Jesus' final exam: Matthew 22:34-46

Jesus' simple summary of the law is actually complex.

by Martha Greene in the October 9, 2002 issue

The problem with any speech that one hears repeatedly is that a hardening of the ears sets in. That may be the case with the first portion of our lectionary reading containing the summary of the law: we have undoubtedly "overheard" it.

There is something appealing about what Jesus does with the theology professors and senior pastors. He is being tested. The atmosphere is not one of lively and amiable scholarly debate; it is hostile, and the intent is to discredit Jesus. Much is at stake—Jesus' authority, his role and his identity. Tom Long has called this Jesus' final exam, because it will be this test that ultimately dooms Jesus in the minds of the scholarly authorities. But what is appealing is that Jesus takes something so complicated and posits a simple formula.

Jewish scholars had surveyed the Torah, counted carefully and discovered 613 commandments. Applying all 613 at once was virtually impossible, even if they could be remembered. If one were to hang all of these laws on one nail, what nail would it be? Jesus uses two nails: love of God and love of neighbor. The formula is memorable and its simplicity appealing. It could almost be a motto on the company stationery. Yet I wonder if the result for those repeatedly exposed to these basic tenets of Christianity has been not simplicity, but dilution, or even a "dumbing down."

A few weeks ago I had a conversation I have had many times. I was due to call on a family in the congregation. The wife had been coming to church for years, but I had never seen her husband. On the phone, I inquired about the husband's wishes regarding church membership. "I don't know what to say," she said. "He believes in God and he is a good man, kind to everybody. But he just doesn't feel it is necessary to go to church." I have heard this litany so often, I wonder about its source. Where does one get the idea that worship is unnecessary and that faith is an easy matter of being kind and believing in God? I wonder if the summary of the law, which is read so often in churches, contributes to the problem. "Loving is what it is all about, isn't it?" said another lapsed church attender sitting next to me on an airplane.

It is true that love is the sine qua non of Christian living, and, as Karl Barth says, "whenever the Christian life in commission or omission is good before God, the good thing about it is love." And we are all familiar with religious obedience that is loveless. In the newspaper this week, we read that a Muslim woman in Nigeria has been accused of extramarital sex and sentenced by a religious tribunal to be stoned to death after her new baby is weaned. We shudder at this manifestation of loveless law.

But I also fear that the progressive Christian church is suffering from another kind of problem, a kind of lawless love. Our Jewish sisters and brothers, frequently with some justification, have accused Christianity of being antinomian—that is, of believing that obedience to the law is unnecessary and perhaps even damaging to one's hope for salvation. John Wesley's intuition was perhaps right when he said that the entire gospel is a hair's breadth away from antinomianism. If any charge were to be made against the mainline church, it might be our laxity about the laws: sabbath practice, tithing, prayer, worship, scripture study and fighting injustice.

The summary of the law, as simple as it may seem, is actually complex. Jesus ingeniously combined love of God (Deut. 6:5) and neighbor (Lev. 19:18). Jewish scholars had devised other summaries of Torah, but Jesus'

summary is unique, and his assertion that the two laws are inseparable is also distinctive.

We might ponder whether one law has primacy. We know that loving God is not the same as loving our neighbor. Frankly, loving a neighbor may at times be easier than loving God, just by virtue of the concrete visibility of the neighbor. And neighbors might make fewer demands on us. But the converse is also true. Humanistically oriented Christians assert that love of neighbor *is* worship, thereby concluding that worship is superfluous. I contend, however, that worship is still our primary expression of our love for God. Calvin said in his *Institutes*, "Surely the first foundation of righteousness is the worship of God. When this is overthrown, all the remaining parts of righteousness, like pieces of a shattered and fallen building, are mangled and scattered."

On the other hand, worship-without–neighbor-love deletes the logical conclusion of loving God. The foundation of neighbor love is to recognize that, as God's own, we are called to love what God passionately loves. The inseparable unity into which Jesus brings love of God and neighbor has its meaning not in the similarity of God and neighbor, but in the nature of love itself. To love God and neighbor is to enlarge the boundaries of the self so that universalizing love is possible.

Universalizing love is authenticated and road-tested in particular relationships. It is one thing to love humankind; it is another thing to love a bed partner. Erik Erickson, when writing his book on Gandhi and nonviolence, had to stop his work for a while when he discovered the unfairness and muted violence in Gandhi's treatment of his wife, Kasturba. Gandhi insisted that his wife remove the bodily wastes of the untouchables from the house—something he was apparently unwilling to do himself.

We cannot avoid the dialectical relation of love and law: in fulfilling one we will possibly sacrifice the other. We can only apply the summary with the awareness that as Christians we live with the tension, that each one of us will have proclivities toward one pole or the other.

Herein, thank God, enters grace.