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“Love”

Matthew 22:34-46

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Matthew 22:34-46. ³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that [Jesus] had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ ³⁷He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’

⁴¹ Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: ⁴²‘What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?’ They said to him, ‘The son of David.’ ⁴³He said to them, ‘How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,

⁴⁴ “The Lord said to my Lord,

‘Sit at my right hand,

until I put your enemies under your feet’ ”?

⁴⁵If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?’ ⁴⁶No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

When I was a seminary student, I was nervous about doing things the right way. I wanted to stay between the lines, jump flawlessly through all the flaming hoops for graduation and ordination. I remember sharing with my parish internship mentor, a pastor named Bill Seel, that I was a rule follower, and I would do whatever it took to get through all these requirements, exams, and interviews. Other seminary students and I would quiz each other on what we thought the trick questions might be in some of these ordination interviews with our presbyteries. “Would you serve



communion at a hospital bedside without Session approval?” “Would you baptize a baby in a NICU because the parents were worried the child may not live—even though you know baptism isn’t necessary for that child’s salvation and even though you’re not ordained yet?” We asked these kinds of hypothetical questions with an odd sort of fascination. How far are you willing to go to follow the rules? What theoretical, theological trap can we catch one another in? And to all these test anxieties, Bill kindly and patiently replied to me, “I wouldn’t worry too much about all of that, Elizabeth. Rules are important, but not more important than people. As a pastor, just lean on the side of love. When you’re wondering what to do, consider what the loving thing would be—and do that.”

We know that the Pharisees were trying to test Jesus. Our text introduces the scene with the reminder that Jesus has just shut down the Sadducees. Now the Pharisees want to give him a go. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” (v36). There are 613 commandments in the Torah.ⁱ What kind of a question is that? How is a person to keep track of all these rules, let alone pick a favorite?

Having grown up going to synagogue, studying scripture, and sharing discussions in the rabbinical tradition, Jesus answers their question wisely. He doesn’t fall into their trap. He reaches into his deep knowledge and understanding of scripture and responds with two positive commandments from the Torah: “You shall love the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 6:5) and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). “On these two commandments hang the whole Law and the Prophets,” he says. Lean on the side of love.

Debie Thomas points out that at this point in story for Matthew, Jesus’ crucifixion is only days away. Death is around the corner, and he’s running out of time to communicate the heart of his message. When he’s asked by these men what command matters most, he doesn’t say, “Believe the right things.” He doesn’t say, “Maintain personal and doctrinal purity.” He doesn’t say, “Worship like this,” or even “Read your Bible every day,” or “Preach the Gospel every waking moment.” He just says, “Love.” That’s his message—this is Christianity distilled down to its essence.ⁱⁱ Love. Love God; love neighbor.

It sounds so simple. But, golly, do we ever get it wrong time and again.

We get caught in the weeds. We disagree and argue over what the church ought to be, what it means to be Christian. It’s almost always been this way. In the early church, Christians argued over whether gentiles could be Christian—or, if they were let into the church, whether they had to be circumcised in order to stick around.

Fast forward nearly 1,000 years. 1054 CE is the year of what’s known as the Great Schism—the great divide between the western church and the eastern church that produced the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodoxy. The bishop of Rome excommunicated the bishop of



Constantinople and the whole eastern part of the church. Then the bishop of Constantinople excommunicated the bishop of Rome and the whole western church. The underlying issue was a theological question concerning internal relationships within the godhead. Does the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father and Son (which was the position of the western church), or does the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father only (that was the position of the eastern church). Now, I got this answer right on in church history, but what I wanted to ask on my church history final exam was, “How could anyone truly ever know? How could we be so certain as to not leave a little room for mystery when it comes to understanding the internal relations of the holy Trinity?”

For another church disagreement, we go to the 1600’s and the Reformed church in the Netherlands. The Dutch Reformed Church almost split over the issue of supralapsarianism versus infralapsarianism (say that three times fast!). I know you all know what that means... but just in case you’ve forgotten the details of your church history, the question they argued was whether God decided to send the Messiah before the fall—because God knew what would happen—or did God decide to send the Messiah only *after* the fall, because only then was the Messiah necessary. Supralapsarians argued that God knew the fall would happen so the decision to send a Messiah had already been made before the fall. Infralapsarians argued the opposite. Again, right belief mattered so much that the denomination nearly split right down the middle. Today, we wonder why anyone would think we could actually know the answer on this side of glory.

Finally, the last example is a story that comes from Marcus Borg.ⁱⁱⁱ It takes place in the late 1800’s in North Carolina. A small-town businessman from a remote community in the mountains of Western North Carolina went to the big city—and there for the first time in his life, he saw an ice-making machine. Now, machines that could make artificial ice were a recent invention; he thought this was wonderful because it meant you could have ice all summer long. So, the man returned to his small community in the mountains. He told his Baptist church all about this great new invention. Within a month the church had split into ice and no-ice Baptists. The theological issue in this case being is it a violation of the natural order established by God to make ice out of season. If God had wanted us to have ice in the summertime, God would have raised the freezing temperature of water.

The point of all these examples is that Christians have a history of being concerned about believing the right things: infant baptism versus adult baptism, for instance. So much so that sometimes we have made being Christian very complex, as if it's about getting our doctrines right. But being Christian, I would argue Matthew is saying—being Christian isn’t so much about right belief, but, right practice.

John Calvin challenges us to put things into two categories—what’s essential, and what’s non-essential. When you distill it down to those two categories, very little is actually essential—baptism with a sprinkle of water or a whole pool or river—doesn’t matter. What matters is that it



happens in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Communion with wine or grape juice—doesn't matter. What matters is that the cup is offered to all who want to partake. We can drive ourselves crazy when we split hairs and try to figure out which rules are the right rules, which rules are for me, and which ones are for you. But if you distill it down, if you distill down those 613 rules found in the Hebrew Bible, Jesus says the takeaway—the essential thing is love God; love neighbor.

Love God; love neighbor. It's every bit as simple, and every bit as hard as it sounds.

We live in a culture that throws the word love around all the time. We “love” our favorite Netflix show, we “love” our favorite musicians and movie stars. We “love” going on vacation, reading a good novel, or watching our favorite team. We “love” bacon, or chocolate, or sushi, or a good wine.

Our problem is that we are shaped by our cheap use of the word “love” around every corner. Shaped as we are by films, music (even some contemporary Christian music), romance novels, and gushy Instagram and Facebook posts, we tend to think of love as a feeling. We associate it with the feelings that arise out of our own enjoyment of things. We don't think of it as a discipline, as a practice, as exercise, as something that requires effort. We *fall* in love. We say that love is blind, that it happens at first sight, that it breaks our hearts. We talk about love as if we have little power or agency over it at all.

But this is not how Jesus describes love. Jesus doesn't say, “I hope love happens to you.” He says, “Love is the greatest and first *commandment*.” It's not a matter of luck or accident. It's not something that always comes easy. It's something you *do*. It's something you choose. It's a matter of obedience, Jesus says, to the one we call Lord.

So, if this is the great commandment—to love—we ought to ask ourselves, are we living this way? Are we living as though love were the greatest commandment of all? What would it cost us to take Jesus's version of love seriously?

We have a God who wants our love—not our fear, not our penitence, not our piety. And we have a God who wants God's children to feel loved—by us. Not shamed or punished or judged but loved.

It's no coincidence that Jesus links love of God with love of neighbor. Think about it. Each reinforces the other. We cannot love God while refusing to love what God loves.

Neither can we love ourselves or our neighbors in a meaningful way if that love does not come from God. Only God's love is inexhaustible. So, the motion of our hearts must be cyclical—love of God making possible and deepening our love of neighbor, and love of neighbor putting flesh and bones on our love for God.



In his commentary on this Gospel, Lutheran minister Clayton Schmit writes this:

To love God with all our heart, mind, and soul seems nearly impossible when we think of love as an emotion. How does one conjure up feelings for something as remote, mysterious, and disembodied as the concept of God? We cannot look into God's eyes, wrap our arms around the Spirit, or even see the face of Jesus.

“Likewise, loving our neighbor is difficult. If love is merely our passive response to the person next to us, we are likely to be more often repulsed than moved to love. How can one legitimately look into the face of an enemy and feel unqualified love? It is nearly impossible.

“But biblical love is not passive. It is not something that occurs to us without our control or will. Biblical love is something we do.”^{iv}

The command is to love God; love neighbor. The call is to follow in the footsteps of Jesus—the one who stood in the midst of his soon-to-be accusers and declared the ultimate rule to follow is love. The call is to love those whom God loves—to weep with those who weep, laugh with those who laugh, feed the hungry, welcome the children, confront the oppressors, and comfort the oppressed. Our call is to hold each other close and guide each other home.

ⁱ Anthony B. Robinson, "Encountering a Riddle," *The Christian Century*, 1993.

ⁱⁱ Debie Thomas, "The Greatest Commandments," [JourneyWithJesus.net](https://www.journeywithjesus.net), October 18, 2020.

(<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2792-the-greatest-commandments>)

ⁱⁱⁱ Marcus Borg, "What's Christianity All About?" Day1.org, February 06, 2011. (https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002c37/whats_christianity_all_about)

^{iv} Clayton Schmit, "Commentary on Matthew 22:34-46," WorkingPreacher.org, October 23, 2011.

(<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/ordinary-30/commentary-on-matthew-2234-46-2>)

