

Matthew 22:34–46

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

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The texts for this Sunday present a very interesting problem, particularly the Gospel. Luther suspected that works-righteousness prevailed in the selection of the Sunday texts, and after years of working with them I have had my own questions. It doesn't appear to me that there was a Lutheran editor involved here. But the fascinating thing about this Sunday's text is that by putting together two loosely jointed sections of Matthew's Gospel, one following the other, the lectionary gives us a contrast between law and gospel. I wouldn't accuse anybody in leadership of wanting to do that, but here it is, and we are going to have some fun playing with it.

The Great Commandment

The first section begins at Matthew 22:34: "When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together." These are disparate groups. As we saw last week, Herodians and Pharisees generally don't get along very well, and the Pharisees, who believed in the resurrection of the dead, didn't have much confidence in the Sadducees, the cultured despisers of the resurrection, who were out to make sure any myths were disposed of. In the preceding verses the Sadducees came to Jesus with the case of a woman who had been married to seven brothers and lost them all, suggesting that she would have questionable tenure in the general resurrection. Jesus disposed of that question quite quickly. So here we go.

Now the Pharisees are going to take their turn. We know we are getting perilously close to the crucifixion. There is a swirling of texts here that brings us deeper and deeper into this conflict. The Pharisees are not interested in a genteel theological seminar. They have their boots on, and they are after him. "And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him." There is a barb here, because Jesus has made quite a name for himself as a critic of legal piety. He has gone after its fundamental assumption. You can see this in Mark 7, where Jesus says it is not what goes into a person that defiles, but what comes out. Legal piety is profoundly concerned with what goes in: dietary laws and all the rest of it, the regulation of

externals. So when Jesus says it is not what goes in but what comes out that condemns, he is challenging the root assumption of legal piety. Along with that there have been several other criticisms, generally involving hypocrisy: binding heavy burdens that the lawmakers themselves do not bear, and so on.

The Pharisees are legally pious in the extreme. They are convinced that Israel will be brought to tone by the law, that by obeying the law and following out every implication they are restoring Israel's moral health. They have been the butt of all this criticism, so naturally they are not interested in a quiet exchange of opinions. They have come to test him, and this lawyer has been primed.

This is not exactly a high curveball dropping out of the zone. Neither is it a fastball right under the chin. The question had been around for a while and had been debated fairly extensively among the Pharisees themselves and certainly among the rabbis: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

The problem of the law is that there are a whole bunch of commandments. Law tends to proliferate. It breeds at night and starts to spill over into every aspect of life. The reason, of course, is that the law as a code can't keep up with the complications of life. We see this in the New Testament itself. What happens if your ox or your donkey falls into a well on the Sabbath? You are in a dilemma: you either break the Sabbath or lose your tractor. Because issues like these keep coming up, the rabbis are in a constant process of evaluating, assessing, and expanding. So the Ten Commandments become the 613; the Mishnah becomes the Babylonian Talmud, thirty volumes and counting of rabbinic commentary attempting to sort out what the law requires in the particular situations of life.

As I like to joke, the law runs on short legs. It can't keep up with everything life presents, and so it tends to lose the forest for the trees. That is why the question "What is the greatest commandment of the law? What is really required here?" is a question demanded by the law itself. In all the proliferation and expansion, all the commentary and examination, somebody has to walk into the center and say, "Here is where it all starts." So the Pharisees, led by this lawyer, ask Jesus a question they have asked among themselves, and which was being asked in rabbinic Judaism as it emerged at about the same time.

"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." It goes right back to the

original commandment given to Moses. “And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” That one emerges from Leviticus 19.

Now we have it. The law has been given its point. In all the welter and confusion, all the haberdashery and all the expansion of law, we have it right here. This is what the law requires.

We can say this about these two commandments: they are built right into the shape of things. We are creatures. We do not have life in ourselves. Life enters us from outside at a particular point and leaves us at a particular point: here for a while, gone tomorrow. That’s how it works. Because we do not have life in ourselves but receive it from outside, we are required by the way we are constituted to be in touch with the one who gives it to us, namely our Creator, and with those through whom we receive it, namely other creatures. God and our neighbors.

Because these commandments are built into things, they are part of our experience. They make sense. You can explain them even to confirmands, even to the hormonally handicapped, even to those utterly lost in themselves, adrift and uncertain, making contact only briefly in junior high school, where they are continually under assault. That’s a test of reason if there ever was one. Jesus is a reasonable person, and as a reasonable person he has access to the same powers of reason that are available to the Pharisees. When he answers the question, it is pretty much settled. This is part of the tradition of Judaism, part of the tradition of Christianity, and part of the shape of things.

We can say a couple more things. Psalm 1, a beautiful psalm that is one of the assigned readings for Sunday, says that if you do these commandments you can pretty much expect to live. Things are going to go well for you, and the future will open to you in blessing. That follows because these two requirements are so closely correlated with life itself. So the apostle Paul can say in Romans that the law is holy and just and good. There is nothing wrong with the law at this point. Provided the obedience is thorough and heartfelt, you can anticipate that if you do these things, it will go as Jesus says. I always loved this in Latin, for some strange reason: *Hoc fac et vives*. “Do this, and you will live.” It works that way, and Psalm 1 is telling us the truth, as you would expect.

The Trouble Is the Heart

The problem is not with the law. The problem is with the human heart, and that’s what we are running into here. Because these two greatest commandments are correlated with life, the old

sinner in us wants to get hold of them and use them like twin handles on a water-ski rope, pulling us out of the mess and over the surface into life itself. Now we can live happily ever after, because we know the commandments.

That is where things get slippery. Knowing is only one aspect, and the heart, in its use of the commandments, damns itself. The commandments turn on us. We expect too much. We expect to do these things and live, and then they become our damnation. That is what is happening here. Jesus has sought over and over again to liberate the Pharisees, his hearers, everybody he deals with, from this legal superstition, the deep-down conviction of the heart that the law is going to save. He has tried in every way, generally by radicalizing the requirements of the law, to show that this is a dead end. And yet here we are again, right in Jerusalem at the very beginning of what will lead to Jesus' death, and still this lousy superstition shows up.

And of course it shows up in the mouth of a lawyer. What do I have to do? What will it cost me? What's in it for me? How do I do this? Give me a kit. Melanchthon called this the *opinio legis*, the secret conviction of the heart that the law provides the instructions for a do-it-yourself kit, so that we can become our own projects and live forever.

David's Son and David's Lord

Now, interestingly enough, and I am still curious about the reason for this, this text, which is complete in itself, has been joined in our pericope with another that is equally interesting and a lot more fun. "Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question." Turnabout is fair play, don't you think? They are forever trying to put him on the spot. Now we will watch him back them right into a corner. "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" How would you like to discuss that question in a seminar with Jesus?

This is one of two questions the human heart asks of the Messiah, and both have the same purpose. In John's Gospel the question is always, "Where does he come from?" Here the question is, "Whose son is he?" It sounds like North Dakota. When you grow up in a small community or a neighborhood like that, you are going to ask: Who's he? Whose son is he? What family does he come from? That is the native question of rural people, and city people ask it too: what neighborhood?

Both of these are filing questions. They are questions by which we seek to establish control over someone: predictability, reliability, some anticipation of what we are dealing with. Where does he come from? That tells you a lot right away. Whose son is he? The smaller the town, the bigger this question becomes, because it has everything to do with domesticating our experience of the person. I know where he lives; I know where she comes from. Holy smokes, have you ever been there on a Saturday night? You know how this works. It is the predictable stuff of every day.

But now we are in a different league. “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he? They said to him, ‘The son of David.’” I bet they had their fingers crossed. That answer came out a little begrudgingly, because they have gone round and round with him before, and they know he is elusive and tough to catch. Still, it is fair enough. It is biblical, good Old Testament theology. It gets them on the board, and it is a low-risk answer. They are not going to get into trouble by giving it.

But give him an inch and it’s a slam dunk. “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’?”’” This is a lot of fun. The law is reasonable. The gospel is an alien word. It comes from beyond our experience.

As one of my dear friends, now approaching his death, used to like to say, the gospel is antithetical to every human tendency. It is an alien word, an external word. It comes from outside, from beyond our experience, and so it is beyond us. It is a puzzle. Even after forty years of teaching and preaching it, I can tell you how elusive it is. You don’t catch it; it catches you, and so it is always just a little beyond your reach. I get close. I was there last night, but I’m not sure I can do it again. That is the nature of the gospel, as any pastor knows who has stood at a deathbed where the gospel was demanded and gone fishing for it, wishing more than anything to say it, and frustrated beyond anything by the question: Have I said it yet?

So now we are in the region of the alien. Jesus can answer their question, but they can’t answer his. If the Messiah is David’s son, then why in the world does David call him Lord? It is a conundrum right away, but a conundrum with a great big promise stuck right in the center of it. As usual, Jesus is playing with these men. He isn’t cheating, but he is playing, and even as he pulls the answer out ahead of them, he sets out a promise.

The citation of this passage is not accidental. Jesus knows what is going to happen as this conversation continues. The Pharisees are going to put him under their feet, literally. They are going to bury him. They are going to bring him to death, because that is all legal piety can finally offer. Death is the end of the law's road. They are going to put him to death in an ultimate act of futility. They are going to play their final card. They have already been consulting with the officials. There is a reason why they dislike the Sadducees but know them quite well, and why they dislike the Herodians but hang around with them when the opportunity arises: they are all part of the establishment Jesus has been provoking. They have already decided what to do with him. The final scene of this play is yet to be set in motion, but we are right at the edge of it, and it is about to begin.

This is the human heart. Pharisee or Sadducee, Republican or Democrat or Tea Party, whatever it is, all the human heart finally has to offer is death. It is reflexive in the deepest sense. It can only turn to death as some sort of power: I'm going to get you in the end. So they are going to put Jesus to death.

And Jesus quotes this passage: "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.'" What is he going to do? He is not talking about the Pharisees. He is talking about the ultimate power of death. He is going to put death under his feet, as in 1 Corinthians 15. He is on his way. He is restoring the garden, reclaiming it from sin, death, and the devil. And while the Pharisees are preparing to put him away, he engages in a little theological tête-à-tête with them. He jokes with them, teases them, pulls the gospel out ahead of them and lets them chase it a little.

"What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" And having pulled it out ahead of them, he jerks the ground right out from under them. "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.'" This is what he is doing. This is the end of the story: he is putting death under his feet, the last enemy to be destroyed. He is going before them now, but he will fall helpless in the end. He is going to go limp. He will come into Jerusalem, and all the forces that have driven him will leave him limp as a dishrag, hanging there with everything wrung out of him. Death will destroy him, as far as the eye can see. And when death is done with him, death will be under his feet. For he is risen. He has been raised, he is being raised, he will be raised, for you and in you. That is the word that blesses you. Even as death prepares to lay down its aces, he still holds the trump, and the whole thing is going to end there.

“No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.” I wonder why. He has them now.

The Other Readings

The other readings support this gospel. Leviticus 19 spells out the assumptions under Jesus’ answer, in its statement of the second great commandment, and Psalm 1 specifies the blessing. And in 1 Thessalonians 2 we have that wonderful, intimate letter in which Paul speaks of the love he had for the Thessalonians and how gently he dealt with them when he first came. It is Christlike. We are being dealt with gently even as our ultimate assumptions are being destroyed, because Christ Jesus is taking us into the new creation, where power and submission, control and domination, self-justification and all the normal tricks and traps of the sinful self come to an end, and life begins again in the power of the resurrection.

Here is the difference. The law, which appeals to reason, comes in the end to futility. The gospel, which is fundamentally unreasonable, opens up the new creation, new life, and everything to follow.

There are some comments to stir you up, I hope, and to lure you into a conversation with this text. It is odd, as I said, that they have put together two passages that don’t usually go together so closely. But by doing so the compilers of the lectionary have given us a wonderful contrast of law and gospel.

Questions and Answers

An observation that the great commandment is, in the original, a future indicative.

Yes, that’s exactly true. In the original the commandment is a future indicative that is generally rendered as an imperative. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” can be translated: this is just what is going to happen to you by the time he’s done with you. You won’t have any alternative. This is typical of the First Commandment. It is a commandment, yes, but behind the commandment there is pure promise, bursting at the seams and pushing through, so that it becomes indicative right away. The same is true of the second: by the time I’m done with you, you are finally going to figure out what your neighbor is for, and you won’t be able to stay away. You will love your neighbor. Because of this, you never want to let these texts degenerate into scolding. It’s descriptive.

A comment: no whiny exhortations.

That's exactly right. This is one of the joys of my retirement. We live a few miles outside a little town in Oregon, and we've gotten to know that congregation over the past five or six years. I help the pastor; I call on the sick and preach once in a while. When you live with people that way, you can see how this happens. It isn't just that we should love the Lord our God; it is happening even now. He is at work in us both to will and to work, and every once in a while we catch intimations of it in the courage and faith you see at a deathbed.

Sheldon was over for supper the other night, and did we have fun. He has lost a lot, of course. He can't walk anymore, and Dorothy cares for him around the clock, but we got him up the steps, and his old self is still under there. You stir around a little and the motor starts. So, no whiny exhortations. A whiny exhortation inoculates people with the law instead of killing them. Everybody knows how to defend against that stuff, and it doesn't go anywhere. You want to preach this so that its goodness and its friendliness are clear: by the time he gets done with you, even if you don't see it very often, he is going to make some good of you. It is happening, even with older sinners who are more experienced in deception and therefore a little craftier.

A comment that part of loving God is honoring the mystery.

Yes, that's exactly right. Part of love is that it honors the mystery. I remember sitting, when I was much younger, with old Gerhard Frost, a salty old character. We always had a lot of fun together. He said to me, "You know, Jim, your questions are a gift of the Holy Spirit, and because of that you don't want to answer them too fast. It is the Spirit who brings these questions up in you, so you want to savor them."

That is what is happening here. The Pharisees have a control myth. They are pretty sure that with the law they can dominate life and bring it into subservience. Jesus pulls the illusion of control out from under them by raising a very simple yet fundamental question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" It is a wonderful question, and one the shape of life requires of us. Jesus himself asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" As Richard John Neuhaus used to say, we are emissaries of a disputed sovereign. His sovereignty is constantly challenged by the powers he has defeated, sin, death, and the devil, and so the questions keep coming back. They should. As Dr. Frost said, the thing to do is cherish the question. Let it be a question. He will hold you even while you are asking.

A comment that sometimes the better thing is to sit in silence and wait for him.

That's exactly right. We use that four-volume set of brown books that goes through the two-year lectionary, *For All the Saints*. Now that we are both retired, we can sit and have devotions together every morning, and we really enjoy it. These last days we have been reading Job, and I keep thinking of old Gerhard Frost preaching out of the book of Job. Those old preachers loved that book, because they had questions themselves, as they should have, and so do we. If justification depended on our answers, there would be hell to pay. But he is tuning us up. We can ask, and if we start asking, he may start asking, and then maybe the best thing is silence.

I love this, because these texts have been my whole life, and now that I'm getting a little older, resting in the text is like going on vacation. There is such a blessing in them, and they overflow with it. You just want to play. It is like coming out into the sunshine.

A question about the lectionary itself.

I tend to be very conservative about the lectionary. I was persuaded when I was a student that these texts are really life-giving, and I love them. That at least gives us something in common, and I'd be interested in hearing more about your view.

This is a perplexing text, but this has been great. The good Lord is watching out for us all. We'll see you next week.

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=111AtjcKOgo>

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