

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia
Preparing for Sunday, October 29, 2017 // Proper 25, Year A

The Gospel: Matthew 22:34-46

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David."

He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,
'The Lord said to my Lord,
'Sit at my right hand,
until I put your enemies under your feet'?"

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

Background and general observations

This passage represents the third of three attempts to entrap Jesus, after he has entered Jerusalem in triumph, riding on a donkey, with a large crowd spreading cloaks and branches on the road as they shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David." Although the crowds hailed him enthusiastically, Jesus was then faced with responding to religious officials who questioned his authority. This passage follows the story of the Pharisees and the Herodians questioning Jesus on paying taxes to Caesar and the story of the Sadducees, who do not believe in resurrection, questioning Jesus on the Resurrection, as they use a hypothetical in which a widow marries seven times—to whom will she be married in the resurrection, they ask?

Now, Jesus is questioned by "a lawyer," who would be an authority on Mosaic law. In the Hebrew Bible, there are 613 commands (248 positive injunctions and 365 prohibitions), and rabbis regularly discussed which commands were the "greater" and which commands might be considered "lesser." However, with so many important laws or commands, one can imagine Jesus' answer providing fodder for controversy.

Jesus does a remarkable thing with his answer. Just as he answered the devil by quoting Scripture, so he answers his interrogator here by quoting Scripture. And in this case, he quotes first of all a part of the well-known "shema," which pious Jews were expected to recite daily ("Hear, O Israel..." from Deuteronomy 6:5). The remarkable part of Jesus' answer is that Jesus links this love of God with another verse that would become very popular with early Christians, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Leviticus 19:18) This combining of love of God with love of neighbor is distinctive and might conjure images from Jesus' teaching elsewhere, such as his identification with "the least of these" in Matthew 25 ("as you have done these things to the least of these, you have done them to me").

It is also interesting that Jesus is willing to “summarize” all the Law and the Prophets by quoting these two commands. “The Law” and “the Prophets” make up two of the three sections of the entire Hebrew Bible. The third section, “the Writings,” contains books such as the Psalms, Job, and Ecclesiastes. Thus, the idea that so much of the entire Bible “hangs on” these two verses—love of God and love of neighbor—is a powerful idea. A contemporary of Jesus, Rabbi Hillel, is quoted as summarizing the Torah (the Law) in a similar way: When someone challenged Hillel to recite the Torah while standing on one foot, Hillel stood on one foot and replied, “That which is despicable to you, do not do to your fellow; this is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary.”¹

Finally, Jesus silences his opponents by posing a conundrum of his own regarding the Messiah as Lord and Son of David. He uses Psalm 110:1 as his text, and leaves his would-be entrappers unable to answer. We, on the other hand, might recall the shouts of the crowd as Jesus entered Jerusalem, “Hosanna to the Son of David” or the voice from heaven which was heard to say, “This is my son...listen to him!” (Matthew 17:5)

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. What does this mean: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind”? Many people find the whole idea of a “relationship” with God a difficult idea—how can you have a relationship with God? What do you make of this commandment? When have you felt yourself closest to honoring it? When have you felt furthest away from it?

Ask yourself the same questions about the second commandment: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

2. Most of us love many things and in many distinct and prismatic ways; love can look very different depending on the circumstances. What “loves” in your life are most important to you? Are you ever aware of yourself loving things inappropriately? What “loves” keep you from your deepest, primary love?
3. If you were to ask a Muslim what it means to be a Muslim, he or she might respond by telling you about the “five pillars of Islam”—the belief that there is no god except God, and Muhammad is his messenger; the importance of praying five times a day; the importance of ritual fasting; the importance of giving alms; and, the importance of Hajj or the holy pilgrimage to Mecca.

If a sincere non-Christian were seeking to understand what it means to be a Christian, how would you answer him or her? If this person were to ask about Jesus, who would you say he is for you? How would you explain what Jesus has to do with your daily life? What are the Christian pillars with which you identify and by which your life of faith is upheld?

4. Drawing on examples from your own life, how do you see loving God and loving other people as being connected?

¹ *Shabbat* 31a in the Babylonian Talmud

5. Many people place great importance on understanding passages of the Bible. The lawyer in this passage seems to be motivated in part by a desire to entrap Jesus or to trip him up in a matter of understanding. Jesus responds with the love commandment—it's more about relationships than about intellectual understanding. Finally, Jesus concludes this passage with a conundrum of his own and a question that the religious leaders cannot answer.

How comfortable or uncomfortable are you with mystery, ambiguity, unanswered questions?
How does it feel to be confronted with matters that are beyond your understanding?

There is much concern by some today about the importance of being “orthodox” in one's Christianity (believing the “right” things). Do you know someone who is orthodox but not very loving? (Someone who seems to know a lot about the Bible or Christianity, but whose life does not seem especially Christ-like?)

Do you know someone who is unorthodox but deeply loving? (Someone who has unconventional ideas about the Bible, the church, or Christianity, but whose life seems very Christ-like?)

What might this say to you about the mystery of God and the ways God might be at work in the world?

6. If, in taking stock of your relationships with other people and in seeking to live in love and charity with your neighbors, you are tending to a relationship with God, how is your relationship at the moment? How could it be richer, deeper, or more intimate? What changes might be called for in your relationships with some of the people God has put in your life?