

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Exodus 22:21-27; Psalm 18 (17); 1 Thessalonians 1:5-10; Matthew 22:34-40

Teacher: Which commandment of the Law is the greatest?

Matt 22:34 When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35 and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36 “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” 37 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.’ 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This is certainly not the most obscure passage in the Bible—the task lies elsewhere, that is, in living it. However a few remarks may keep us open to the challenge.

This brief exchange is found in all three synoptic Gospels (Mark 12:28-31 and Luke 10:25-28). In reality, it is also found in the Fourth Gospel with its extraordinary emphasis on love—love from God, love for God and love for our brothers and sisters. It is found in a series of questions from his opponents to Jesus—pay taxes, the resurrection and now the greatest commandment. The following story is another question about the identity of the Messiah. These strained encounters are framed by the parable of the wicked tenants and Jesus’ denunciation of the scribes and the Pharisees.

Given the extensive instructions in the Hebrew Bible (some 613 commandments), there was a discussion among the rabbis regarding the core or essence of the Law. This discussion can be understood in that context.

It is noticeable that this the third in a series of conflict stories is sharpest in Matthew. Mark begins: One of the scribes came near and heard them dis-



puting with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” (Mark 12:28) Luke is sharper but without the animus against the Pharisees. Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25).

KIND OF WRITING

As we have seen before, these vignettes from the life of Jesus are best understood as *chreiai*, scenes which illustrate the “needful” or what is necessary. It is in the form of questions and answers. In the surrounding stories, Jesus trumps his opponents and we are given their reactions: “When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.” (Matt 22:22); “And when the crowd heard it, they were astounded at his teaching.” (Matt 22:33); “No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.” (Matt 22:46). In this particular scene, however, there is no response—presumably because Jesus has reported perfectly orthodox biblical teaching with which they cannot but agree. Even on the level of Matthew’s community there can be no disagreement over this.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Matthew and Luke have a version which is significantly different to Mark’s, chiefly found in the introductory formulae. Old Testament background

(i) The first reply of Jesus reflects the great prayer of Judaism, the *Shema Yisrael*, taken from the book of Deuterono-

Thought for the day

Jesus does not pluck his summary teaching from the air—he quotes from the *Shema Yisrael*, the great daily prayer of Judaism found in Deuteronomy 6. The second part about the love of neighbour is taken from Leviticus 18. This mission statement stands as a resounding appeal to us today. We are asked not just to believe that there is a God, but to love God. We are asked not just to respect our neighbour, but to love our neighbour. Love is not only the truth about human beings but also the truth about God, who is love itself.

Prayer

Great and loving God, your love for us is beyond what we can grasp with our minds and hearts. Let such great love for all awaken in us a true love of you and lead to authentic service of our neighbour.

my:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut 6:4-9)

(ii) The second reply of Jesus quotes the book of Leviticus:

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord. (Lev 19:18)

Cf. He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

The Jewish tradition continued to reflect

on this, as we see in two examples taken from the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*:

Love the Lord and your neighbour; (Is-sachar 5:2) Throughout all your life love the Lord, and one another with a true heart. (Dan 5:3)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) Matthew cites the Leviticus text elsewhere: “Honour your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” (Matt 19:19)

(ii) The command (!) to love God and your neighbour is found especially in the First Letter of John:

“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God—because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.” (1 John 4:7-12)

“If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” (Jas 1:26-27)

ST PAUL

(i) Like a good rabbi, Paul is also interested in summary statements of the Law:

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall

not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. (Rom 13:8-10)

For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” (Gal 5:14)

Elsewhere, of course, Paul teaches love—for example in the famous 1 Cor 13—sometimes in less remembered texts, such as:

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour.” (Rom 12:9-10)

“Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.” (1 Thess 4:9-12)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 34 The Pharisees and the Sadducees did not agree on all points of doctrine (e.g., the resurrection). As Matthew tells it, the Pharisees (a) are pleased to see their enemies at a loss and (b) are trying to drive *their* point home.

Verse 35 The contrast with the version in Mark is considerable: *One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another* (Mark 12:28). Lawyer here means someone versed in religious law, i.e., a kind of theologian or Bible scholar.

Verse 36 This question was often asked in the later rabbinic tradition and the answer there given does not contradict our text. Matthew and Luke agree on the use of the word “teacher” here. Greater—not however in the sense that other commands may be neglected but rather in the sense that the love commandment is the core ethos which makes sense of the others.

Verse 37 The *Shema Yisrael* still prayed three times daily by practicing Jews. Notice that Matthew omits (contrary to Mark) the opening words of the *Shema*.

Verse 38 This verse, which gives clear

priority to the love of God, is found only in Matthew. This pointed evaluation is perhaps best grasped in the light of 1 John above.

Verse 39 It is often commented these days that there is an implied approval of loving your self—and there is, except that the emphasis here falls on loving your neighbour the same way.

Verse 40 A summary statement. Law = the Pentateuch, the first five books of Moses. Cf., “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. (Matthew 7:12)

The whole incident is designed to show that Jesus’ insight into the Law is deeper and richer. Cf. *For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.* (Matthew 5:20)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. You may feel some sympathy with the Jews struggling to cope with 613 laws and wondering which were the important ones. But have you ever felt overwhelmed by the rules and regulations of your own tradition? And have you ever been blessed by meeting someone, or reading something, that was able to cut through all the layers and point out to you what is essential in life? Who was that person? What did s/he say or do? Is there some phrase or text that encapsulates such wisdom for you?

2. If you were asked what is most important in life, what would your answer be? Recall the experiences and relationships you have had. Which are the ones that you treasure most? What has particularly enriched your life? How would you encourage another person who asked you how s/he could live a full life?

PRAYER

Your love, O God is boundless.

We who were strangers have been made your children.

We who were defenceless have been brought into your household.

Keep us mindful of your deeds of mercy, that we may love you with all our heart and love our neighbour as ourselves.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

How you turned to the living God

1 Thess 1:6 And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, when you received the message with joy that comes from the Holy Spirit, despite great affliction. 7 As a result you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 8 For from you the message of the Lord has echoed forth not just in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place reports of your faith in God have spread, so that we do not need to say anything. 9 For people everywhere report how you welcomed us and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus our deliverer from the coming wrath.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Today we hear the second half of the thanksgiving/introduction which opens 1 Thessalonians. Paul takes up exactly where he left off in v. 5.

KIND OF WRITING

	Letter	Speech
1:1	Greeting	
1:2-8 and 9-10	Thanksgiving	Introduction (Thesis)
2:1-3:13	Body of the Letter	Proof 1
4:1-12		Proof 2
4:13-5:11		Proof 3
5:12-27		Conclusion
5:28	Greeting	

In nearly all Paul's letters there is a thanksgiving (in letter analysis) or an introduction/exordium (in rhetorical analysis). Not only does this section foreshadow topics to come, it usually leads directly to the thesis or main topic of the letter which then drives the whole argument. This is the case here.

In v. 5, Paul already reminded them of their experience of power of the Spirit and also, somewhat elliptically, of their debt to him. He goes on to praise the Thessalonians—actually a kind of buttering up but at the same time true. Their fame went out, as the Psalm put it.

Vv. 9-10 constitute the thesis or the *propositio* of the whole letter. It is in three parts and each part looks forward to a

section of the letter.

Part 1: *For people everywhere report how you welcomed us.* This is the story of how they came to faith. Paul rehearses his ministry and subsequent dealings in chapters 2 and 3.

Part 2: *and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.* This is a description of their current situation. The did write to Paul about how to live in the alien culture of the Roman empire. Paul takes up the questions in 4:1-12. It is all to do with love. In the first paragraph Paul deals with sexual morality and love and in the second with the general teaching on loving one another.

Part 3: *and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus our deliverer from the coming wrath.* The Thessalonians also had questions for Paul. He responds in 4:13-5:11. The first question was about the status of those who had already died at the time of the Second Coming and the sequent question was about the timing of that event. Oriented towards the future, Paul deals here with Christian hope.

It is noticeable that the three topics raised deal with *faith* (how they came to believer), *love* (how to live it now) and finally to *hope* (what we may look forward to). That slightly unusual sequence is taken up twice in the letter. Your work of *faith* and labour of *love* and endurance of *hope* in our Lord Jesus Christ. (1Thessalonians 1:3) But since we are of the day, we must stay sober by putting on the breastplate of *faith* and *love* and as a helmet our *hope* for salvation. (1Thessalonians 5:8) The sequence matches the chronology of the overall argument: the past (*faith* 2:2-3:12), the present (*love*; 4:1-12), the future (*hope*, 4:13-5:11). Although 1 Thessalonians may seem a simple and spontaneous, in reality the letter is quite sophisticatedly structured.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The context is the mixed history of the Christian assembly in Thessalonica. Part of their story was one of more recent harassment from fellow citizens. But part of their story too was faith, faith so strong that the word went out beyond even Greece itself. They experienced as well great joy in believing, a constant feature of Pauline foundations.

RELATED PASSAGES

Now we make known to you, brothers and sisters, the grace of God given to the churches of Macedonia, that during a severe ordeal of suffering, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in the wealth of their generosity. (2 Corinthians 8:1-2)

I keep boasting to the Macedonians about this eagerness of yours, that Achaia has been ready to give since last year, and your zeal to participate has stirred up most of them. (2Corinthians 9:2)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verses 6 In new places, Paul had to embody somehow what he proclaimed. Otherwise, there would be no “evidence” that the proclamation was both true and truly transformative. See also 1 Cor 4:15-17, 11:1; Gal 4:12; Phil 3:17, 4:8-9.

Verses 7-8 This flattery falls into the category of *captatio benevolentiae*, the gaining of the goodwill of the hearers. Given the difficult recent history, a bit of buttering up will help, of course. Not needing to say anything is the equivalent of “needless to mention” after which people always go on to, well, mention!

Verses 9 Briefly, Paul alludes to the conversion of the Thessalonians (to be followed by chapters 2-3) and hints at their service of God (to be taken up in 4:1-12).

Verses 10 This completes the third element in the thesis, in a rather full reference to end-time hope, anticipating the questions in 4:13-5:12. Paul has mentioned Jesus several times already—this time in relation to the Second Coming and the end of time. “Wrath” here points not to God’s anger but the end time travail.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Have you found yourself inspired by someone whom you felt called to imitate in some way?
2. What is your own story of doing to faith, just as the Thessalonians did?

PRAYER

O God, you have called to faith, love and hope in Jesus. Let your call penetrate deeply into our hearts and lives so that our witness to abundant life in Christ may draw others to faith in Jesus, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens

The Lord said to Moses, tell the children of Israel this,

Exod 22:21 You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. 22 You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. 23 If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; 24 my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans.

Exod 22:25 If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. 26 If you take your neighbour's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; 27 for it may be your neighbour's only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbour cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Israel's principled protection of the marginalised is rooted in the memory and imagination of the Exodus itself. Our reading—illustrating the reality of loving your neighbour—leaves no room for equivocation. The penetrating German theologian Dorothea Sölle once wrote a book entitled *Truth is Concrete*. So too, of course, is love. In words borrowed from Elizabeth Browning, Exodus lets us “count the ways”! The author has in mind very practical ways of protecting the defenceless and vulnerable.

KIND OF WRITING

This is Torah as its best, full of humanness, justice and righteousness. It reflects the profound emphasis on true justice found across the traditions in the Hebrew Bible. The related passages in the next section show how embedded these teaching are in the Bible.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The passage is part of a longer section in the book of Exodus, known as the Sinai pericope, running from Ex 19:1 to 24:18. Within that, the *Covenant Code* of 20:22-23:19 corresponds to the *Decalogue* in Ex 20:1-17. The sub-unit of 22:18-31 is somewhat miscellaneous.

RELATED READINGS

You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with the wicked to act as a malicious witness. You shall not follow a majority in wrongdoing; when you bear witness in a lawsuit, you shall not side with the majority so as to pervert justice; nor shall you be partial to the poor in a lawsuit. When you come upon your enemy's ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back. When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free.

You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in their lawsuits. Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and those in the right, for I will not acquit the guilty. You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 23:1-9)

And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The LORD’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. (Exodus 33:19; cf. Deuteronomy 24:10-13)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 21 The resident alien, i.e., someone living in Israel for a longer or shorter time without the usual supports of family and profession and hence open to exploitation. Cf. Ex 23:9 above.

Verse 22 The widow and the orphan are stock characters, without the support of husband and/or father and so easily taken advantage of. The spread of texts which speak of the widow and orphan is in itself instructive: Exod 22:22; Deut 10:18; 24:19-21; 27:19; Job 31:18; Ps 94:6; 146:9; Isa 1:17; Jer 7:6; 22:3; Ezek 22:7; Zech 7:10; Mal 3:5; Sir 35:17; Bar 6:38; 2 Esd 2:20.

Verse 23 Hebrew has an intensive form of the verb called the infinitive absolute. A good translation here would be: “if you *truly oppress*.if they *truly cry* out...I will *truly hear*.” It was all part not only of the Exodus but also of the Covenant

with YHWH. Cf. “*Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice.*” *All the people shall say, “Amen!”* (Deuteronomy 27:19)

Verse 24 A fierce example of the *lex talionis*. Or, positively, the Golden Rule, as found in nearly all religions and philosophies.

Verse 25 The poor are equally important to YHWH. People may find themselves having to borrow to manage—but the rich are not to take advantage of them. The model is borrowing within a family, where there is no question of interest. See Deut 24:6, 10-13 above.

Verses 26-27a Even something held as collateral is to be returned that night just in case. The idea is idealistic: one takes collateral more for the benefit of the borrower's feelings than with any idea of gain.

Verse 27b “I am compassionate” is the foundational principle of all the commandments. All who are in the image and likeness of God are called to the same great compassion.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. When we have been through something ourselves, we are ready to have more sympathy and even able to help. An example would be AA. Can you think of experiences in your own life which have helped you to be more understanding to fellow human beings in difficulty?

2. Within your range of family / work / society, who are the truly vulnerable in need of special care and service? Are you yourself engaged in any way?

3. A key principle is not taking advantage of people who are vulnerable. Money is an obvious example and so might be the awful information emerging about orphans. But there are other ways of “using” people as well. The core principle is highly moral: acting out *agape*, that is loving without seeking any benefit to ourselves.

PRAYER

God, all-powerful and all-compassionate, you console us in all our affliction. Come to our help so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Exodus 22:21-27; Psalm 18 (17); 1 Thessalonians 1:5-10; Matthew 22:34-40

READINGS 1 AND 3

The Gospel itself gives no indication of *how* we are to love our neighbour. The first reading supplies examples which must speak to every Irish person.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 18 (17) is slightly disconcerting as a choice because other hymns take up more clearly the topic of the widow and the orphan. Perhaps the response is the key, taking us to the Gospel passage in reality: *I love you, Lord, my strength.*

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Exodus 22:21-27

Often our own difficult experiences can help us to be truly compassionate. This was very much the case in the past as well, as we hear in this reading. It should have a special resonance for Irish people today.

Second reading

1 Thessalonians 1:5-10

A word of appreciation can work wonders. As we hear Paul praise the Christians in Thessalonica, we may wonder what he would say today, to our community of faith.

Gospel

Matthew 22:34-40

Imagine someone has asked you to put in a few words the heart of the Jesus' teaching. What would you say?

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 30 October

Romans 8:12-17

Abba Father is not that frequent in the New Testament. Paul uses it here to remind his hearers of their own practice of prayer and thus bolster his persuasion.

Luke 13:10-17

The story of the woman bent double is a great story (strangely not read on Sundays). It has lots of potential at a metaphorical level. The argument used by Jesus to "excuse" his healing on the

Sabbath is irrefutable.

Tuesday 31 October

Romans 8:18-25

St Paul is full of faith and hope; yet, he acknowledges the struggle. Still, for him—and for us—the key is how we respond to the costly travails.

Luke 13:18-21

Two brief parables with striking power. Both are parables of magnificent, unstoppable growth—as incredible then as now, and just as needed.

Wednesday 1 November

All Saints (see special notes)



Thursday 2 November

All Souls

The range of options means detailed commentary is not practical!

Ephesians 2:19-22

Our reading opens up a fundamental question: what or who are we as Christian believers? Using a building metaphor, the identikit is rich, to say the least.

Luke 6:12-16

Luke makes it plain that Jesus *prayed* before the choice and appointment of the Twelve. It is important to note that the Twelve function, in the ministry of Jesus, as a prophetic action, underscoring Jesus' programme which was the restoration of Israel. Cf. "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" (Matthew 15:24 NRSV) By the time Luke is writing the restriction to the Jewish people of Jesus' ministry was already in the distant past.

Friday 3 November

St Malachi, bishop

Romans 9:1-5

In Romans 9-11, Paul embarks on the deepest reflection in the New Testament

on the "no" of most of his co-religionists to Jesus. The split between Jews and Christians was already tragically apparent. It also cost Paul a great deal as we hear in this heartfelt confession.

Luke 14:1-6

It is a curiosity of Luke's Gospel that Jesus eats just as frequently with Pharisees as with sinners. In today's Gospel, the question of healing on the Sabbath comes to the fore. Jesus' illustration powerful...if its okay to rescue an animal...

Saturday 4 November

St Charles Borromeo, bishop

Romans 11:1-2, 11-12, 25-29

Paul rounds off his deep discussion of Jews in God's plan of salvation with another heartfelt reflection. The last line of this reading is extremely significant and is the foundation stone of Jewish-Christian dialogue today: *but as the chosen people, they are still loved by God, loved for the sake of their ancestors. God never takes back his gifts or revokes his choice.*

Luke 14:1, 7-11

In the culture of the period, dining with friends was highly regulated and stratified. Jesus' advice is to subvert and reject these social conventions, not only as social conventions but as philosophy. Humbling yourself was not the expected behaviour of those on the way up.