

Loving God: From Command to Choice
Matthew 22:34-46

A good teacher for me is one who gets to the point. I like a teacher who uses simple words and constructs simple sentences. I like asking questions and exploring different sides of an issue. I enjoy puzzles and brain teasers. But at the end of a meeting or a discussion I want as much clarity as possible. From this perspective I always come away from the gospel stories with a deep sense of appreciation for the teaching style of Jesus.

Jesus was indeed the master teacher. Through parables he used common objects and everyday events to convey memorable lessons. He used one-liners to distill the wisdom of his Jewish heritage. And occasionally, in technical discussion or even confrontation, he cut through complexity and tradition to present truth with amazing clarity and power. Nowhere in the gospels is this more evident than in Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees on the Temple Mount during his last week. The Pharisees were among several groups vying to be the ones able to trap, discredit, or perhaps destroy Jesus. They chose one of their ablest theologians to present a question that no amateur could handle. This expert in the Law asked Jesus, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

That probably does not seem to be a deeply complicated question to us because we know the story well. But consider what Jesus was facing. The rabbis had counted 613 commands in the Law. There were 248 positive commands, corresponding to the generally accepted number of the parts of the body, and 365 negative commands to match the number of days in a year. While teachers and students of the Law sometimes tried to summarize the Law or divide it into sections, they generally felt that all the commandments were equal since they all came from God. Any effort to place one commandment above another would be presumptuous. It would be placing human judgment above divine judgment. It was a trick question. Jesus didn't dodge it.

He didn't cloak his response in vague language. Although he cited two commandments instead of one, his answer went straight to the point. Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'" This is the first and

greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." Brilliant answer! Short, simple, and clear!

How can anyone not understand? Not only do we have here a way to keep both the letter and the spirit of the Law but also we have a key for understanding the Law, the Prophets, and the very revelation of God itself. I value this statement of Jesus immensely. It is not simply an example of his genius. It is a prescription for living. It is a clear, concise guide for relating to God and to other people. Yet there is one thing about this statement that has always bothered me.

It is given as an imperative, and I want to ask how love can be commanded. How can love be love if it comes as a response to some kind of order? Is love not a choice? Oh, I know that Jesus was quoting from the Shema in Deuteronomy, a sort of creed in Judaism, and from a pronouncement on love for neighbor that appears in Leviticus. And I realize as well that even in the Hebrew Bible these so-called laws have a relational quality to them. But still they are given as commands, and that can put us off. My daughter Jamie and her husband Jay have a fourteen-month-old daughter named Jayne Grace.

Somewhere Jayne Grace received a little picture book about David the shepherd boy. One page has a drawing of David playing his harp and the caption: "David loved God. You love God, too." We adults who held the book in front of Jayne Grace and turned the pages had remarked that it was unfair to tell a child that she loved God. Loving God is something that we decide to do.

However, you don't worry about such things with an infant. One day one of us was holding the book so the baby could see the pictures and reading the text. Jayne Grace was intent, if not on the book itself at least on the attention she was getting. When we got to the line, "You love God, too," she let out a loud burp! The appropriate thing, we agreed, for telling her how to feel! Some persons, I find, are content to try to love God out of a sense of duty. They are not bothered by a command to love. The idea of obligation gives a feeling of relief.

When I listen to persons talk in religious classes and discussions, I am puzzled and sometimes stunned by the notions they express about the nature of God. Some persons talk about ways that God has "tested" them through difficulty. Others refer to the harshness of following "God's will" for their lives. And hardly a week goes by that I do not hear someone say that God "never gives us more than we can bear." I know that comments like these come from sincere intentions.

Here's my problem with them. If a person believes that God sends hardship in any form or that God is daily testing our trust, how can he or she have good feelings about God? If I believed that God sent difficulty into my life, I would be afraid of God. And I cannot love someone that I fear. Love and fear are opposites. If you believe that God causes tragedy, even if there seems to be a good purpose behind it, you need a command to love. You will hear the injunction, "You shall love God," grit your teeth, and do your best to obey. Isn't it better to love God by choice? Isn't it better to have a joyous, trusting, completely committed love for God?

I want people to love me because they want to do so. I do not want my children or other family members or friends to say that convention requires that they love me, so they will. I would be extremely uncomfortable with that kind of love. If you can call that love! Don't misunderstand. I do not think for a moment that Jesus was saying that one must love God whether he wants to or not. Jesus loved, trusted, and served God as a willful and natural response to the God who had said to him, "You are the Beloved," at his baptism, during the transfiguration, and probably many other times in his life. Jesus did not love by command, and I do not think he would encourage anyone else to do that either. He was reciting from the Law. So, how do we move from command to choice here?

I suggest three things that I employ when I feel that I have moved away from God and need to express my love for God as well as rest in God's love for me. The first is to learn or re-learn something about the nature of God. That involves scripture reading, meditation, or just simple thought about who God is and what God is doing. That is not a complicated thing to do. You can sit, close your eyes and think about God's love and care. You can talk aloud to God when you drive your car. You can pull up another chair and imagine God sitting there sharing time

with you. Mother Teresa once said, "Spend some time every day in adoration of God and don't do anything you know is wrong, and you will be all right."

Why suggest something so mundane? Isn't the problem more complex than that? Not really! If you see God as immediately involved in your life, if you can grasp that God surrounds you with his own love and with grace sufficient, you will not be able to believe that God is going to zap you or inflict your life with some terrible hardship. It is not hard to love someone who loves you infinitely. Second, choose to love God by loving another person. It was no accident that Jesus included the second command, "Love your neighbor as yourself," on the level with the first. Love is always practical.

We cannot see or touch God in the normal way of thinking, but we can see and touch and love God by loving those around us. Those who composed the ancient Law of Israel recognized that. The prophets of Israel reinforced the message. Some of them went so far as to say that loving one's neighbor is more important than believing in God. Jesus said, "As you serve one of the least of these who are members of my family, you do it to me" (Mt. 25:40).

The first letter of John contains that pointed line, "Anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen" (4:20). The third approach to loving God by choice is to live the love we profess. As I said earlier, love is not theoretical. Jesus was not a theorist. Loving God as well as loving others is something we do. The other day I read an interesting piece that a woman had written about one of the ways she had found to express love for her husband. She said that as a child she had watched her mother serve her father in almost a slave-like fashion and she determined that she would never do that. She became a strong feminist. When she married, she demanded that every chore be divided equally so that neither she nor her husband would feel burdened to care for the other.

This woman wrote that every morning she prepared her own lunch to take to work. Usually, her husband ate out. During a challenging time financially she decided to make her husband a lunch when she made her own in an effort to save money. The husband in turn gave her a ride to

work so that she could save gas and parking costs. Both of them at first resented the inconveniences, but they cheerfully supported each other. When things improved financially, the woman found that she actually liked preparing her husband's lunch and continued to do so.

Her husband enjoyed the extra time with his wife going to and from work. They never changed their new habits. What began as a necessity continued as a choice. Learning about God, loving God through loving others, living our love-these approaches can take us from command to choice. Actually, that was the pattern of Jesus. He was calling us to love God in the way he loved God. At the end of a very fine book called *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis poses a question of an old author, "Is it easy to love God?" And he gives the old scholar's reply, "It is easy for those who do it." (p. 191)

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