

The First Great Commandment

Matthew 22:37-38

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Jesus' teaching of the "First Great Commandment" is embedded in a series of disputes about the nature of faith and Jesus' capacity to articulate and enact that faith.

I.

The longer text of Matthew 22:15-45 features four questions that constitute Jesus' "oral examination." The exchange is perhaps to test to see whether Jesus has a grasp of the tradition and can function as a reliable rabbi. But of course, in the hands of the Evangelist, the question of being a reliable rabbi is transposed into the question of his being the Messiah. (See Matthew 16:16-20; 26:63; 27:17, 22.)

The first three questions are put to him variously by his opponents, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Herodians. It may be that the disputes were characteristic rabbinic conversations; in context, however, there is an adversarial edge to the questions. The first question concerns paying taxes to the empire (vv. 15-22). Here the issue is clearly adversarial because eventually he will be "no friend of Caesar" (John 19:12). They "plot to entrap him." He offers, in response, his well-known enigmatic answer. And "they were amazed" (v. 22).

The second question is put to him by the Sadducees who were the imperial rationalists and concerned the resurrection that they were eager to deny (vv. 23-32). Again it is a trick question; again, Jesus will not be drawn. He delivers a theological maxim that voids the question (v. 32). Our "great commandment" comes in the third exchange, this time again the Pharisees (vv. 34-40). Though there is, in these verses, no hint of an adversarial tone, we may assume that the "plotted to entrap" in verse 15 still pertains. They ask him to pick out, from the array of Torah commandments, the most important one. He does not hesitate. He answers promptly, as if he had anticipated the question. We do not know what his interrogators expected. Maybe there was a broad consensus among them on this commandment from Deuteronomy, and they wanted to find out if he knew the answer and shared the consensus. But maybe not. Maybe there were diverse opinions. Maybe there were social conservatives among the Pharisees who wanted him to focus on sexuality. Or maybe there were some Pharisees who were fiscal conservatives and thought that the right answer was, "Tighten the money supply." Or perhaps there were social liberals who wanted him to respond with some word about government relief. Or perhaps there were rational liberals who wanted him to say, "God has no hands but our hands."

So they asked him. They held their breaths to find out which side he would take. As in the previous questions, however, he refused the temptation. He blew away the question with the quotation from Deuteronomy 6:5. How could he do better than Deuteronomy! He aligns himself with the most dynamic of interpretive traditions. He appeals back to the great shema' text that the scribes would eventually mark as "WITNESS." He placed himself amid the first commandment of Sinai concerning

the “God-monopoly” of the creator who freed the slaves (Exodus 20:2-3). They must have leaned back stunned, because he had outflanked all their trickery. Except, of course, he must add an edge to it by following Deuteronomy with Leviticus on the neighbor (Leviticus 19:18). In Mark’s memory, moreover, Jesus’ teaching evokes a scribal endorsement, and Jesus responds with a commendation for the scribe (Mark 12:32-34). In Luke 10:25-28, it is Jesus who asks the question, and the lawyer answers with “the two great commandments.” In Mark 12:32, the scribe responds to Jesus’ teaching, “You are right, teacher.” In Luke 10:28, it is Jesus who answers, “You have given the right answer.” But in Matthew, there is no such answer, no agreement, no affirmation, no response. His opponents are reduced to silence, no doubt avoiding eye contact!

When the stunned silence had gone on long enough and it was time to terminate the exchange, Jesus confronts his adversaries by asking them a question (vv. 41-45). He inverts the relationship, and now he is in charge. Foolish candidate, not to let it rest! But of course Jesus had been challenging the old teachers for a very long time (See Luke 2:46-47)! Here he riddles them a question about the Messiah; and “no one was able to give him an answer” (v.46). No wonder there were no more questions. It turned out, of course, that not only did he get a “pass” from his examining committee. He overwhelmed them with his mastery of the tradition and his uncommon authority. It is no wonder that in Matthew 23 that follows, there is an assault on the scribes, the Pharisees, and hypocrites who had failed to probe or understand the tradition in all its radical contemporaneity.

So now we know. Now we know that Jesus understood, beyond his opponents, about the seductive possibilities about taxes (22:15-22), about the enigma of after-life (vv. 23-33), about Torah accents (vv. 34-40), and about kingship, divine and human (vv. 41-45). Now we know that his authority makes him master of all the traditions and institutions of his cultural religious world. He has evaded nothing. We know from him about the old city (Matthew 23:37-39), the old temple (Matthew 24:1-2), and the old tradition (23:1-36). All are in jeopardy!

Now we know that in the person of Jesus there are “birth pangs” that twist and turn against what was old (Matthew 24:8). And we know, further, that what carries over from the old tradition is the core commandment that defines everything in the new age of the coming rule of God, as it has defined everything in the old age of Sinai. Jesus is a *rabbinic conservative* who enacts *revolutionary Messianic dimensions* of the Torah.

II.

We are of course pushed by the answer of Jesus in v. 37 back to the old tradition. He is not making this stuff up! Rather he invites his listeners to stand in the Book of Deuteronomy at the brink of newness, at the edge of the Jordan River, ready to enter, yet again, the land of promise. That fraught moment of entry evokes Moses’ most magisterial teaching. Israel is about to begin a new life in a new luxurious place, without manna (see Joshua 5:12). The new land is permeated with temptation. At a surface level, it is the temptation of the Canaanites, as we used to talk about “Canaanite fertility religion.” In fact “Canaanite” is a metaphor for the seduction of self-sufficiency that will come with the new land. The luxury to come will be extravagant: “a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you

did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant” (Deut. 6:10-11). The temptation to come is self-made affluence that will invite Israel to think, “My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth” (Deut. 8:17). Such affluence, in time, will breed amnesia:

Take care that you do not *forget* the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Deut. 6:12)

Take care that you do not *forget* the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes. (Deut. 8:11)

But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. If you *forget* the Lord your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. (Deut. 8:18-19)

The risk of the new affluence to come in the land of promise is that you will forget where you came from. You will forget who you are. You will forget the giver of gifts. You will forget the conditionality of commandments. You will imagine autonomy that can be readily engraved in self-indulgent religious prattle about “choseness.”

Indeed, Hosea, a close child of Deuteronomy, sees that such amnesia is the primal seduction of Israel:

She offered incense to them
and decked herself with her ring and jewelry,
and went after her lovers,
and *forgot* me, says the Lord. (Hosea 2:13)

And since you have *forgotten* the Torah of your God,
I also will *forget* your children. (Hosea 4:6)

Israel has *forgotten* his Maker,
and built palaces;
and Judah has multiplied fortified cities;
but I will send a fire upon his cities,
and it shall devour his strongholds. (Hosea 8:14)

When I fed them, they were satisfied;
They were satisfied, and their heart was proud;
Therefore they *forgot* me. (Hosea 13:6)

And Deuteronomy, mindful of the indictments of Hosea, adds urgency to the commandments with the imperative to remember:

Remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you. (Deut. 15:15)

Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and diligently observe these statutes. (Deut. 16:12)

Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this. (Deut. 24:18)

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this. (Deut. 24:22)

The summons of Deuteronomy turns on the issue of remembering and forgetting. Israel can remain rooted in the deep tradition of the God of the Exodus; or Israel can sign on for a less demanding, more readily embraced identity as a complacent, self-sufficient people whose horizon is one of control, management, and manipulation of the systems of life and death.

III.

All of that is inscribed in the “first great commandment.” The commandment is dominated by the two big verbs, followed by provision for sacramental-educational reiteration. The first verb, the first verb of all biblical faith, is “listen.” Israel has been addressed. Israel has been called by name. Israel has been summoned. Israel is on the receiving end of the purposes of God. The “Canaanite” temptation of the book of Deuteronomy is to imagine that “we” (Israel) hold the initiative, that we act first, that we define and decide and determine. “Shema” places Israel in a receiving posture to accept what is given “from the other side,” far out beyond our conjuring or knowing or controlling. It is clear, as in Exodus 24:7 where “hear” has the force of “obey,” that Israel is summoned to obey. To “listen” means, as we regularly communicate by tone to our children, to obey; “You don’t listen” means you do not do what I say. Israel is identified as a listener!

The second great verb of the commandment is “love,” a term that has of course been trivialized and cheapened in self-indulgent romanticism. We may identify two dimensions of “love” that are present in the commandment. It is beyond doubt that “love” is a covenant word that means to acknowledge the covenant Lord (covenant partner) and so to honor obligations that belong to the covenant.¹ Thus there is a solemn, juridical aspect to the term, a promise to obey. Thus in the book of Deuteronomy, both the ten commandments of 5:6-21 and the derivative corpus of Deut. 12-25 summon Israel to obey YHWH in every sphere of life. But second, as Jacqueline Lapsley has shown, “love” in this tradition is not exhausted by the juridical notion of covenant obligation.² There is also an affective element of emotional attachment and commitment. Thus Moses can twice use the powerful word *hsq* (passionate desire) for YHWH’s disposition toward Israel (Deut. 7:7; 10:15), and surely Israel’s love back to YHWH is with the same passionate affection, as in Psalm 91:14. Thus Israel is not only commanded to love; Israel is bound to YHWH in compelling ways that are more elemental than mere obedience:

The Lord your God you shall follow, him alone you shall fear, his commandment you shall keep, his voice you shall obey, him you shall serve, and to him you shall hold fast. (Deut. 13:4)

Israel is to be gladly preoccupied with the things that delight YHWH. The piling up of the imperative verbs attests to the emotional force of the covenantal expectation. Or in the imagery of Jeremiah who lines out the honeymoon of covenantal faith:

I remember the devotion of your youth,

your love as bride,
how you followed me in the wilderness,
in a land not sown. (Jer. 2:2)

With such passionate devotion, Israel trailed after YHWH with glad eagerness, to do all that may please YHWH in the performance of fidelity.⁴ Of this responding fidelity done with passion, Eberhard Busch concludes:

[The first commandment] allows us and bids us to choose the God who graciously chooses us. We cannot do this on our own, but only in response to God's electing grace. And I give the response in that I "trust in God alone, humbly and patiently expect all good from God alone, and love, fear, and honor God with all my heart" (art. 94 of the Heidelberg Catechism). Love always also means choosing. Love means saying with all the passion of love in the action of my life: this one and no other! In this way we may and should on our side reflect the self-differentiation of God from the idols and take part in this differentiation. This means of one thing that we need to keep ourselves open to the fact that God—because God is not that motionless One behind and apart from all historical phenomena—deals with us and meets us in ever-new ways and changes, in bright and dark hours, as helper and as judge, as supporter and as challenger.⁵

The two great verbs, "hear" and "love," do not constitute a one-time utterance or a one-time embrace on the honeymoon of Israel. Moses provides for liturgical, didactic reiteration in what I have called "saturation education" (Deut. 6:6-9). The children are to be daily, visually, regularly reminded of the miracle and the obligation and the passion that belong to being YHWH's covenant partner and lover. The antidote to the threat of amnesia is the endless active reiteration of covenantal memory and obligation.

The outcome of such "hearing," "loving," and "reciting" is a conscious, intentional community of oddness, an oddness that touches all of life. Thus the triad of "heart, life, might" in 6:5 intends to claim every part of Israel's life for a counter-cultural existence in the land of "Canaan." That counter-cultural existence is focused on the God of the Exodus with two concerns in this tradition. On the one hand, it warns, negatively, to resist the temptation of "Canaanite" religion and "Canaanite" economics that are anti-neighborly. Moses knows that the "Canaanite" regime of self-sufficiency is powerful and attractive, and Israel is to have none of it. On the other hand, the great commandment aims, positively, at transformative energy. The Book of Deuteronomy clearly attests that the "land of Canaan" can be transformed into a neighborly community so that the institutions, policies, and practices of Israel in the land continue with the force of the Exodus; that is, they continue the work of neighborly emancipation. Israel's seduction is to be "like all the nations" (I Sam. 8:5, 19). But clearly Israel is otherwise. The first great commandment has the effect of de-absolutizing all other claims and goals and desires, and drawing Israel always back to the emancipatory force of the God of Exodus-Sinai. The "decrees, statutes, and ordinances" of YHWH are designed so that the children will ask and learn about the Exodus and the "lasting good" that comes from life with YHWH (Deut. 6:24).⁷

IV.

Of the entire Torah that Jesus knew like the back of his hand, Jesus focuses—in his oral examination—on this one verse from the mouth of Moses. He intends, of course, that the urgency of Deuteronomy should pertain to his own contemporaries, for the pressure against the oddness of covenantal obedience is persistent and pervasive, then as now. In his context, the defining seductions away from covenantal obedience were the absolutizing of the commandments in a positivistic way without the agility of on-going interpretation and assimilation to the empire of Rome. Indeed, the two temptations of absolutizing and assimilation work very well together, for the empire never objects to positivistic religious law. Perhaps the four-fold set of questions in Matthew 22 (three addressed to Jesus, one asked by Jesus) indicates the seductions against which the great commandment gives standing ground. The first question about “taxes to Caesar” concerns the empire. The second question on the resurrection suggests a Gnostic narcissism that always has an appeal. And the fourth question concerning the Messiah suggests a convergence of theological issue and political possibility among Jews. The cruciality of verse 37 relativizes all the questions and moves to the Holy Addressor who gives Judaism its grounding and *reson d’être*. “Heart, life, and mind” all belong to the Lord of the covenant. They do not belong to the empire of Rome or to the positivistic religious law. The response of the scribe in Mark 12:32-33 (with a probable allusion to Hosea 6:6) agrees about the sacrificial practices of the temple cult. The temple cult along with imperial authority and positivistic religious law all may become instruments of self-serving and self-securing. The commandment is a summons away from self-securing. As the commandment calls away from self-securing to the covenant with YHWH, so the second great commandment calls toward the neighbor.

V.

Of course the hard part is how the great commandment can be contemporary to our time and place and circumstance. Insofar as the great commandment has a critical function, it serves to destabilize our favorite loyalties: “From each idol that would keep us, /Saying Christian, “Love me more than these.”⁸ The “more than these” requires that we identify, as best we can, the seductive alternatives that seek to talk us out of our oddness in covenantal obedience. You, dear reader, might give different nuance to the idols that talk us out of our covenantal obedience, but the inventory has some constants that are pertinent in our time and place:

—The covenant anticipates that society—and the economy—are transformable to neighborliness. The temptation is whatever talks us out of hope and the energy to enact that transformative hope; dominant ideology specializes in the production of despair.

—The tradition of Deuteronomy warns about the seductions of “Canaanite religion and Canaanite economics” that turn our heads and our affections away from the neighborhood and toward the self. The covenant summons us to remember, and the seduction is whatever infects us with amnesia, so that we lose our grounding and our identity. Dominant ideology prefers that we not remember.

—After recalling Pharaoh (in the Book of Deuteronomy) and after “taxes

to Caesar” (in the narrative of Jesus), the commandment witnesses against the absolutizing of the state, the empire, and in our own context, the ideology of militarism that passes for patriotism. The reach of empire in our society extends to the control of markets, the mastery of “natural sources” (oil, water), and the “unnatural” sense of entitlement that comes with the thrill of the flag.

—On the list, according to the question of resurrection, is the “cult of the dead,” and the cultural practice of denial, the desperate effort to prolong life, and the deep individualism that leads to issues of personal survival and away from the rule of God.⁹ The popular notion of “immortality” translates into a pursuit of youth (endless exercise) and beauty (cosmetic surgery) and power, as though to fend off death.

—The amnesia prized in our society, given iconic force in the “delete button,” makes erasure easy and credible. It is enough to erase the bad stuff of violence, oppression, and exploitation that has defined much of the church and much of our culture. But the more elemental erasure is the erasure of the gifts and miracles by which we live, so that the capacity for gratitude evaporates into an ocean of self-congratulations. It is this erasure that Moses warned against.

Michael Fishbane, in his exquisite little essay on Deuteronomy 6, suggests that the question of the child in verse 21 and the recitation for the child in verse 7 evidences a deep tension between generations in ancient Israel, “two generations’ memories, sets of experiences, and commitments.”¹⁰ He judges that the fathers wanted to “transform their uninvolved sons from ‘distemporaries’ to contemporaries, i.e., time-life sharers” in the tradition.¹¹ That does not suggest for us, I judge, that the older generation among us remembers and that the younger does not. Matters do not divide that way. Rather what we face in the new world of forgetting amnesia is a fresh “modern” way of being in the world that appeals to all, of every generation. The older generation is as vulnerable as the younger. Nor is it a matter of tradition *vis a vis* Enlightenment rationality, though that contest is worth pondering. I judge that the issue is more particular, namely, the specificity of an emancipatory narrative and a set of obligations that arise inescapably from that narrative and the seduction of the generic. The bid of the great commandment is to remember the miracles and the agent of the miracles, nameable miracles and namable agent, while our society wants to reduce everything—miracle and agent and memory—to the generic, because the generic neither offends nor demands. Thus the interpretive task is to move from that nameable agent and namable miracles to our practices of “heart, soul, and mind.” With this triad one can easily line out the comprehensiveness of the claim of YHWH. If we focus on the triad, we may notice that the triad in the Hebrew of Deuteronomy 6:5 is somewhat different from the Greek of Matthew 22:37. In the latter case the triad of “heart, soul, and mind” stays with the mental, emotional apparatus, thus a bid for a complete commitment. But in the Hebrew of Deuteronomy 6:5, the second element is *nephseh* (all of life, not psyche), and the third element is *me’od*, force, might, wealth, stuff. Perhaps it is not useful to parse the differences too closely because, in the end, both triads have in purview the totality of one’s existence.¹² (In passing I may note my conviction that a sermon that walks through the triad (either one) and tries to identity the “zones of

life” that are addressed is both boring and unhelpful. The triad, either way, is about “everything”:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.¹³

It is the “all” that is required by the great commandment.

Finally the great commandment will draw the preacher and the congregation into the deep contradiction that is palpable between covenantal obedience done with a glad heart and the self-serving of the modern Enlightenment individualized economy that receives its religious cover in a preoccupation with personal morality and private salvation.

Of course the commandment has not only a critical function against our dominant ideologies. It is also an *affirmative call* to an emancipated life with the God of the covenant. It invites us to see how our “heart soul, and mind” (or in the variant triad of Deuteronomy) may embrace God’s liberating action. It is the deep claim of Sinai, transmitted by Deuteronomy, that life with YHWH is a life of unencumbered freedom, freedom from the demands of the state or of the corporate economy, freedom from endless production and consumption, freedom for an emancipated community that, unlike the scribes and Pharisees, can focus on “the weightier matters of the Torah, justice, mercy, and faith” (Matthew 23:23).

In *The Evangelical Catechism*, the handbook of my pietistic tradition, the great commandment is taken up in questions 27-29:¹⁴

How should you summarize the Ten Commandments?
What does God declare concerning these Commandments?
What does God mean by this declaration?

The answer to the second of these questions is: “God declares: You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so you shall live.” The supportive citation references the narrative of Luke 10:25-28 wherein Jesus says to the lawyer, “Do this and you will live.” Clearly that assurance from Jesus, the citation of it in the Catechism, and the tradition behind it have in mind a very different notion of life. It is not the onerous life of aggressive politics. It is not the life of fatiguing consumerism. It is not the life of acute personal preoccupation. It is rather a life in sync with the creator God who gives gifts that preclude devouring anxiety (see Matt.6:25-33).

But it is the response to the third of these questions that strikes me as urgent and compelling for us:

By this declaration God means that we trust the Commandments and seek to live in accord with them. The Commandments are not given to us in order to put us down or to keep us from enjoying our lives, but rather to guide and help us make our way through life with faith, a sense of purpose, meaning, and joy. The Commandments offer us the freedom to live out the purposes of our creation.

This tradition knows that it is life lived in imagined but idolatrous autonomy that eventually “puts us down” and robs us of joy. Thus the commandment frontally contradicts the assumptions of modernist autonomy and insists that covenantal fidelity is the only way to freedom and joy. The outcome is freedom that is given only in a life of covenantal obedience.

It is not surprising that in the narrative of Matthew, his opponents do not speak after he enunciated the great commandments. They do not speak because his teaching made no sense to them. They did not know what he meant, so injured were they to their several ideologies. But along with his utterance, he showed them what he intended! He showed them by act, by gesture, and by word. From that utterance the tradition keeps inviting to another way in the world, a way of freedom. With the emancipation of the first great commandment, his teaching rushes on to the neighbor. There is, however, plenty to chew on with the first great commandment, even before we get to the second.

Notes

1 See William L. Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Dt,” CBQ 25 (1963): 77-87.

2 Jacqueline E. Lapsley, “Feeling Our Way: Love of God in Deuteronomy,” CBQ 65 (2003): 350-369.

3 The final verb, “hold fast,” is used in Genesis 2:24 to characterize the man-woman relationship where it is often rendered as “cleave to.” The same intent is in our usage in Deuteronomy 13, thus casting the intensity of the covenant as like a marriage relationship.

4 In Jeremiah 2:2 the honeymoon is said to be one of *hesed*; the same term is used in Hosea 6:6 where *hesed* is said to be YHWH’s “desire.”

5 Eberhard Busch, *Drawn to Freedom: Christian Faith Today in Conversation with the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 299-300.

6 Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storeyed Universe* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 103-109.

7 The phrase in Deuteronomy 6:24 reminds me of the mantra from Andrew Carnegie now used by the Carnegie Foundation to describe its work as doing “real and permanent good.” The move from Deuteronomy to Carnegie surely requires some sense of irony.

8 The lines are from the well known hymn, “Jesus Calls Us, o’er the Tumult” by Cecil Alexander.

9 See Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973).

10 Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979), 81.

11 Ibid., 82.

12 Dean S. McBride, “The Yoke of the Kingdom,” *Interpretation* 27 (1973) 303, has provided a compelling summary of the triad:

Heart: with an undivided loyalty, both good and evil impulses;

Soul/life: commitment even to the point of death or martyrdom;

Might: substance, wealth, property given in the service of God.

13 The lines are from the hymn of Isaac Watts, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.”

14 *The Evangelical Catechism: A New Translation for the 21st Century* (translated by Frederick R. Trost; Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2010), 51-52.