

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Here's some context for today's reading. The Pharisees are planning another attack on Jesus "when they hear that their rivals, the Sadducees, have been silenced." They ask a familiar question, one frequently found in the deliberations of any group of rabbis: which is the great commandment of the Law? So, Jesus replies that the first and greatest commandment is to love God and that there is another related one, to love your neighbor. The first is part of the *Shema* which is repeated by every Jew every day of his life, a verse from the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Deuteronomy, "*Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.*" It is "an affirmation of God's singularity and kingship." What flows from it, of course, is a commitment to follow God's teaching. The second, also from the Old Testament, derives from Leviticus 19: 18. It would be hard to find a better summation of the central principles of faith for Jews at the time of Jesus' ministry than the combination of these two verses.

Then Jesus asks of the Pharisees: "*What do you think of the Christ (that is, the Messiah)? Whose son is he?*" At this point, Jesus has answered three test questions posed by the Pharisees. They reply that the Messiah will be the son of David. This raises a difficulty, however: David was inspired by the Spirit in a prophet, and in one of the Psalms he spoke of the Messiah as *my Lord* and said that he would sit at the right hand of God which implied that the Messiah is greater than David --- thus, he could not be his son. None were able to reply to the question of how he could be both the son and his Lord. Thus, his meeting with those who fill the place of unbelievers in Matthew's gospel, results in their being unable to give an answer to Jesus.

Through this exchange, "Matthew is telling us that although Jesus has a distinct lineage in the line of David, he was and is finally more than his ancestry could produce...he was more than David's son. He was the son of God, he was Yahweh in the flesh, he was the lord of all lords and the King of all kings." The actual reason for the fact that the Pharisees remained silent in the face of the question raised by Jesus was not because they didn't know the answer. "They just did not much like the answer. The answer is that the true Messiah is more than his ancestry could produce because the true Messiah was God himself."

The next time "when Jesus will meet his opponents will be in the garden when they arrest him, in the council when they accuse him, and on the cross when they mock him...Matthew wants us to know...that his arrest, trial, and execution are precisely the way in which Jesus is fulfilling the two great commandments, and the way in which he is being enthroned both as David's son, the true king of Israel, and David's master, David's Lord." This is how as the son of God...he has come to rescue his people."

It is worth pausing here to take a closer look at the statement of Jesus regarding the two teachings from scripture. For example, “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 Deuteronomy 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 (the needs of our neighbor) seriously.”

Similarly, the cultural context should be taken into consideration. In first century Mediterranean culture, “persons were extremely group-oriented. They learned that a meaningful human existence required total reliance on the group in which one found oneself embedded.” The result of this was “an anti-introspective way of being.” What this meant in practice is that “the term love...(was) best translated ‘group attachment, attachment to some person.’” So, to love one’s master can best be paraphrased as “to be devoted.” There may or may not be affection, but it is the inward feeling of attachment along with outward behavior bound up with attachment *that love entails.*” To love God with all one’s heart means total attachment, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself is “to be attached to the people in one’s neighborhood in the same way that one would be attached to one’s own family.” Correspondingly, “hate: would mean “dis-attachment, nonattachment, indifference,” rather than active animosity.

Also, “biblical love is not passive and it is not strictly emotional.” It is not something that occurs to us without our control or will. Biblical love is *something we do*. It is loving-kindness, merciful action that is both generous and continuous.” In the Old Testament, the love referred to by Jesus is the love of Deuteronomy, the love of Yahweh.” And this love is “far from passive,” It is “the active response of the faithful person to the love of God.” God’s love itself is also active: he “chooses (or elects) to love Israel above all nations and to bring his love through this chosen people.” As God chooses to love us, we choose to respond to that love. The Greek word for the love of God is agape, a passionless kind of love but with some connection to emotion in which “God *cares for* God’s creatures and creation.”

It is also important to acknowledge here that Jesus is not simply one who “breaks the rules,” a frequent misinterpretation, but one which is certainly not how Jesus is depicted in Matthew. The author of this gospel “goes to lengths to show Jesus as one who not only rightly interprets the Torah but as one who commands adherence to even its finest points.” Jesus does not critique the Pharisees for their “desire to keep the Torah in its smallest detail” but rather “their tendency to *fall short* on obedience to central values of the Torah.” And for Jesus, this means that “the Torah is rightly understood when it is read through the central lens of love of God and love for neighbor.”

With respect to the discussion of the Messiah as the Son of David, we should recall that the idea of son “connotes more than biology and physical lineage”; it also suggests something of one’s character and

“whom one obeys or is subservient to.” And it is worth pointing out that when applied to Jesus, the term “Son of David” is simply inadequate. He will “surpass the prevailing opinions and expectations of the “Son of David” nomenclature. The traditional understanding of the expression conceives of the Messiah as a “conquering hero...who will destroy Israel’s enemies.” Although Jesus might not be a mighty warrior in the sense that David was, as the *suffering servant* (in the words of Isaiah) he would certainly trust “that God will put all enemies under his feet.”

With this passage is concluded the narrative of the many “disputations and entrapments orchestrated by religious leaders during Jesus’ final visit to Jerusalem.” In each of these confrontations, Jesus has revealed himself as “more careful, clever, and inspired than his adversaries.” When upon Jesus’ answer to the question about the Son of David, they are finally stumped, it is still not the end of the story. They are silenced and withdraw, but “on the next day they hatch the plan that will remove this trouble-making prophet and permanently (remove) him” from their midst.

***Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity and...make us love what you command; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen***

#### Sources

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