

Biblical Love

Matthew 22:34-46 (October 25, 2020)

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³⁴When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

⁴¹Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: ⁴²“What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” ⁴³He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, ⁴⁴‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet”’? ⁴⁵If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” ⁴⁶No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Historical Context

In Mark's version of this encounter (Mk. 12:28-34) a scribe asks Jesus which is the greatest commandment; Jesus gives the same answer here as in Matthew. The scribe praises Jesus' answer and Jesus affirms the scribe's wisdom with these words "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (Mk. 12:34).

Theme: Biblical Love

Loving God is the first thing, the most important thing. But, with it comes a corollary: to love God means that you also love God's people. The ancient rabbis put it in similar terms: "What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Law."

The key problem in interpreting this double commandment for our time is that we lose sight of the biblical meaning of love. Biblical love is not passive and it is not strictly emotional. Chiefly, it refers to what can be called loving-kindness. It is not passive emotion, but active mercy. It is marked by patience and generosity, again, both acts generated by the one who loves. In short, loving is a choice, not a feeling.

Likewise, loving our neighbor is difficult. To love our neighbor as oneself is to act toward the other as one would act toward those close to you. We treat the stranger as well as we treat those that we love emotionally.

When the action to each is equal, the love to each is equal. This is counter to what we expect, but it is in keeping with what the commandment requires. This means that, to those with whom we are intimate, to those we do not know, to those who may be dirty or repugnant, and even to those who harm us, we can act according to the law of love. We can be merciful and gracious. To love the neighbor as ourselves is to make a conscious choice and act upon it.