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Grace Bible Church NorthWest
Matthew 22:15-46 Four Scenes of Conflict: Part Three
Matthew 22:34-40 Conflict with a lawyer regarding the Law

Introduction: Whenever you hear a preacher say, or read a scholar write, “This is the most important verse in the Bible!” Or, “This verse is the key verse that unlocks the whole message of the whole Bible!” You need to put on your “skeptical hat!” Usually, what follows is a strange, odd or simply false interpretation of said verse (that sounds more or less plausible) and then, that interpretation is used to turn other passages of Scripture “on their heads.” This “hermeneutics of reduction” is not a source of enlightenment and understanding but more often than not it is the source of theological mischief and misinterpretation (not to say heresy and cultish-ness). There is no short-cut that will enable a person to understand the whole Bible without studying the Whole Bible! (Which is why Paul told the elders from Ephesus that they needed to follow his example and preach and teach “the whole purpose of God” [Acts 20:27].)

Even here, the point Jesus is making is NOT that we can dispense with all the details—the doctrines, the commandments, the lessons, the examples recorded in the Bible and just *luv’ on others* (an expression I hear often which never fails to make me cringe . . . like I just took mouthful of butterscotch ice-cream syrup dipped in artificial sweetener with those sprinkles! You know? The “saccharine shiver!”)

As we will see, Jesus is not endorsing the “hermeneutics of reduction” but He is stating “an encompassing principle” (cf. Turner, *Matthew: ECNT*, 536) that should inform and guide one’s interpretation and application of the Law (and the whole Bible). In other words, He is not saying, “Love is all you need”—He is saying, “Love for God and love for others will be the motive for, and the outcome of, truly understanding and living the Law.”

Transition / Review: We are in a section of Matthew’s gospel (in Passion Week!) after Jesus has indicted the opposition in three parables (see 21:28-32; 21:33-46; 22:1-14) the opposition comes after Him with a series of questions that intend to discredit Him—they are looking for a pretense to arrest Him (and more!)

Overview: Four Scenes of Conflict 22:15-46

Conflict with Pharisees and Herodians 22:15-22

Conflict with Sadducees 22:23-33

*Conflict with a lawyer regarding the Law 22:34-40

Conflict with the Pharisees over “the Christ” (the Messiah) 22:41-46

Transition: Once again . . . one part of the opposition has been “shut down” . . . and another part steps back up to the plate . . .

Conflict with a lawyer regarding the Law 22:34-40

~The Pharisees “regroup” v. 34

The Sadducees had been **silenced** (literally: “muzzled”). As noted last time, this no doubt delighted the Pharisees but disappointed them as well—their theological opponents had been defeated but Jesus was still standing.

The Pharisees **gathered themselves together**— Recall, that last time we saw the Pharisees (22:15) it was their disciples who had been sent to try and trap Jesus. This time they come themselves . . . or rather they sent one of their own--“A Pharisaic legal expert (cf. Luke 10:25; 11:45, 52; 14:3) would evidently be a more formidable interlocutor (questioner) than the Pharisaic disciples . . .” (Turner, *Matthew: ECNT*, 535)

~One Pharisee steps up to ask Jesus a question v. 35

The question came from a **lawyer**—This occupation is not exactly like our “lawyers” today—this was a scribe or one who was an expert in the Old Testament Law. It’s clear that this one individual is the mouthpiece for the whole lot of the Pharisees. (“So the Pharisaic inquisition was still on the job.” Morris, *Matthew: Pillar Commentary Series*, 562)

The question was a “test”—**testing Him**—Now . . . this indicates that this **lawyer** was not altogether sincere in asking this question—as we’ve seen, these questions were meant to “trip Jesus up” in one way or another—“his purpose was to trap Jesus, not to gain insight into the exegesis of Torah” (Turner, *Matthew: ECNT*, 535; cf. Morris, *Matthew: Pillar Commentary Series*, 562) Here it seems that the intent was to ask Jesus a question that would entangle Him in this arcane debate and make Him appear to be just one partisan, one more “talking head” among the many partisan disputants engaged in an endless and arcane and pedantic and ultimately pointless debate over Scriptural minutia.¹ The crowds would have understood that this is the kind of question and debate that endlessly occupied the “scholars” of the day—as the Pharisees debated with the Sadducees over the resurrection (as we noted last time). And in fact, the “scribes,” the “lawyers,” the “rabbis” had been debating this very question—“What is the greatest commandment?”—in one form or another for years!

The questioner was “polite”—**Teacher**—Morris notes, “throughout this series of attempts to entrap and discredit Jesus there is the outward form of politeness.” *Matthew: Pillar Commentary Series*, 562) Application: We should be polite in return but wary; “be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves.” (Matt. 10:16)

The question was— **which is the greatest commandment in the Law?** We must note that this was not (as some think) a question about which one of the Ten Commandments is the most important. The issue is wider than the Ten Commandments; this is **which is the greatest commandment in the whole Law?** It seems that the scribes and lawyers had isolated 613 distinct commandments in the Torah and of these they had designated 248 as “positive” and 365 as “negative.” Then they divided the commandments into those they designated as “heavy” (= more important) and others as “light” (= less important). And then, the hermeneutical (interpretive) procedure and debate continued by comparing the relative “heaviness” of the commandments (one against the other) until they arrived at the “heaviest”—the most important—the greatest—commandment of all. Along the way it was determined that some commandments were understood as required while others more or less optional and some could be completely ignored Presumably, after isolating this **greatest commandment** (by this “hermeneutics of reduction”) if one obeyed this “heaviest, **greatest**, commandment,” . . . well then . . . failure to obey the all the others would not be so serious.²

Now before we get to Jesus’ answer, we have to ask, “What did this lawyer expect Jesus would say?” That is, how is this a *test*? As we have seen, their objective was try and “trip-Him-up” . . . to get Him

¹ The first question (re: the poll tax) was intended to get Him in trouble with the authorities (either the Roman authorities or the religious authorities—depending on which way He answered the question. The second question (re: the resurrection) was intended to discredit Him by making Him look foolish to the scholars for His belief in the resurrection. This question (re: the great commandment) is intended to make Him appear to be just one more partisan in an endless and fruitless discussion—this was directed at the crowds. In sum, the questioners wanted Him to appear as a threat, as a fool, or as a fraud.

² Wiersbe notes: “The fallacy behind this approach is obvious: You need to break *one law*, heavy or light, to be guilty before God. ‘For whoever shall keep the whole law, yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all’ (James 2:10).” (Wiersbe, *Be Loyal*, 203)

to say something for which He could be accused of impiety, or rebellion (e.g. the question about the poll tax); or to get Him to stumble over a contradiction (e.g. the hypothetical scenario of the Sadducees). So how was this (apparently straightforward) question meant to “test” Him?

We need to think about a couple of things here. For one thing, we are so familiar with this question and with Jesus’ answer that to us it’s a “no-brainer!” “Duh! Of course this is the right answer! Love God and love others! What could be more obvious?” But . . . that was not so obvious before Jesus gave this succinct summary. Another thing . . . actually, you may be surprised to know that this *was* a big debate among the Pharisees themselves! (“How could that be?”) Do not forget that these guys were the champions of creating theological knots that could not be unraveled! (Much like many “scholars” today who apply techniques and methods of study to deeply analyze the texts of the Bible until the obvious becomes nebulous and the perspicacious becomes ambiguous and the trivial becomes an insurmountable problem—e.g. “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?”)

So . . . here was the nefarious objective of this question: (1) to get Jesus join in the pointless debate and make Him look like just one more of those phony scholars who spent their time in philosophical minutia—divorced from “real life” and looking down on the peons. Or (2) to take a stand on the matter; and if He did take a stand (in the lawyer’s thinking) he’d either (a) be agreeing with some else’s opinion (“See! He’s nothing new!”) or (b) He’d be offering a new opinion (“See! He’s unorthodox!”) In short, this lawyer wants to get Jesus bogged down in an arcane and pointless debate—an unbiblical debate over parts of the Bible!

~Jesus’ Twofold Answer – Love God, Love Others

Overview / Outline: Jesus makes Two Scriptural Citations: (1) Deuteronomy 6:5 (Matthew 22:37) and (2) Leviticus 19:18 (Matthew 22:39b). Then . . . Jesus makes Three Summary Comments: (1) about the first text (it is **the great and foremost commandment** v. 38) (2) about the second text (it **is like it** v. 39a) and (3) about both texts (**On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets** v. 40).

>Two Scriptural Citations: The Substance of Jesus’ Citations:

One: Deuteronomy 6:5 “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”; “YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.” (v. 37) (Mark 12:30 adds “strength.”)

This verse is found in the well-known *Shema* (“to hear”) in Deuteronomy 6 (verse 4 “Hear, O Israel . . .”) (There may be a mild rebuke here . . . “You fellows say this every day and yet you don’t realize it contains the great and foremost commandment?”)

Now, we notice there is a variation between the text in Deuteronomy 6 and Matthew’s (and Mark’s) quotation of it. This is most likely due to the fact that the gospel writers were quoting the Greek version of the OT (the LXX, Septuagint); the English version we have is a translation of the Hebrew text.

But this actually serves to make an important point. Neither Moses in Deuteronomy, nor Jesus in His quotation here, is suggesting we should spend much time considering the various “parts” of human nature and try to “love God” with each part separately—the exact “parts” are not the point! The point is just the opposite! We are commanded to Love God with our “whole self.” “The command to love God with all one’s heart, soul, and mind means that one must love God with one’s entire being.” (Turner, *Matthew: ECNT*, 536) Morris puts this way: “love for God should be wholehearted, involving all that we have and all that we are (the threefold *all* is important.” (Morris, *Matthew: Pillar Commentary Series*, 563)

Application: We cannot love God with our “hearts” if our “minds” are someplace else! We cannot love God with our “souls” while our bodies (“strength”) are devoted to something else! Love for God is not a part-time, part-of-us, partitioned effort. “Love for God is no tepid affair, scarcely raising a ripple in life. It is wholehearted devotion, involving all of life. Love for God suffuses the whole person.” (Leon Morris, *Matthew: Pillar Commentary Series*, 564; See Morris, “Love,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 494)

He has answered the lawyer’s question . . . but then Jesus goes beyond the question . . .

Two: Leviticus 19:18 “. . . you shall love your neighbor as yourself”; ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’ (v. 39b). Now . . . this is NOT endorsing the notion that you should be “loving yourself.” This is NOT an endorsement of the (unbiblical!³) notion that we must have “self-love, self-esteem, self-approval” before we can love others! (That’s turning the point on it’s head!) This commandment in Leviticus 19:18 along with all of “its NT echoes (John 13:34-35; Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14; James 2:8; 1 John 4:19-21)” assume that one will instinctively love oneself.” (Turner, *Matthew: ECNT*, 537) This is neither denied nor lauded as such—it’s just a fact. On its own “self-love” can be understood as a neutral matter-of-course; or it can be understood in terms of self-preservation, self-care, “taking care of one’s-self” . . . as such “self-love” can be seen in a positive light. BUT in no sense is “self-love,” as understood in a self-serving, self-pleasing, self-ish (narcissistic) way a good thing that we must actually pursue! And as such it certainly is NOT as a “prerequisite” for loving others.

>Three Summary Comments: The Significance of Jesus’ Comments:

(1) about the first text (it is **the great and foremost commandment** v. 38) NOTE: Jesus is NOT saying the Law can be reduced to Love! Jesus is NOT “playing their game!” He is NOT endorsing a “hermeneutics of reduction!” As noted in the Introduction (above) He is stating “an encompassing principle” (cf. Turner, *Matthew: ECNT*, 536). He is not saying, “If you love [God, others] you need not worry about keeping the commandments.” He would never endorse that idea! Well. What is Jesus saying?

Well, let’s begin with this: loving God is the very point of our existence! . . . everything in our lives must flow from Love for God . . . everything must be subsumed under Love for God . . . everything in our lives must aim at Love for God . . .

Love for God is to be the most basic, the first and primary, the very beginning motive for our lives . . .

Love for God is to be the single controlling principle for every action and every decision in our lives . . .

Love for God is to be the ultimate criteria for successful or a failure in our lives . . . THINK!!

You need to be asking yourself, every day, every action, every decision . . .

Why am I doing this, saying this, thinking this? Does it come from Love for God? (Motivation)

How am I doing this, saying this, thinking this? Does it exhibit, demonstrate, (“spread around”) Love for God? (Action / Manner)

³ Turner notes, “Psychological jargon about the necessity of loving oneself as a prerequisite for loving God and one’s neighbor turns the biblical pattern on its head (Eph. 5:28-29; despite Augustine, *City of God* 19.14). A proper biblical view of oneself as a flawed but redeemed individual hardly amounts to uncritical self-affirmation. For Paul, viewing oneself as a new creation ‘in Christ’ (e.g., Rom. 6:1-23; 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 4:17-24; Col. 3:1-4) is crucial. But this assumes a self-crucifixion with Christ, which is not far from the counsel of Jesus to take up one’s cross (Matt. 16:24-26; cf. Gal. 2:20; 6:14). For Jesus self-love is death, and self-denial is life (Matt. 10:38-39; 16:24-25; 20:26-28).” (Turner, *Matthew: ECNT*, 537)

What have I accomplished? Has it fostered, promoted (“moved others to”) Love for God? (Achievement / Goal) So . . .

Love for God is the criteria for setting your every motive, Love for God is the principle for guiding each and every one of your actions, and Love for God is the ultimately the standard for judging all of your accomplishments!

Whew! That’s a lot to think about! Do you suppose we need some help with all that? Yes.

And that is why He graciously and lovingly and Fatherly has given us His Law! Or more to the point His Word! The Law / Word of God cannot be reduced to Love for God—because we wouldn’t know *why* we should Love Him, or *how* we should Love Him, or *if* we had Loved God without it!⁴

The Law / Word of God cannot be replaced by Love for God—because, well, without the Law / Word of God we don’t even know what Love is! And without the Law / Word of God we wouldn’t know God!

The Law (how often have you heard me say this?) is a transcript of the Nature of God—the Law is Theology! The Law tells us WWGD! The Law teaches us “This is the kind of God we love, worship, serve! And—by the way—He not only gave us the Law . . . He gave us His Son—who came to fulfill the Law (cf. Matt. 5:17)—to live the Law and show us how it’s to be done . . . And He gave us His Spirit to enable us to fulfill the Law (see Romans 8:4)! We simply cannot dispense with His Law / Word and Love God!

Listen, here is the main point: one loves God “*by living according to His commandments,*” one who loves God will be living out / keeping His commandments. “The Ten Commandments themselves make clear that love for and obedience to God are inseparable. The Lord shows His ‘lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love [Him] and keep [His] commandments’ (Ex. 20:6; cf. Deut. 7:9; Neh. 1:5). Jesus declared, ‘If you love Me, you will keep My commandments’ (John 14:15), and John wrote, ‘And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, ‘I have come to know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him’ (1 John 2:3-5). A person who belongs to God loves God and therefore obeys God. One of the most beautiful descriptions of a Christian is one who loves ‘our Lord Jesus Christ with a love incorruptible’ (Eph. 6:24). And one of the most sobering descriptions of an unbeliever is ‘anyone [who] does not love the Lord’ (1 Cor. 16:22).” “God’s people are those who love Him, and the unsaved are those who hate Him and are His adversaries (Deut. 32:41; Prov. 8:36). The person who truly loves the Lord with all his heart and soul and mind is the person who trusts Him and obeys Him. That person demonstrates his love by meditating on God’s glory (Ps. 18:1-3), trusting in God’s divine power (Ps. 31:23), seeking fellowship with God (Ps. 63:1-8), loving God’s law (Ps. 119:165), being sensitive to how God feels (Ps. 69:9), loving what God loves (Ps. 119:72, 97, 103), loving whom God loves (1 John 5:1), hating what God hates (Ps. 97:10),

⁴ We have heard some (many?) say: “We don’t need doctrine; we just need to love God” . . . Well, that’s a doctrine! And it’s one NOT taught in or endorsed by the Law / Word of God! What hubris to think we humans have a better grasp of reality, of life, of morality that we can condense God’s Word to a more “user friendly” edition! Listen! That is what these Pharisees were doing—reducing the Law / Word and that is what liberals have done . . . and that is what many evangelicals are doing today! Who is the real Pharisee? Not the one who wants to know, to submit to and to live the doctrines of the Word as He has revealed them but the one who wants to trim, add to, or adjust God’s Word to fit their humanly devised definition of love!

grieving over sin (Matt. 26:75), rejecting the world (1 John 2:15), longing to be with Christ (2 Tim. 4:8), and obeying God wholeheartedly (John 14:21). Above all, the one who truly loves God is the one who truly obeys God.” (MacArthur, *Matthew 16-23*, 340)

(2) about the second text (it **is like it** v. 39a) How is the second like the first? Simply because the only way to tangibly demonstrate our Love for God is by loving those He loves! The commentary on this is in 1 John 4:1-7. The term **neighbor** is not intended as a limitation; the Pharisees “tended to understand by *neighbor* one’s fellow Jew” (Morris, *Matthew: Pillar Commentary Series*, 564) But it is also meant to indicate that this love must be shown to “persons” (fellow human beings) not “mankind” or other “abstractions of humanity”—e.g. “the poor,” “the homeless,” “the 99%.” (When people say they want to help “the _____” [fill in the blank; one of these or other abstractions] be wary—they are after power or money—power over you or your money! This love requires tangible, personal, substantial contact. (And the best way we can [and are commanded!] to love others is preach the gospel to them—See Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church*, 248-49 quoting J. Gresham Machen)

(3) about both texts (**On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets** v. 40). The term **depend** is κρέματα / *krematai* and means “to hang on”; the Law “hangs” on love. One cannot really live out or obey the law (or the Word of God in any part of it) if the motive and objective is anything other than love for God! (Quote from Morris, *Matthew: Pillar Commentary Series*, 564; See Morris, “Love,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 494)

Conclusion: Love is all you need? Not really. The Word of Truth (Jesus / The Word of God) is all you need. How do you know if you have it? Love is the proof.

40. Jesus rounds this discussion off with the point that, rightly observed, these two commandments involve the whole law.⁵⁵ Not only the law, but the prophets as well *hang* on these two commandments.⁵⁶ Anyone who loves God and people wholeheartedly is not going to come short in religious observances, nor in doing what is proper to other people. In short, when anyone loves in the way Jesus says, there is no need for a host of hair-splitting definitions of when an obligation has been discharged and when it has not. As I have written elsewhere, “Jesus swept aside all such pettifogging nonsense with his revolutionary insistence on the centrality of love and for good measure he added that the teaching of the prophets is included in this command. At one stroke he did away with any understanding of the service of God that sees it as concerned with the acquiring of merit or with an emphasis on liturgical concerns. What matters can be summed up in one word: love.”⁵⁷ This does not, of course, mean that all other commandments may be ignored and that all that one must do is love. The commandments of God are serious and must be observed. But Jesus is saying that it is only when we love that we can truly obey them and that without love we do not really understand what the commandments mean. In one way or another all the commandments are expressions of God’s love. Love is the thrust of them all, and it is only as we love that we fulfil them.