ask them? In our scripture, by the time the lawyer, a member of the party of Pharisees, came to question Jesus, Jesus had already silenced the Sadducees. The Pharisees and Sadducees were apparently rival parties in first-century Jerusalem. The lawyer may have been trying to do any one of three different things in questioning Jesus.

First, like the Sadducees, 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 the Sadducees, and to those who were overhearing his conversations, that the Pharisees were smarter than the Sadducees. In this case he may have been hoping simply to outwit Jesus, as the Sadducees failed to do. 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 discern 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. He may have been so driven by his own questioning that he found the courage to ask, whether or not he had much hope of any wise response. **Earl F. Palmer**

The lawyer's question: "What sort of commandment is of great import?" Rabbinic commentary is replete 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 responded—just as he did when tested by the devil—by quoting Scripture: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Deut. 6:5). This formula is the second part of the Shema, the standard prayer that all pious Jews are to recite daily ("Hear, O Israel ..."). To this he appended a second citation that was popular among early Christian writers (Rom. 13:8; Jas. 2:8) but never combined with the Shema in this manner: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18). Love of oneself is neither praised nor condemned but merely taken for granted. Love of God and neighbor receive the primary emphasis. Insofar as Jesus gave no concrete instruction on how one is to love God, it is perhaps safe to infer on the basis of other ancient Jewish writings that it entails proper knowledge of God and obedience to God's law. The latter command, Jesus said, was "like" but not identical to the former. If the two were the same, there would be no reason to state them separately. While it would thus be a mistake to view Jesus as reducing love of God to ethical regard for one's neighbor, he clearly saw the two as closely related.

All the law and the prophets "hang" on these two commands (v. 40). The image conjured in this concluding remark is that of a branch hanging from a tree or a door on its hinge. Jesus was asserting that love is a test of one's true understanding of the law. This comment gives us some idea of what Jesus meant when he said that he had come not "to abolish the law or the prophets ... but to fulfill" (Matt. 5:17; cf. 7:12). Jesus' pithy 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**

The real issues of discipleship are about love of God and love of neighbor. Our passage comes toward the end of Matthew as the conflict with the scribes and Pharisees reached its crisis. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus was both utterly orthodox and a profound threat to the religious establishment. His purpose was not "to abolish but to fulfill" the law and the prophets (Matt. 5:17)! The two portions of our scripture—the greatest commandment (vv. 34-40) and the question about whether the Messiah is David's son (vv. 41-45)—may not seem related, yet a close inspection reveals similar themes. Both mark Jesus as an orthodox Jew, reveal the deepening crisis with the Pharisees, and 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 became desperate. They publicly confront Jesus in order to discredit him. The 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 superior biblical knowledge and irrefutable logic. When asked which commandment is the greatest, Jesus quoted Judaism's most fundamental, ancient, and widely recited biblical passage, the Shema: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Deut. 6:5). Unwilling to leave it simply at that, Jesus adds 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! We cannot love God and oppress or exclude any of God's creatures—even our enemies. While the scribes and Pharisees used the law to place severe limits on those whom they were obliged to recognize as their neighbors, Jesus joined these texts in order to smash all the limits and boundaries of neighborliness.

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 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. God is the source of all being, and God loves all God's creatures.

Jesus proved himself to be the true and faithful interpreter of Scripture, silencing his critics with knowledge and wisdom. This did not end but deepened the crisis, driving it beyond debate and unwaveringly toward violence. In the end, Jesus is the Messiah who loves his enemies, who loves as God loves, who is "God with us" (Matt. 1:23).

Jesus himself initiated the next topic of discussion. Quoting Psalm 110:1 to them—"The LORD said to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet'"—Jesus raised the question of the Messiah's identity. If the Messiah is "the son of David," why does King David, traditionally believed to be the author of all the Psalms, refer to him as "my Lord"? King David's deference marked the Messiah as his superior rather than his subordinate, and therefore not simply as his son. The Messiah is both in the line of David and transcends his lineage. Jesus' messianic identity surpasses all of the traditional expectations, even as he himself fulfilled the law and the prophets (Matt. 5:17)!

While Jesus defied conventional expectations concerning the Messiah, his knowledge and use of Scripture were unquestionable. Jesus was a faithful Jew, yet he bursts the bonds of custom that limited God's concern to faithful Jews. God's purposes are larger than any single people. 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. As he approached the cross, 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 was limited to the Jewish leaders. As Christians we are just as prone to the sort of religious conventionalism 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 and will undoubtedly be as troubled by him as anyone.

Tim Beach-Verhey

Jesus has told us that we are to love God with all our being; to love our neighbor as we love ourselves – but we also need a savior – who is Jesus Christ himself; and the Holy Spirit to be our guide to empower us to live faithful lives. We can only obey the greatest commandment with his help!

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