

Matthew 22:34-40 The Prayer That Starts Out Listen
October 29, 2023

From time-to-time the gospel text, or maybe the Old Testament text runs one of the biblical appearances of the Shema, the prayer that begins with the address, “listen:”

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And as for you, you shall love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.”

The most common notion of prayer is that when we pray, we speak, we let our confessions and petitions be known to God. This prayer begins with, and is named after, listening. “Hear O Israel,” listen up. Before we speak, we listen. It *is* followed by a command to talk, but not to God, rather, to each other, to the children, to those we meet throughout the day.

When asked the greatest commandment, Jesus answers with a version of this foundational prayer, “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind (Jesus adds, “mind,” but I suspect that it is not a *real* addition, but a contextual interpretation of what heart and soul and strength have always meant).

The greatest, which means most important, commandment is not to do, or not do, any particular thing, but to always live by the general rule of love for God with *one’s whole self*. And then Jesus makes another addition by quoting from the 19th chapter of

Leviticus, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” He says that all the law and commandments are summed up in these two commands.

Whenever one of these texts shows up in the readings, I feel compelled to emphasize it, because we are told that it is, “the greatest commandment.” I struggle, on the other hand, to find anything new to say about them, because they are central enough to the Christian faith to be well-known, thus we have heard them before, and just about anything that *can* be said about them, has already been said many times.

Yet, given that the Shema, the great prayer that starts out, “*listen*,” is meant to be prayed in the morning *and* in the evening, and at points throughout the day, *every day*, it does not seem out of place to repeat what has already been said many times:

1 - That the first four of the Ten Commandments are summed up by the command to love God, and the last six are connected to the love of neighbor, with all the subsidiary implications and specific applications associated with each.

2 - That the concept of love that is referred to in these texts, is a rich, multi-faceted concern for another, ie. God or neighbor, without any mixture of self-concern. It is a compassionate, patient, faithful desire for the well-being that is willing to sacrifice for the other. It takes a couple paragraphs to define it like Paul did in the 13th chapter of 1st Corinthians.

The Hebrew term *Hesed*, is translated by the Greek *Agape*; and might simply be called, divine love. This love becomes a high calling because admittedly, people are not divine and find it difficult to love so wholeheartedly *and* unselfishly at the same time.

3 - It is clear that at some level there must be a kind of self-concern (after all, the command says, “love your neighbor, *as yourself*”). It is noteworthy that the actual prayer in Deuteronomy doesn’t refer to the mutual kind of love that is also a healthy part of human relations. We recognize the possibility of misunderstanding if one neglects healthy self-concern in an attempt to obey the command to love God.

4 - That the presentation of “divine love” as the greatest and most important commandment can, for comparison sake, be set next to some of the other possibilities, the most significant is that the most important thing in life is to be *right* about *everything*, or at least everything that it is possible to be right about.

Lest you think I am criticizing human attempts to be right, let me say that I am not, and being right does matter, it is an important aspect of our lives and attention must be given to it. But it is *not* the most important thing. It is not the greatest commandment.

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Regardless of *how* we understand what it means to love, we know that we are being led into the realm of

relationship, and not some other. It is in relationships that meaning is found. The capacity and aptitude for relationships is closest we can get to the essence of our lives, and the best window into the question of God.

You may have heard me say before, one of the runners on one of my son’s track teams once said, “I run the 800 because it is the hardest thing I do.” I could relate to that because I ran the 800 and know how hard it is. I thought of how much harder it is than is schoolwork, even advanced topics like Calculus and English.

The hardest thing I do these days is write; turning thoughts into words. But when I think about it a little further, reflecting on my time in school, I am forced to conclude that running the 800 (or any other race) was, in fact, not the hardest thing (neither is the writing) . . . it is the relationships . . . by far.

When we are involved with life’s daily tasks, thinking and doing, exercising skill, taking decisive action, solving problems, doing the math and filling out the paper work of life, we are well reminded that we do all those things, not for their own sake, but in the context of all our relations. It is easy to get so caught up in the doing and the thinking that the relating is neglected.

As is clear from the world’s life, the relationships *are* the *hardest* we do; from the most intimate and personal to our relationship to the world of nature; from the local community to the world stage.

While it is unrealistic to expect ourselves to love divinely in every moment and in every context; we know that we have *been so loved*, and this knowledge is the source of our striving, our praying, and our listening.

May God's people *hear*.

It turns out these two commands reflect the most important part of life's experience, and they are the hardest thing and that explains perhaps why the command to love is the greatest command, why before we ask anything of God in prayer, we listen *to what is asked of us*.

5 - And finally, the command is also a promise. "You shall love," is not only telling us what we should do and what our priority in life should be, but it also tells us that after a life of faithfulness to God, *we will indeed* come to love the Lord our God with all our being, and our neighbors as ourselves.

Beginning with God's relation to us, initiated and fulfilled by the supreme act of God's love for people, the giving of the only Begotten Son, Jesus, whose death is our health, and whose raising is our life, we are able at least, obstacles and failures set aside, to stand for this high calling - to love God with our whole being. Then to love all our neighbors. All the law and the commandments are summed up in these two commands, these two promises, these two prayers.

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