

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 10/29/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, October 29th

Matthew 22:34-46

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

And then Jesus drops the mic

Having artfully dodged a trap set by the Pharisees and the Herodians, it is the Sadducees turn to have their go at Jesus by seeking to get Him to undermine the doctrine of bodily resurrection (which the Pharisees held but the Sadducees did not). Jesus ends up demolishing the Sadducees entire position (22:23-33). While these verses are not included in the lectionary, they set up another interaction between the Pharisees and Jesus in this week's lectionary text. There are two 'drop the mic' moments in this interaction where Jesus exposes the legalism and hypocrisy of the Pharisees. Jesus distills the whole law into two commands: love God and love people. In doing so, Jesus provides us with the acid test to apply against almost any decision we make in our lives and the life of the church. This text also illustrates the downside of a focus on legalistic orthodoxy. Jesus challenges us to both think with our minds and act with our hearts.

Matthew 22:34-46 Commentary

³⁴ But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. ³⁵ And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?"

While the text this week appears to be another attack on Jesus, in Mark's Gospel (12:28-34) this is more of a friendlier interaction. Jesus has just proved the Sadducees to be wrong in a key difference in doctrine compared to the Pharisees and thus indirectly supported the Pharisees. The Pharisees constantly debated which commandments were more important than others. They had reduced the law down to 365 negative and 248 positive commandments. They engaged in endless debate trying to prioritize these legalistic technicalities.¹

A lawyer, or scribe of the Pharisees and thus an expert in the law, addressed Jesus as "Teacher." This appears more flattery than a sign of respect. The text states the question was to "test" Jesus. This word appears three other times in Matthew's Gospel. Two other times it is used when the Jewish leaders are intentionally trying to put Jesus to the test (16:1 and 19:3) and one time when Jesus calls them hypocrites for putting Him to the test (22:18). The text is thus clear, the context of this meeting is an unfriendly encounter and another trap.

¹ S. K. Weber, *Matthew, vol. 1* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 358.

³⁷ And 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 great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

Rather than become embroiled in the Pharisaic technicalities, Jesus – the living exegesis of Scripture – draws His answer from the most memorized and recited passage in all Jewish Scripture – the *Shema* (Hear – after the opening word). The *Shema* forms an important part of Jewish evening and morning prayer and is used as a Jewish confession of faith:

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. [Deuteronomy 6:4-5]

We are to love God with everything we have in every way possible. Jesus quotes from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures) almost verbatim except He replaces "*might*" (power) with "*mind*." We are also to think biblically and critically. Jesus goes beyond the scope of the original question and offers a second command which resembles the first, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*." This time Jesus is referring to Leviticus 19:18 (see also Matthew 19:19). These two commandments are inseparable since it is not possible to love God without loving people and *vice versa*.

Jesus defends His response by arguing that all the Law and the Prophets (every Old Testament commandment and teaching) ultimately fulfilled these two commands. Instead of becoming involved in the minutia of the legalistic argument that consumed the Pharisees, Jesus simplifies the whole teaching of the Old Testament into two commands. A modern, urban paraphrase version of this Scripture would no doubt include, "*And then Jesus dropped the mic*."

⁴¹ Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, ⁴² saying, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." ⁴³ He said to them, "How is it then that David, in 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"?"

After the drop the mic moment, Jesus goes for the knockout blow and defends His own identity. Jesus asks the Pharisees a question that reveals the depths of their denial and hypocrisy. Messiah is the Hebrew word for "anointed one," Christ (*Christus*) is the Greek form. It was common knowledge that the Messiah would be a descendant of King David and the Pharisees answer accordingly. Some of the Old Testament passages that support this response are 2 Samuel 7:12-14; Psalm 2; 89; 132; Isaiah 9:7; 11:1, 10; Jeremiah 23:5.

Jesus then asks the Pharisees to interpret Psalm 110:1 (v.44). The English rendering does not reveal the nuance of the text and neither does the Greek. The original verse in Psalm 110 reads: "The LORD (YAHWEH) says to my Lord (Adonai – Master, Lord)..." David is "*in the Spirit*" (the writing of Psalm 110, like all Scripture, was inspired by the Holy Spirit) and states that "*God says to my Lord...*" while referring to God speaking to the Messiah, his (David's) son/descendant. In other words, the Messiah is thus both David's Lord and David's son.

⁴⁵ If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?" ⁴⁶ And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Jesus asks the Pharisees how can the Messiah be both David's Lord and David's son? The implication here is that the Messiah is not just a special person, but He is God Himself. The Pharisees do not dare to respond or ask any more questions. Jesus drops the mic again.

Reflection and Application

In this interaction, Jesus exposes both the legalism and the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. By focusing on the minutia, the Pharisees had missed the big picture. For them, the devil (sorry!) was in the details, yet they had somehow missed the big picture to which Jesus distilled the entire law into: Love God. Love people. It must have been evident to them, no matter who Jesus was in their eyes, He had a unique command of the law. From our position on the other side of the cross from these scribes and Pharisees, we recognize that Jesus was sent as the living interpretation of the law. Rather than engage Jesus further, the Pharisees never asked Him another question. Thus, their hypocrisy is fully on display: “This Messiah chap in front of us does not fit our orthodox view. We need to get rid of Him, sharpish, before He embarrasses us further and threatens our privileged position in the status quo.”

This Scripture challenges us to be aware of any legalism or hypocrisy in our lives and in our churches. Many of us may scratch our heads at the Pharisees and wonder how they could miss who was standing in front of them. Yet many of us probably know of once vibrant churches that became embroiled in internal battles over relatively minor technicalities and ultimately ended up causing splits and schisms. The needy in the community often wait for the church to settle theological disputes or disputes over internal minutia before the Gospel is lived out. Like the Pharisees demonstrated, sometimes the church can develop a life and an agenda of its own that majors in the minors and only minors in the majors. The result is often one interpretation of orthodoxy being proclaimed at the expense of loving one’s neighbor.

When asked whose son is the Christ, the response by the Pharisees was not wrong. It was an oversimplistic response. It was an orthodox response. The problem with orthodoxy is you do not have to think. In George Orwell’s *1984*, he writes, “Orthodoxy is unconsciousness.” Perhaps this is the reason why Jesus used “mind” instead of “might” in the Great Commandment. If the Pharisees had worshipped God with their minds, they may have been able to see who was standing in front of them.

The gift of Jesus’ exegesis offered in this text is its simplicity. Whenever we become embroiled in the complex or mired in attempting to maintain the status quo in a radically changing society, we have two definitive lenses through which we can look through. First, how is the issue helping us grow in how we love God? Second, how is the issue helping us to grow in how we love our neighbors? These questions may perhaps help us balance concerns over orthodoxy with demonstrations of orthopraxy.



For feedback or to be added or removed from the mailing list, please e-mail david.r.lyons@gmail.com