

Matthew 22:34-40

³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵ and one of them (a scholar of the law) tested him by asking, ³⁶ “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷ He said to him, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the greatest and the first commandment. ³⁹ The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.”

Context

From the 26th through the 28th Sundays, we considered three tightly connected Matthean parables: the two sons 21:28-32; the tenants in the vineyard 21:33-46; and the wedding banquet 22:1-14. They are parables about doing (or not doing) what God (father/landowner/king) wanted (or submitting one's self to their authority): sons working in the vineyard, tenants giving the owner the fruit, and invitees accepting the king's invitation to his son's wedding feast and wearing the proper garb.

On the 29th Sunday, we moved into a section of Matthew's gospel that comprises a series of controversies between Jesus and the religious authorities of Jerusalem.

- “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” (asked by Pharisees and Herodians: v.17);
- “In the resurrection, whose wife of the seven will she be?” (asked by Sadducees; v. 27);
- “which commandment in the law is the greatest” (asked by a lawyer; v.34)

It is the third controversy which is the context of our gospel this week. Where the lectionary draws the boundaries of a reading and where scholars mark the boundaries can be different. For purposes of studying Scripture, the boundaries of our gospel narrative is usually taken to continue and includes vv.41-46, where at the end of the questioning by the leaders of Jerusalem

Jesus asks them a question:

⁴¹ While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus questioned them, ⁴² saying, “What is your opinion about the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They replied, “David's.” ⁴³ He said to them, “How, then, does David, inspired by the Spirit, call him ‘lord,’ saying: ⁴⁴ ‘The Lord said to my lord, “Sit at my right hand until I place your enemies under your feet”’? ⁴⁵ If David calls him ‘lord,’ how can he be his son?” ⁴⁶ No one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day on did anyone dare to ask him any more questions. (Matthew 22:41–46)

There are really two parts in play: the end of the controversy questions put to Jesus and the beginning of them being put on final notice that something greater than King David and Prophets is here before them.

Something new? The gospel this week condenses the teaching of Jesus into its most simple form. And it is not a new topic in this Gospel. Jesus has already taught the centrality of love in the life of the disciples and that love for “neighbor” includes the “enemy” (Sermon on the Mount; 5:21–48, esp. 23–48). It is also not a radical topic for Judaism. Jewish teachers of Jesus' day offered the same response adding that the rest of the scriptures are but commentary on these two things. In Deut 6:4–5, the command to love God is part of the Shema, which begins with the confession of the oneness of God, the closest thing to a universal creed in Judaism. In the Gospel of Mark, this same account is told as a friendly scribe making a sincere inquiry in which Jesus commends the scribe for his answer, declaring that the scribe is not far from the kingdom of God (Mk 12:28–34).

Here in Matthew's account, why would this become a controversy?

Since Matthew 21 Jesus has been involved in controversy with the leading people of Jerusalem (Sadducees, Pharisees, scholars, scribes, Herodians, etc.) about the issue of authority: “*When he had come into the temple area, the chief priests and the elders of the people approached him as he was teaching and said, ‘By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?’*” (Mt 21:23). The three parables (Man who had two sons, the vintner and tenants, and the great wedding banquet of the King’s son) have been followed by three controversies (taxes to Caesar, resurrection, and now the question of the greatest commandment).

This shift from a scholastic inquiry to a controversy over authority is important for Matthew’s community (in the last part of the 1st century) which is finding its way in the world after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (70 AD). With the center of praxis of Jewish life lost, there was a regrounding in the practice of faith that was beginning to take shape in the form of rabbi-led Judaism (as opposed to the priest-led practice when the Temple was still present). It is believed that the Pharisees, scribes and scholars of the law formed the tone and sense of post-70 AD Judaism. The tide of this movement will ultimately lead to an expulsion from synagogue of all Jews who held Jesus to be the Messiah. This will be the final break in ranks between Judaism and early Christianity.

In this final controversy, it is perhaps why a professional theologian from their ranks becomes their spokesman (the only occurrence of “lawyer” (*nomikos*) in Matthew). His question is no longer sincere or collegial, as in Mark, but is to “test” Jesus (*peirazō*, as in 4:1, 3; 16:1; 19:3; 22:18; only the devil and the Pharisees are the subject of this verb in Matthew). The address, “teacher,” is insincere and stands in contrast to the believers’ address, “Lord.” Jesus has just defended the Pharisees’ point of view, as he does throughout this section (cf. 23:1–2), yet their response is to test him as did Satan. In Matthew’s understanding, this is more than a religious debate; once again, the two kingdoms confront each other.

Eugene Boring (424) notes: “The nature of the test is not clear. The clue may be given by Matthew’s addition “in the Law.” The rabbis had counted 613 commands (248 positive commands, corresponding to the number of parts of the body; 365 negative commands, corresponding to the days of the year). Although rabbinical teachers could also indulge in giving summaries of the Law, there was also the view that all commandments were equal, with any ranking of them being mere human presumption in evaluating the divine law, all of which was equally binding. The lawyer may be attempting to draw Jesus into this debate and get him to make some statement that could be interpreted as disparaging toward (some part of) the Law, such as declaring the “moral law” more important than the “ceremonial law.” This is a charge to which the Markan version of this story is very amenable, since not only Jesus but also the scribe subscribes to it.”

Unlike Mark, Matthew focuses on the polemical aspect of the scene, he does not develop the theological issues that interest the contemporary interpreter (cf. Luke, who relocates the passage, 10:25–28): (1) the meaning of “love,” (2) the meaning of “neighbor,” and (3) the meaning of Jesus’ responding with two commands.

What’s love got to do with it?

In commentaries and in Bible studies, I often encounter the variety of words, in the Greek, used for love. People ask lots of questions about the meaning and use of them in Scripture. There are perhaps several questions that can be asked:

1. How do modern-day Christians use and interpret the various Greek words for “love”: *eros*, *philos*, and *agape*? The answer is often given as a hierarchy of love ascending to God-love in the word *agape*.

2. How did the first century Scripture writers understand the differing words? How did they intend to use them?
3. How does OT and NT scriptures use the words.

It is perhaps the latter question that is the foundation. Boring (425) provides an excellent summary:

The word used here for “love” is ἀγαπάω (agapaō), the verbal form of ἀγάπη (agapē). The interpreter should first dispel the tradition that has become almost sacrosanct that there is some magic in the meaning of the Greek word agapē. There is certainly something special about the Christian understanding of love for God, neighbor, and world as expressed in the NT. But this is not bound up with the meaning of a particular Greek word. The author who composed in Greek was in approximately the same situation as the English interpreter in having several words for “love” that overlapped in meaning. In Greek as in English there was and is no single Greek word with an inherent meaning that refers exclusively to the kind of love with which God loves the world and with which Christians are commanded to love God, each other, and their neighbors. Let it clearly be said: agapē was not such a word. Neither Jesus nor Christians invented this word, found in the LXX in a variety of senses: for the love of God (Deut 6:5) and neighbor (Lev 19:18) as here, but also of adulterous lust (e.g., Jer 2:25, 33), and of the love of money (Eccl 5:9). It is used as a synonym for ἐπιθυμία (epithymia) in Wisdom of Solomon 6, and for φιλία (philia) in 7:14; 8:2. The NT takes over this variety of usage of agapē. It is used in 2 Pet 2:15 for Balaam’s love for money. In Luke 6:32 it is used for sinners’ love for each other. In John 3:19 it is used for the love of evil people for the darkness. In addition, both agapē (noun) and agapaō (verb) are used as synonyms for φιλέω (phileō) / φιλία (philia), as in the celebrated but misunderstood John 21:15–17. Likewise, phileō, supposed in the traditional interpretation to express mutual love as in friendship, inferior to the self-giving love of agapē, is in fact used both for the deepest self-sacrificing love of both human beings and God (Matt 10:37; John 5:20; 11:3, 36; 16:27; 20:2; 1 Cor 16:22; Titus 3:15; Rev 3:19). When Christians use the word love with reference to God, to the deepest human relationships, and of the stance they are called to exercise toward the world, the content of this word is not to be filled in from the supposed meaning of a special Greek word, but from the understanding of God’s nature made known in Christ. It is from this revelatory perspective that we come to know love as unmotivated and unmanipulated, unconditional and unlimited. Such love is not a matter of feeling, which cannot be commanded in any case, but of commitment and action. It is at the farthest pole from sentimentality and is related to the OT word for “covenant love” or “steadfast love” (חסד ḥesed).

This is not the only opinion on the meaning of the various Greek words as used in the NT, but it is one of the only commentaries I have found that explores how the words are used in the OT (LXX). Later in this commentary, other views are presented.

Commentary

Jesus Being Tested. The test goes to the heart of the Mosaic law, and as such, it is appropriately raised by a Pharisaic lawyer. It would not be an unfamiliar question, since rabbis did discuss which of the commandments were “heavy” and which “light,” and sometimes tried to summarize the main thrust of the Mosaic law in terms of a key OT text. Since the five books of Moses (Pentateuch) contained, by rabbinic calculation, 613 commandments, some means of assessing their relative importance would be widely valued. But to provide this must involve choosing one legal principle over others, and this carried the risk that other teachers, who might have made a different choice, could accuse their colleague of belittling the importance of some other equally scriptural principle. Any answer must risk pleasing some at the expense of alienating others, and therein perhaps is the element of “test” from an

unsympathetic dialogue partner, particularly in view of the suspicion already noted in 5:17 that Jesus had come to “abolish” the law. If he differed radically from mainstream Jewish orthodoxy, this question ought to reveal it. (R.T. France, 2007: 842)

As Brian Stoffregen notes: “In a similar way, if we were to assume that all verses in the Bible were equal, then asking, “What’s the most important verse in the Bible?” would be a “testing” question. We could find fault in any answer that was given.”

The Old Shaping the New. In Mark as in Deut 6:4–5, the command to love God is part of the Shema, which begins with the confession of the oneness of God, the closest thing to a universal creed in Judaism. Although there was a rabbinic tradition of “summaries of the Torah,” the combination of the command to love God and love neighbor is distinctive of the synoptic Jesus. Matthew’s most dramatic change is to replace the Markan conclusion’s positive interchange between Jesus and the scribe with Jesus’ pronouncement (v. 40) that the whole of the law and the prophets “hang” from these two commandments. In the context of the Matthean narrative theology as a whole, this is more than another summary of the law. Nor is it a statement explaining that all the other commands of the law can be exegetically derived from these two commands. Rather, Jesus declares the command to love God and neighbor (on their unity as one command, see below) to be the hermeneutical key for interpreting all the divine revelation—not only the Law, but the Prophets as well.

Jesus’ Choice. Jesus’ choice of Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18 is notable for two reasons. In the first place, by focusing on “love” rather than on more tangible regulations to be obeyed, it raises the discussion above merely judging between competing rules, and gives the priority to a principle which has potential application to virtually every aspect of religious and communal life. When Jesus declares that “the whole law and the prophets” depend on this principle, he is repeating the point he made in 7:12, “this is the law and the prophets.” The ethical principle he there laid down did not use the word “love,” but that is what it was all about. The priority of love in the life of a disciple will be a frequently repeated NT principle, and one which it would be very hard to object to.

In the second place, by bringing these two texts together Jesus asserts that the one principle of love applies equally to the two main aspects of religious duty, one’s attitude to God and one’s attitude to other people. It is these two foci which provide the framework of the 10 Commandments, with its two “tables” covering these two aspects in turn. If the 10 Commandments are a sort of embodiment of the law, these two quotations in turn sum up the 10 Commandments.

As France (2007:846) points out, even though the love of God as expressed in Deut 6:5 rightly takes first place, Jesus goes beyond the scope of the original question to assert that “a second” must be placed alongside it. It is “like” Deut 6:5 not only in that it is equally important, but also in the formal sense that it uses the same verbal form, “you are to love,” and more fundamentally in that it equally insists that one’s religious duty is focused outside oneself. It might be possible to think even of love for God as a self-centered spiritual experience, but love for one’s neighbor is inescapably practical and altruistic.

Is Jesus the first Jewish teacher to bring the two texts together in this paradigmatic way? The great Jewish teacher Hillel summarized the law in a way that is much like the so-called golden rule of Jesus: “What you hate for yourself, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole law; the rest is commentary. Go and learn.” And there is certainly evidence that others had combined love for God and for neighbor in a summary of religious duty in non-Biblical, Jewish writings such as Jubilees, The Testament of Daniel, the Testament of Isaiah, Philo, and the Testament of Abraham. But as far as canonical, biblical sources, there is no parallel to Jesus’ use of this double quotation to make the point. (France, 2007:843)

Love Means.... What? Although the Sermon on the Mount has already included an extensive section of Jesus’ teaching to his disciples on love as fundamental to the life of discipleship (5:21–48), in this

concluding encounter with his opponents Matthew gives Jesus another opportunity to summarize the core of his teaching (as 7:12). There, the teaching was to his disciples; here, it is to his opponents, in the controversy situation showing his orthodoxy as an advocate of the whole of the Law and the Prophets. Since Matthew here focuses on the argumentative aspect of the scene, he does not develop the theological issues that interest the contemporary interpreter (cf. Luke, who relocates the passage, 10:25–28): (1) the meaning of “love,” (2) the meaning of “neighbor,” and (3) the meaning of Jesus’ responding with two commands.

While Jesus quotes two OT passages (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18), it is interesting that commentators offer different opinions about the relationship between these two commandments. Here is but a sample:

- Patte (*The Gospel According to Matthew*) writes: “... these two commandments remain distinct. They should not be identified with each other. Loving God should not be reduced to loving one's neighbor! Loving God is an act of love distinct from loving one's neighbor, and vice versa” [p. 314].
- Boring (*Matthew, New Interpreters Bible*) writes: “To love God is to love one's neighbor, and vice versa (25:31-46)” [p. 426]
- Hare (*Matthew, Interpretation Commentaries*): “Truly to love God is to love the neighbor; truly to love the neighbor is to love God (cf. 1 John 4:20-21)” [p. 260].

All hold an insight. On one hand, I think that loving God means something different than just loving one's neighbor. One can be a very kind, caring, philanthropic person without giving any thoughts or love to God. On the other hand, I don't think that a believer can love God without loving neighbor and self, because God loves that neighbor too.

There are three basic Greek words for “love:” *agapao/agape*, *phileo/philos*, and *eros*. There is not always agreement among scholars about the distinction between these three choices. Boring, (*Matthew The New Interpreters Bible*) says that the words are synonymous -- that *agape* is not necessarily a special word for “God-love”. He writes:

When Christians use the word *love* with reference to God, to the deepest human relationships, and of the stance they are to exercise toward the world, the content of this word is not to be filled in with supposed meaning of a special Greek word, but from an understanding of God's nature made known in Christ. It is from this revelatory perspective that we come to know love as unmotivated and unmanipulated, unconditional and unlimited. Such love is not a matter of feeling, which cannot be commanded in any case, but of commitment and action. It is at the farthest pole from sentimentality and is related to the OT word for “covenant love” or “steadfast love” (*hesed*). [p. 425]

While there is merit to stress the nature and actions of God to give understanding to the word “love,” (i.e., it is God's actions that give the content to *agape*, rather than a dictionary meaning of *agape* that defines God's actions) and recognizing that the meanings of the three Greek works for “love” overlap - that is, they are partially synonymous, still there are different emphases or nuances in these three words. Given a continuum with “selflessness” on one end and “selfishness” on the other, most place *agapao/agape* towards the selfless end and *eros* towards the selfish end with *phileo/philos* in the middle.

Agapao/agape are words that tend to center on actions (not emotions) towards other people. *Eros* is a word that tends to center on emotional/sexual actions or feelings that please one's self. *Phileo/philos* are words that tend to center on actions and feelings that benefit both parties, e.g., friendships.

Especially as a verb, *agapao* refers to “loving (or caring) **actions** towards other people for their benefit.” It is not primarily a word to describe one's emotions, e.g., having warm feelings towards.

For a slightly different definition, Hare, (*Matthew*, Interpretation Commentaries) writes:

In an age when the word 'love' is greatly abused, it is important to remember that the primary component of biblical love is not affection but commitment. Warm feelings of gratitude may fill our consciousness as we consider all that God has done for us, but it is not warm feelings that Deut. 6:5 demands of us but rather stubborn, unwavering commitment. Similarly, to love our neighbor, including our enemies, does not mean that we must feel affection for them. To love the neighbor is to imitate God by taking their needs seriously. [p. 260]

Loving God then implies an attachment to God -- a commitment that goes beyond personal, inward feelings. The same is implied towards the neighbor. Within the OT context of this commandment (Lv 19:17-18), neighbor referred to “kin”. (However, Lv 19:33-34) extends the love to “aliens” who reside among them.

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