Love the Lord Your God with All Your Mind

An Exegetical on Matthew 22:34 – 22:40

by

Charles L. Knight

submitted to

Dr. Matthew Jones

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

BIB 307 Synoptic Gospels

April 9, 2018
Survey

Often titled “The Greatest Commandment,” Matthew’s pericope begins with the Pharisees conspiring to test Jesus by asking him “which commandment in the law is the greatest?” (Matt 22:35 HCSB). The Gospel of Matthew goes on to record Jesus responding to this question by quoting a part of the Shema to love God (Deut 6:5), and adding a Levitical command to love your neighbor (Lev 19:18). Jesus goes on to finish his response by citing these two commandments as the hermeneutical principle through which the rest of the law is to be viewed. This goes beyond the original question which the expert of the law was asking. This paper will argue that Jesus’ response in this pericope is designed to redefine the Pharisee's interpretive framework for the scriptures.

Context

The authorship of the Gospel of Matthew is an interesting question, not because of who may or may not have actually written it, but rather because the three synoptic Gospels are so closely related. It has traditionally been argued that Matthew was the first Gospel to be written, this is evidenced by its placement first in the cannon. However, interesting evidence, such as the amount of shared material, and more primitive forms of some traditions, has suggested that Mark was written first. The evidence for Markan Priority is substantial enough that the majority of

---

1 Michael J Wilkins, Matthew: From Biblical Text...To Contemporary Life, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 725.
2 Gary M. Burge, Lynn H. Cohick, and Gene L. Green, The New Testament in Antiquity: A Survey of the New Testament within Its Cultural Contexts (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 166. They note that while the Gospel of Matthew is formally anonymous, there are very early church traditions which attribute the Gospel of Matthew to the Apostle Matthew. This paper will assume the position that the Apostle Matthew wrote the Gospel and that the Jesus presented therein represents the “authentic voice” of the historical Jesus.
4 Strauss, Four Portraits, 50.
scholars on the New Testament have accepted this view. However, this still leaves the question of the relationship between Mark and Matthew. While it has been proposed that there is a source which has been lost, a hypothetical ‘Q’, the evidence for this is lacking in comparison to the evidence for the view that Matthew used Mark, and that Luke used both Matthew and Mark, commonly referred to as the Farrer Hypothesis. Therefore, this paper will assume that Matthew used Mark as a source and therefore all changes from the parallel passage in Mark are intentional changes by Matthew.

Contextually this pericope is in an interesting place. It is the third in a sequence of four back to back encounters which Jesus has with the religious authorities (Matt 22:15-33). These encounters are characterized by carefully plotted and posed questions which are designed to trap Jesus into saying something in error (22:15). This is characteristic of the religious authorities as they are portrayed in the Gospel of Matthew. Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, the religious authorities of all varieties, Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, etc, are treated as a single character whose only trait is evil or opposition, and their only function is to oppose Jesus’ activities in his ministry. Therefore, it is no surprise that in this string of encounters, Matthew consistently portrays the questioners and religious authorities which stand behind them as antagonists with poor motivations. However, Jesus, in a brilliant show of intellectual prowess, reverses the situation on the religious authorities, as he challenges their interpretive framework.

We see in the first of these encounters that the “Pharisees went and plotted how to trap him [Jesus] by what he said,” seeking for Jesus to slip up by violating either Jewish religious law

5 Strauss, Four Portraits, 51.
6 Strauss, Four Portraits, 51–53.
8 Kingsbury, "Developing Conflict Between Jesus and the Jewish Leaders in Matthew's Gospel," 182.
or Roman law as they regarded taxes (Matt 22:15-22). However, Jesus escapes this trap only to be confronted by the Sadducees regarding a highly contrived situation which they do not believe is even possible. This type of contrived and hypothetical question can only be used in order that Jesus would say something to which they could object. However, Jesus insists that they are in error because they do not know the scriptures. It is at this point which Jesus attempts to provide for the Sadducees a new interpretive framework from which to interpret the scriptures. His entire response is designed to do more than simply answer their question. From their misunderstanding of the nature of marriage to their disbelief in the resurrection, Jesus carefully crafts his response so that if the questioners take his response seriously then they can no longer interpret the scriptures the same way. This is where the pericope of the greatest commandment picks up, as the Pharisees see Jesus overcome Sadducees. It would seem then that just as with the Sadducees, Jesus does more than simply respond to the Pharisee’s question, rather, he gives them a new way in which to view the scriptures; this is made explicit by his saying “All the law and the Prophets depend on these two.”

This question of which of the laws is the greatest is not an unexpected question given the historical context. The Pharisees in the first century viewed all of the laws as having equal significance, this is one of the reasons for which it was of the utmost importance for them to follow all of the laws. However, the question of which commandment is the greatest was still debated by those who studied the law. It is understandable then why the Pharisees would ask this question of Jesus, the question in and of itself is highly tricky one to navigate. How can

---

9 Matthew notes that the Sadducees do not believe in a resurrection, and yet they question Jesus regarding the nature of marriage in the resurrection. This question is completely hypothetical and may be designed to see if Jesus will affirm their disbelief in the resurrection.
Jesus possibly give a commandment which is the greatest, and not demean the other parts of the law? Thus, it seems this is still part of the religious authorities attempt to trap Jesus. However, Jesus response navigates all of the challenges posed by the question. Instead of simply elevating one of the commandments, Jesus quotes the law in such a way as to provide a new interpretive framework for the whole scriptures. In this way, Jesus answers which commandment is the greatest without lessening the scriptures. Jesus’ response to the Pharisees is carefully crafted to avoid the trap which they have set for him as he challenges them to reconsider their interpretation of the Old Testament.

Genre

This Gospel narrative which describes a third encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees falls into the category of conflict encounter (Matt 22:24-40). This genre is characterized by a challenge, question, or accusation which the protagonist of the narrative must respond to, or defend himself against. A question is posed, with poor motivations and provides Jesus’s response (22:35, 37-40). Pericopae of this particular genre are used frequently in the Matthew in order to declare some new or different truth to the challenger. For example, the conflict encounter between Jesus and Pilate contains a refusal to respond, intentionally drawing Pilot’s attention to the identity of Jesus, something which he had not considered before (27:11-13). Further, the temptation narrative contains a series of conflict encounters with Satan (4:1-11). Finally, Matthew intentionally changes the parallel passage in Mark in from an expert in the law who genuinely seeks wisdom from Jesus to a conflict encounter in which the question is posed out of poor motivations (Matt 22:34-40 // Mark 12:28-34). Therefore, given the consistent usage

---

of this genre to challenge the perspective of the challenger throughout Matthew, it seems appropriate that this genre would be used when Jesus is attempting to change the interpretive paradigm of the Pharisees.

While this pericope sits at the climax of the narrative structure of this series of conflict encounters, this encounter between Jesus and the lawyer demonstrate a challenge to Pharisaical paradigms. Contrasting the previous pericope, Matthew introduces the cause of the next question. After silencing the Sadducees, it was the Pharisees, a particular lawyer, turn (Matt 22:34-35). The action rises as the lawyer asks Jesus what is the greatest commandment (22:36). As Jesus responds with the command to love God with everything (22:37), the pericope is brought to a climax with Jesus’s claim that this is the greatest command (22:38). The falling action is the challenge to love one’s neighbor as oneself (22:39) and concluding with the command that the law and prophets are reflected in these two commands (22:40). Jesus responds in such a way which shifts the interpretive paradigm of all of the scriptures. Jesus becomes the challenger and proceeds to reverse the intellectual bombardment on the religious authorities.

**Detailed Analysis**

Matthew intentionally changes a number of aspects from Mark in order to draw out and highlight the shift in the interpretive framework which Jesus in attempting to bring about (Matt 22:34 // Mark 12:28-34).\(^{15}\) For example, the question posed by the lawyer in Mark does not specifically mention the Law or the Torah, but Matthew adds this qualification to the question.\(^{16}\) Matthew adds, “All the Law and Prophets depend on these two commandments” which is not found in the parallel passage in Mark (Matt 22:40 // Mark 12:30-32).\(^{17}\) Matthew's use of "the Law and the

---


\(^{16}\) Park, "A Soteriological Reading," 64.

\(^{17}\) Park, "A Soteriological Reading," 68.
Prophets” also helps to link this passage to others throughout his gospel which deals with the interpretation of the scriptures (Matt 5:17-20; 7:12). It seems that Matthew makes explicit the purpose of Jesus’ response as an interpretive paradigm while it is only implicit in Mark.

Jesus’ response of reciting the Shema is also specifically chosen because of its special relationship to the Law. Park notes that “to love God in the Shema primarily denotes knowing and observing the words of God. Then it is not far-fetched to assume that the citation of Deut 6:5 would bring echoes of this idea.” Jesus intentionally chose this section of the Law because it brought to the mind of the Pharisees the way in which observing the law meant loving God. However, Jesus uses this to flip this idea around and make this the interpretive paradigm, loving God interprets the law.

Jesus also significantly changes the Shema from Deuteronomy, substituting “mind” for “strength” as the final component (Matt 22:37 // Deut 6:5). This is a change from Mark’s parallel passage, where he includes both mind and strength. Interestingly, the inclusion of “mind” in the Shema, though it is not found in the Hebrew texts, is not unique to Matthew or Jesus. The LXX version of the Shema during the first century was not yet formalized; there were two different versions of the Greek Shema. One of the versions of the Greek Shema kept with the Hebrew tradition and used the word heart for the first component, but the other version translates the Hebrew word for “heart” as “mind.” This likely reflects the Jewish understanding of the heart, corresponding to the Greek understanding of the mind. The center of volition, emotion, and

18 Park, “A Soteriological Reading,” 64.
19 Park, "A Soteriological Reading," 64.
22 Foster, "Why Did Matthew Get the Shema Wrong?" 319-20.
23 Foster, "Why Did Matthew Get the Shema Wrong?" 319-20.
24 Foster, "Why Did Matthew Get the Shema Wrong?" 319-20.
personhood for the Greek was the mind, while for the Jew it was the heart. This can be further seen throughout Matthew where characters are seen "reasoning in their hearts," something which would have been attributed to the mind for the Greeks. Jesus draws this attention to the mind because he is involved in a series of intellectual bouts with those who oppose him. Jesus is shifting the interpretive paradigm of the Pharisees which will require that they use their mind in order to look at the scriptures through a new lens. Lastly, Matthew’s introduction of the second commandment, Leviticus 19:18, differs significantly from Mark (Lev 19:18 // Matt 22:39 // Mark 12:31). Matthew adds a word to this introduction which indicates that they are equal in importance. In fact, this is the same word which is used by Plato in order to denote ontological equality. Jesus does not think that one’s interpretive paradigm can be complete without an understanding of love manifesting itself not only for God but also for others.

**Synthesis**

Jesus is in the midst of a series of intellectual bouts with the religious authorities who oppose him. They are bombarding him with questions which are designed only to trap him into making a mistake. However, the Matthean Jesus uses his response to not only answer the question in such a way as to avoid being trapped but also to introduce a new interpretive paradigm to his challengers. This type of reversal can be seen many times as the Matthean Jesus does this often when he finds himself in conflict encounters. Matthew’s Jesus also very carefully chooses his response in such a way as to bring about the idea of interpretive paradigm through his use of the Shema. Finally, Matthew’s Jesus makes explicit this purpose as he contends that “all of the Law

---

25 Foster, "Why Did Matthew Get the Shema Wrong?" 319-20.
26 Matthew 9:1-8; 18:35 in each of these passages we see the heart is used to do some action which would be attributed to the mind by people who are from a Greek philosophical tradition.
and the Prophets depend” upon the commandments he has cited. The pericope is also strategically placed by Matthew such that we find Jesus performing similar reversals several times in a row on a smaller scale. Therefore, when Jesus introduces this interpretive paradigm for the whole scriptures, we have seen the situation building to this.

**Theological Connection**

In the Church today there are too many Christians who fall on extreme ends of the interpretive spectrum which ignore this interpretive paradigm that Jesus teaches for the scriptures. There are many who rely solely on their feelings and emotions, focusing on the love aspect of the Shema. However, this ignores a major part of what Jesus calls for. Jesus calls us to love God will all of our heart, soul, and mind, with our whole selves.  

Those who latch on to the emotional feelings they associate with love and God are disobeying this commandment from Jesus. They are neglecting to love God with their entire mind, and all of their soul. This means that they are not able to correctly interpret the scriptures. Jesus very clearly teaches that the interpretive paradigm for scripture is loving God with all of our selves. But, it also is loving one’s neighbor as one’s self. There are also those who ignore this portion of the interpretive paradigm. There are many in the church today who express hate and disdain for groups of people, specifically the LGBT community and those they disagree with politically. Those who fall on this extreme are also missing the point. Love for God cannot be separated from its manifestation in love for others.

Those who fall in this extreme are also misinterpreting the scriptures. The interpretive paradigm is not complete without loving one’s neighbor. These two groups are often doing major damage to the church and the Gospel as they are branded as hateful and ignorant. The church would

---

benefit immensely from a proper understanding of how Jesus wishes for us to view the scriptures.
Bibliography


