

The Second Great Commandment

Matthew 22:39-40

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Having been asked to identify which of all the commandments is the greatest, Jesus responded by saying that the first and greatest is that we should love God with our whole being. One can't help thinking that this could have been enough; it seems that distilling all commandments to one that requires us to love God would have been sufficient. But there is hardly a pause before Jesus establishes the second great commandment: Love your neighbor as yourself. The two commandments (love God and love neighbor) are separated by no more than a brief claim: "The second is like it." They are, therefore, to be understood as distinct from one another *and* inseparable. On the one hand, when we love the neighbor we are not, in fact, loving God; on the other hand, loving God cannot occur in isolation, but demands love of neighbor as well. The two commandments cannot be understood as interchangeable, but neither can they be severed.

This close connection between the commandments to love God *and* neighbor is parallel to the two tables of the Decalogue, where the first table specifies obligations to God (have no other gods, make no graven images, don't live as if God's name is useless, and observe the Sabbath), and the second table describes our relationship to the neighbor (honor father and mother, and do not kill, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, or covet). Here again, the message is that love of God and love of neighbor are distinct, but inseparable. To emphasize this biblical truth, one could also invoke Jesus' claim that in serving the least of the brothers and sisters, we serve Christ (Mt 25), not because our brothers and sisters *are* Christ to us, but because serving Christ by definition means serving the neighbor as well. The notion that love of God and love of neighbor are connected is echoed again in I John 4:20: "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."

In spite of this close connection between the first and second greatest commandments, the second commandment is sometimes presented as if it stands alone. Some people claim that the commandment to love the neighbor as the self, which is often associated with the "golden rule" (Mt 7:12; Luke 6:31), not only provides the foundation of Christian ethics, but also presents a universally binding claim that applies to all societies and all people everywhere. To say that Christian ethics stands on the commandment to love the neighbor is, however, only partially true, and in this case a partial truth actually provides no truth at all. Jesus' reply to the lawyer does indeed establish a foundation for Christian ethics, but it is only when the first and second great commandments are taken together that this foundation is laid. Jesus did not simply say that we are to love the neighbor, but that we are to love God with our whole being *and* love the neighbor. "On these *two* commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

These two commandments, taken together, are like the hinges on which a door hangs. If the door is understood to represent all other commandments, then those

commandments stand or fall only to the extent that the command to love God and neighbor has been fulfilled. Jesus' identification of these two commandments as the greatest challenges the law-based ethic of the Pharisees. The lawyer's question is the third in a series of questions posed to "test" Jesus. The lawyer would have been familiar with Jesus' reference to the Shema for the first greatest commandment and then to Leviticus 19:18 for the second. The familiarity invoked by Jesus' response is, however, not friendly. Jesus' answer is intended to challenge strict adherence to the 613 laws set down in Hebrew Scriptures and suggests that love of God and neighbor not only summarizes all of them, but actually replaces them. The writer of Matthew clearly intends to pit what is sometimes described as "Pharisaic legalism" against Jesus' ethic of love for God and neighbor.

Make no mistake; the claim that all the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments is a radical one. Jesus is insisting that fulfilling the laws of Torah is no longer necessary for those who seek to serve God. Love of God and neighbor trump them all. Preachers, however, need to be careful not to caricature the Pharisees or Judaism of the first century as if they represent the height of a cruel and legalistic approach to the law. Nor should preachers in any way use Judaism as a foil for Christianity today. Loving God and neighbor are undeniable affirmations in Hebrew Scriptures; both of the commandments come straight from the sacred texts of Judaism. No suggestion that the people of Israel loved rules above God is appropriate here. While Jesus challenges the Pharisees' understanding of how to express love for God (by following the law), the distinction between Christianity and Judaism then or now should not be the aim of the sermon. How would it nurture the faith of the congregation or challenge them to consider the nature of Christian responsibility if the preacher sets up Christian faith and ethics as superior to the Pharisees and by implication to Judaism today? Preaching on this text should aim to help *Christians* understand who *they* are. If combating legalism forms any part of a sermon based on this text, *Christian* legalism should be the target.

A sermon could, however, challenge *Christian* tendencies toward legalism. The message to Christians is that if we follow the moral law (even those that are presented as divine commandments in Scripture) in a way that dishonors God, does harm to the neighbor, or shows hatred for the self (see below), we are on the wrong track. If our singular goal is to leave a moral situation being able to say, "I did the right thing; at least my conscience is clear," with no concern for the suffering that may have been caused by our need to have a clear conscience, we have placed following the law above loving the neighbor and, according to the two-fold nature of Jesus' response, we have placed following the law above love for God.

Keeping in mind the connection between love of God and love of neighbor, the remainder of this essay will focus on the latter commandment: Love your neighbor as yourself. Even though listeners will be very familiar with the text, the preacher will need to untangle the complexities that arise when defining the neighbor whom we are called to love and proclaiming what it means to love those neighbors *as ourselves*. "Who is the neighbor?" and "Does the text affirm self love?" need to be considered carefully as one composes a sermon.

Love of Neighbor

"Love your neighbor" presents us with three words that combine to make one

seemingly simple command. When considered more closely, however, what sense does it make to say there is a *commandment* to *love* the neighbor? The neighbor must be understood to include near neighbors and far, the stranger as well as those familiar to us, and the enemy as well as friends and family. Since we usually consider love to have an emotional component (love is something we *feel* for another), how can we possibly love those neighbors whom we do not know or love those neighbors whom we know, but do not like? And what could it mean to love the neighbor who is our enemy? Without diminishing the importance of human emotions or the fact that love usually invokes feelings in us, the preacher can help hearers understand that love in this context is not defined as an emotion. While some church traditions are notorious for denigrating the value of feelings, and others too readily try to manipulate emotions, preaching this text means insisting that loving the neighbor does not require feelings of affection.

If the command to love the neighbor doesn't require feelings of affection for all people, what does it mean? One response to this question is to interpret loving the neighbor to mean that we are to seek the good of all to the extent that we can and to try to do harm to no one. This interpretation, which should not be understood as a utilitarian calculus, goes a long way in opening the path to loving neighbor apart from any expectation of emotional love.

Concern for the common good is, in fact, not found in abundance in civil society in our present time. Winning a political debate and destroying one's opponent are with ever increasing frequency placed above concern for the common welfare. Sarcasm, caricature, and vitriol fuel a meanness that can be found in conservatives and liberals alike in public debate. Isn't it time for Christians, who seek to follow Jesus' commandment to love the neighbor as the self, to lead the way in saying "No" to all attempts to feed people's frenzied desire to destroy their political opponents? For instance, shouldn't Christians evaluate the options for healthcare from the perspective of the common good? Shouldn't Christians be seeking to find a healthcare system that will realistically address the needs of the weaker brothers and sisters? And shouldn't Christians seek to enter political debate about healthcare seriously and even passionately without seeking to do harm to their opponents? The first commandment and the second one that is "like it" tell us that we cannot be indifferent to neighbors when deciding how to cast our votes and when we enter debates about critical issues in the public realm.

The same holds true within the church. Debates over critical theological beliefs or controversial issues such as homosexuality or abortion or end of life concerns should not bring out the worst instincts we have for protecting what we hold dear. When we seek to diminish the neighbor who, according to us, holds the wrong position, we are not demonstrating the combined love of God and neighbor that Jesus says is required of us. Jesus' commandment to love the neighbor does not say that we have to like each other. It does not say that we have to like the position held by our opponents or even that we must hold back expressions of anger. Jesus, after all, drove the money changers out of the temple. But the command to love insists that we be concerned for the welfare of all--and that includes political allies as well as opponents in the public realm and in the church.

When the neighbor is our enemy. How we are to follow this commandment to love the neighbor when the neighbor is not only our political opponent, but our enemy as

a person who has done us physical harm? Matthew has stated prior to this text that love for the neighbor includes loving the enemy (5:21-48, esp. 23-48). The preacher needs to be mindful that members of the congregation who are victims or survivors of violent crime will be listening carefully for any indication, however subtle, of what is expected of them in relation to the one who has caused them harm. Even if the sermon does not directly address love for enemies, victims or survivors of physical and emotional abuse will relate everything the preacher says to this question of how to love the one who hurt them. Great harm can be caused by suggesting, even indirectly or unintentionally, that the victim is commanded to love and forgive the perpetrator regardless of the harm done or justice denied. To suggest, for instance, that a victim of rape must love the rapist as the neighbor should be unthinkable; in such a case the commandment to love the neighbor becomes not a word of grace, but a cruel and legalistic requirement. Divine love is, of course, unconditional and undeserved, but, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned, even divine love should not be understood as “cheap grace.”

I once heard someone claim that our command to love the neighbor should lead Christians to caution victims of rape against filing charges in civil court against the perpetrator. “How do you know,” the person demanded of me, “that God will not use that woman’s forgiveness to change the heart of the one who attacked her?” My reply came without hesitation: “How do *you* know that God will not use the justice system to hold the attacker accountable for what he did and perhaps to bring about a change of heart?” Whether the preacher focuses on love of enemy, when proclaiming “love your neighbor,” concern for the victim and survivor, known or unknown to the pastor, should instruct the making of the sermon.

When the neighbor is a stranger. Even as we cannot force ourselves to feel emotional love toward our enemy (nor do we have to), we cannot force emotional love for those we do not know. How does the preacher generate genuine concern and good will toward those whose identities are objectified and lost in being described as “the hungry” or “the needy”? Referring to faceless strangers and admonishing people to love them will generate very little power. No amount of scolding will motivate people to be the neighbor Jesus intends us to be. Preaching, however, provides an opportunity to put a face on the stranger. Telling a story where ordinary people have helped a particular person and then referring to that person as a way to put a face on the stranger who needs us to love the person as the neighbor can prove to be effective. Such stories are numerous, but one in particular comes to mind.

Years ago in Midland, Texas, a toddler who came to be known as “Baby Jessica” fell down an old well in her backyard. The whole world, it seemed, watched the tireless efforts of rescuers, fearful that they wouldn’t get to her in time. I was among the many thousands of people who stood before a TV set and cried for joy when they brought her up alive. After her rescue, people from around the world sent a considerable amount of money to that little girl. Some people were understandably critical of all the attention given to one child and all the monetary gifts showered on one rescued little girl, when thousands upon thousands of children need our help. Instead of criticizing those actions, however, the preacher can capitalize on the generosity of strangers in that story and use the story of one little girl who’s plight was made known around the world to remind people that there are children who fall down holes every day, holes of poverty and hunger, of neglect and abuse. Invite the congregation to

put the faces of children they know on the faces of those children who are in danger of being lost. And then remind them that these children are our neighbors whom we are called to love just as strangers loved that little girl in Texas.

Love of Self

In addition to addressing what it means to love the neighbor, the preacher cannot overlook the significant observation that the second great commandment does not simply say: "Love your neighbor." It says instead, "Love your neighbor as yourself." The preacher needs to consider what force is carried by the "as yourself." Does the text in any way command us to love ourselves? Given the church's long standing tradition of defining self love as sin, I expected to find a near universal condemnation of self love in the history of the church. I was pleasantly surprised to find that there has at least been a debate over the matter. Theological heavyweights such as Augustine, Tertullian, Chrysostom, and Kierkegaard all believed that the Bible allows for, or even commands, love of self. Karl Barth says, "No," as do Martin Luther and John Calvin.

Grammatically, there is no *imperative* in the second commandment that involves self love; the commandment does not say, "Love yourself." Self love is, however, at least assumed and may even set the standard for how we are to love others. Obviously Jesus' commandment to love the neighbor as the self cannot refer positively to self-centered affection that places one's own needs above that of others. Neither can the reference to self love mean that we are not sinful or that we are *worthy* of God's love and have, indeed, earned God's grace by our goodness. Nevertheless, the opposite of that kind of self love that is readily identified as sin *cannot be* self hatred and loathing. If there is no direct commandment to love the self, neither is there a commandment to hate the very person God created us to be and now redeems us to be. While arrogance and self-aggrandizement may be the sins of some members of the congregation, self loathing most surely haunts others. By taking time to focus some attention on "the self" in the command to love the neighbor, the preacher could address those people in the congregation who have been told all their lives that they are insignificant and useless by proclaiming that self respect and self confidence do not stand against the will of God. If we are going to give ourselves to others, as Christians are called to do, there must actually be a self to give.

One can even hold to Calvin's doctrine of total depravity (which I do) and still proclaim that God's grace, which redeems us from sin through no merit of our own, calls us to accept with gratitude the life that is ours in Jesus Christ. Without cultivating the sin of pride, the preacher can proclaim:

—Because we are loved by God, no one has the right to diminish the life that God has given to each of us.

—Because God calls us into the world for a divinely appointed purpose, no one has the right to tell us we are worthless.

—Because we have been redeemed as children of God, no one has the right to tell us we aren't smart enough or good enough or pretty enough to make our way in God's world.

In 1971 The Rev. Jesse Jackson recited a poem on the children's television show,

Sesame Street, which was intended to give children a sense of pride in who they are. The poem was presented in a call/response format with children from different races together repeating and answering Jackson's call. Jackson made claims such as, "I may be poor... I may be on welfare..., I may be small," and the children responded, "But I am somebody."¹ The poem concludes with Jackson and the children insisting that they must be "respected," "protected," and "never rejected." Because they are children of God, each of them is *somebody*. Jackson's purpose was to instill self-confidence and pride in children who, because of race or poverty, were told they were useless. He was most certainly seeking to give children a sense of self that the world around them sought to destroy. He was, I believe, teaching children to love themselves. Is the self love he sought to instill in children prohibited by the Gospel? Is this the self love that has often been prohibited by the church throughout the centuries? I believe that one can argue that *this* kind of self love is *included* in the great commandments to love God with our whole heart, soul, and mind, and to love the neighbor as the self. This kind of self love is not saying that we are deserving of God's love; it is affirming that *because* God loves us, no one else can tell us we are useless, unloved, or unworthy of respect.

The law and the prophets. After Jesus has identified the greatest commandment as loving God and the second greatest as loving the neighbor as the self, he proclaims that on these two commandments hang all the laws and the prophets. The lawyer asked only about the law; Jesus' claims that his answer is necessary for understanding the law *and the prophets*. This reference to the prophets broadens the two great commandments so that they refer to every aspect of Christian life: the way we worship through prayer, confession, proclamation, and song, the way we greet each other, the way we welcome the stranger, and the way we live when we walk out of the church. All of these things fall under the expectation that we will seek to love and glorify God and to love the neighbor as the self in all that we do.

Note

1. The poem "I Am Somebody" and the video from the 1971 airing of *Sesame Street* can sometimes be found online. The best way to find it is through Google.