

Eighteenth Sunday After Trinity

2026-10-04

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In our Gospel reading for today (Matthew 22:34-46) Jesus is in Jerusalem, contending with various religious leaders. We're toward the end of a sequence (Matthew 21:23-23:39) in which establishment figures of the day, described variously as Chief Priests, Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians, conspire to trip Him up with questions contrived to prompt controversial answers.

In this case a "lawyer" from among the Pharisees who are "gathered together" asks, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?" Now it would not have been unusual for Jewish scholars to debate a question like that. It was generally accepted that in addition to the ten commandments, there were 603 other laws prescribed by God in in the Old Testament.^[1] And it would have been reasonable to expect that regardless of his answer to such a question, some significant portion of Rabbis would disagree with the answer.

Our Lord's answer, however, avoids controversy: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." an essentially direct quotation of Deuteronomy 6:5. "And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" likewise a quotation of Leviticus 19:18. The two part answer does not really violate the question since it presents the second as a corollary to the first and on them "hang all the law and the prophets." The law and the prophets refers to the *Torah*, the five books of Moses, and *Nevi'im*, the rest of the historic and prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible. The two of which together we call the Old Testament. Rather than ranking the laws, He shows they can all be derived from the same, singular law. Rather than joining the debate, he shows the debate itself to be mistaken. We can imagine this sets the Pharisees, "gathered together" to discredit Jesus, on their heels.

Jesus follows up immediately with a question of his own: "What think ye of the Christ, whose son is he?" Their answer is the standard one of the time, "The son of David". His response, "How then doth David in spirit call him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, til I make thine enemies thy footstool'? If David then call him Lord, how is he his son?" Here,

^[1] Daniel M. Doriani, *ESV Expository Commentary*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol 8 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 340.

Jesus quotes Psalm 110, which was accepted to have been written by David, and to refer to the Messiah, the Christ. Thus "David in spirit call him Lord." This points out the religious leaders' basic misunderstanding of the nature of the Christ. He is the son of David by human lineage and heir to his throne, yes, but more than that. What could make him David's Lord who will sit at the right hand of God but an additional, divine lineage? This is what we might call a mic drop moment and Matthew tells us that no one could answer him and no one would ask him any more questions from that moment onward.

As much fun as it is to imagine Jesus dunking on the Pharisees, let us focus on the question of Christian Love. Our Lord clearly tells us that love should be the focus of our lives. And, not surprisingly, sewing confusion about what it means to "love thy neighbor" has become the focus of the enemy in his unrelenting attack on the Church. It's obvious to all of us that many churches have fallen away due to a distorted conception of love. The idea of "toxic empathy" has been offered by Alley Beth Stucky, Gaad Saad, and others as an apt characterization of this line of attack. Our own Fathers Kurt and Winston have aptly described this as watering down love to mere niceness. The popular suggestion derailing so many churches is that loving our neighbor means accepting, nay, confirming and celebrating them *as they are*.

Here I'd like to quote from the Two Books of Homilies, referenced in Article 35 of our Articles of Religion. These were written during the early reformation in England to be read in churches by ministers whose ability to preach on their own was in doubt. They're really a great resource. This is from the beginning of the sixth homily, "A Sermon of Christian Love and Charity". Note that charity is the highest form of love, translated from the Greek *agape*.

Of all things that be good to be taught unto Christian people, there is nothing more necessary to be spoken of, and daily called upon, than charity: as well for that all manner of works of righteousness be contained in it, as also that the decay thereof is the ruin or fall of the world, the banishment of virtue, and the cause of all vice. And forsomuch as almost every man maketh and frameth to himself charity after his own appetite, and how detestable soever his life be both unto God and man, yet he persuadeth himself still that he hath charity: therefore you shall hear now a true and plain description or setting forth of charity, not of men's imagination, but of the very words and example of our Saviour Jesus Christ. In which description or setting forth, every man (as it were in a glass) may consider himself, and see plainly without error, whether he be in the true charity or not.

It seems quite remarkable to me how applicable that is to our current situation. "... almost every man maketh and frameth to himself charity after *his own appetite*". Whoever wrote that almost 500 years ago would not be surprised by the blasphemies being spewed from pulpits in viral videos on YouTube today.

Christian Love is defined "not of men's imagination, but of the very words and example of our Saviour Jesus Christ." In his Sermon for the Ordination Service during the UECNA General Convention I recently attended, our presiding Bishop Peter Robinson quite pithily observed, "The Bible does not contain the Word of God. It is The Word of God." No part of it can be overlooked like the Pharisees did with that part of Psalm 110 that was inconvenient to their view of the Christ. We are commanded to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, true enough. But that commandment flows from, and must be understood in relation to the greatest commandment: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind."

In Deuteronomy it is heart, soul, and might. The other synoptic gospels also relate the greatest commandment, identifying heart, soul, mind, and strength. (Mark 12:36 and Luke 10:27). I don't think the exact faculties enumerated are as important as understanding that we are to love God with *all* our faculties. Emotionally, our love for God is a needy love, as C. S. Lewis points out in the introduction to his book *The Four Loves*.^[2] We instinctively know ourselves to be incomplete and we yearn for connection with the source of all goodness. I guess that's the easy part. But we are also called to a higher form of intellectual love. What the Greeks call *agape* and what the KJV renders in English as *charity*. What Aquinas describes as "willing the good of the other." But how are we to will the good of the timeless, self-contained, unchanging source of all goodness? To Love what God loves, to see others the way God sees them. To love the image of God he put into each of us. That's a start.

And so we must will the good of others as we will it for ourselves. C. S. Lewis dryly points out that normal men are not particularly fond of themselves. It's fairly clear that our love of self is not affection, but our seeking what is good. And, of course, the ultimate good for ourselves and others is the same thing, the fulfillment of our ultimate purpose as determined by our Creator. We do not need to be fond of our neighbor, any more than we are fond of ourselves. As we seek God, to know him, to repent of our sins and seek his forgiveness, so we must desire for others, and help them to do the same. We will the good for ourselves and others and the scriptures are our guide as to what that entails.

^[2] C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harper Collins, 1960), 3.

But our Old Testament lesson (Deuteronomy 30:11-16) tells us we have more than that: God has written his law on our very hearts. He pleads with us to choose the good, the knowledge of which is very near to us. It may be that discerning God's will for us is not as hard as we sometimes make it out to be. In his commentary on Matthew, Michael Wilkins relates "tossing out Augustine's ... dictum" to his seminary students when they inevitably fret about discernment: "Love [God] and do as you will."^[3] That does not mean, of course, that as long as you love God, anything goes. But if you are in right relation with God, if you love Him with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, "what you will" is His will.

O Lord, who hast taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth; Send thy Holy Ghost and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whosoever liveth is counted dead before thee. Grant this for thine only son Jesus Christ's sake. *Amen.*^[4]

^[3] Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew*, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2024), 738.

^[4] *Collect for Quinquagesima* from the Book of Common Prayer