

Matthew 22:34-40    The Meaning of Our Lives  
October 25, 2020

It is the day for another sermon about love. One can hardly be faithful to the scripture without contending with the implications of texts such as the one from The Gospel According to St. Matthew that we have just heard. It is not unique, but simply quotes from Deuteronomy and Leviticus a requirement of faith that is echoed and repeated throughout the Bible.

It comes to us this way in Matthew's version. Jesus had silenced the people of the Sadducee party on the question of the resurrection of the dead, and the Pharisees decided to get in on the fun. One of them asked him which among the commandments was the greatest in the Law. He gave them two answers.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind,” and, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

### Clarifications

Some clarifications are in order. The English word “love” is ambiguous. The biblical meaning refers to an unselfish goodwill that gives to its object without asking or expecting anything in return. In recent times, bible scholars have used the word, “disinterested,” to describe it. That makes it sound like one doesn't care. But it actually means that the one expressing the love is not self-concerned, not self-interested. This is the way God has loved us, and it is the way we are to love God in return, and also our neighbor.

As we have seen by the way this encounter is represented in the Gospel of Luke, the term “neighbor” can also be misleading, for there, it led to the telling of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. This parable leaves us no choice but to conclude that “neighbor” means “everyone.” It does not refer to those with geographic proximity or proximity of any kind; ethnic, religious, racial, social standing; it means all others, near or far.

### The Commands

Of course, the ideas Jesus is expressing here are not controversial as ideas. It is only in the living of them, putting them into practice, that we begin to have some difficulties. Unfortunately believers down through the centuries have had trouble getting it right. You could say it is a simple command, easy to say; but very hard to do. The spiritual life is the lifelong effort to learn how to love in this unselfish way.

So I can only offer some thoughts about it since I am no better than anyone else at its application, and not as good as most. The first thought I offer is to draw a distinction between what Jesus said in response to the question, “what is the greatest commandment?” and the alternatives, what he might have said, but didn't.

He could have said, “get your thinking right.” He could have told us to be right about every issue that comes up, to be right about science, politics, history, technology, but mostly get our theology right. He

could have told us that the best expression of what it means to be a human being, and thus the greatest commandment, is all tied up with the mind, thought, reason. Sometimes Christians act like that *is* what Jesus said. And when they do, it involves them in a kind of doctrinal legalism.

He could have said, “get your religious rituals right.” Make sure that you are not only doing the right rituals, but also doing the ones you are doing, correctly. Make sure you are structuring things in the right way, getting baptism and communion right, speaking the right formulas, dotting the i’s, crossing the t’s correctly. Be sure to exclude those who’s actions are not to the letter in accord with the scriptural demands. Again, sometimes Christians act as though they think that is what Jesus *did* say. And when they do, they involve themselves in a kind of religious legalism.

He could have said, “get your morals right and make sure that there are no failures in moral and ethical action.” Sometimes people act as though they believe that is what Jesus actually *did* say. When they do, they involve themselves in a kind of moralistic legalism.

There is more than enough in the bible that tells us to be truthful, to be pure, to think and act rightly, and yet not here, where Jesus speaks about the most important commands. And these things are important. They are just not *most* important.

Now the word legalism can be ambiguous too, but it is the word we have used to describe religion gone bad,

when the hard work of human relations, compassion, empathy, and grace, have been set aside to simplify things and cover a basic lack of concern for other people, concerns that would make extensive demands on us and require great sacrifices.

But here in this simple command we are confronted by the most important aspect of our lives. Meaning comes from relationships. It doesn’t come from knowledge or technology or pleasure or power or security, or purity, or from the illusion of success, or from religion. Relationships provide the line of sight that opens up the possibility of asking questions about humanity and God.

When we ask what it means to be human, we can be informed by chemistry and biology and math, history and sociology and anthropology, all of which explain some aspect of our physical existence. They leave, however, the most important question unanswered. Even the words we use to speak of life’s most important aspects are relational; love/hate, honest/dishonest, responsible/irresponsible, honor/dishonor, kindness, compassion, empathy; selfishness, anger, greed. The list goes on.

And we learn about God’s nature. It is here that science and reason completely fail us, because they have *no* standing to ask any question beyond material existence. It is through the window of relationships that we have with other people that we can see the truth about ourselves, get our bearings about us, so

that we can know something of God's nature, and of the meaning of our lives.

And so we have been given the Gospel of God's unselfish love for us, known God as Father, which means, loving parent, and have been invited into a relationship that asks only one thing, as in all healthy relationships, that we freely give ourselves in return. And that is what "Love the lord your God," means, "with everything you are; That is what "Love thy neighbor," means.

To the glory of God.

## Matthew 23

34 Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. 35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" 37 Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'[a] 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'[b] 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

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