

## A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 22:34-46

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When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees,  
they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer,  
asked him a question to test him,  
"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"  
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.'  
This is the greatest and first commandment.

And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'  
On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together,  
Jesus asked them this question:  
"What do you think of the Messiah?  
Whose son is he?"  
They said to him, "The son of David."

He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,  
'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand,  
until I put your enemies under your feet"'?  
If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?"  
No one was able to give him an answer,  
nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

This story has two parts: (1) the discussion with the Pharisees in relation to the law, and (2) the discussion with the Pharisees in relation to the Messiah. These are easy to learn. The first part consists of two commandments, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is Jesus quoting the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:5) and naming it as the greatest commandment.

Jesus isn't through quoting scripture. He follows next with a quote from Leviticus: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). The verbal thread "commandment" links the first episode with this second episode. Here Jesus names a second commandment that he describes as comparable to the first. The conclusion of the episode is: "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." This first part of the story is a very clear pronouncement type.

The second part of the story begins with Jesus questioning the Pharisees. He asks them "What do you think about the Messiah, the son of David?" He then pursues the question: "How can he be the son?" Just think through the logic of what Jesus is saying and this third episode will be easier to remember. We will have to consider Jesus as an exegete engaged in a distinctive style of exegesis unfamiliar to our normal approach.

Jesus is pointing out that the scriptural command (from Psalm 110:1) "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet" is introduced by the phrase, "The Lord said to my Lord." Now, "the Lord" is God. Next, Jesus gives "my Lord" is a Messianic interpretation: Jesus assumes that David was talking about the Messiah when David says, "my Lord." Thus, "God said to the Messiah" would be a way of translating what Jesus is reading into the Psalm. That was a normal way of reading the Psalms in relation to the traditions of the past in Jesus' time.

What Jesus has identified is a contradiction. On the one hand, David talks about his son as being an anointed one; that is, one who would re-establish the kingdom of David. On the other hand, David is addressing "my Lord"; that is, calling the Messiah his Lord. Therefore the Lord couldn't be his son. No father would ever call his son "my Lord." That was simply out of the question. The Pharisees saw the problem but didn't know how to resolve it.

Another dimension of what is going on in this saying is that both Matthew and Jesus (assuming this is a statement of Jesus) are distinguishing between the Messiah and the son of David. In other words, the Messiah did not have to be a son of David. He did not have to be someone on the way to becoming a general and king, whose role was to lead the armies of Israel in warfare and reestablish the kingdom of David. This is Matthew distinguishing Jesus as Messiah from the son of David tradition as the normative understanding of the Messiah.

The story of Jesus questioning the Pharisees is addressed to Matthew's audience. Matthew's listeners would have assumed that a criterion for identification of the Messiah was that he was the Son of David. Jesus' interpretation of Psalm 110 is an exegetical proposal that qualifies this criterion. Thus, Matthew does not claim that Jesus was the Son of David. This appears to be in conflict with the genealogy in Matthew 1 in which David is clearly identified as part of Jesus' ancestry. But here, in the later part of his Gospel, Matthew tells a story in which the clear argument is that the Messiah, that is Jesus, does not have to be the Son of David, with all that being a son of David implied; namely, a being a warrior king.

Another thing to notice in regard to the first part of this story is that the question posed by the Pharisees is a tough one. There were many commandments in Hebrew scripture, 612 that can be specifically identified. So, which of the 600 or so commandments is the greatest and most important? Jesus answers without any hesitation, quoting the Shema and subsequently pursuing the topic with a quote from Leviticus. Jesus identifies these commandments very quickly, demonstrating his degree of mastery of the law.

The way to tell the first part of the story is to convey complete confidence, simply naming the commandments straight. Then for the second part of the story, again with confidence and calm objectivity, convey Jesus posing his rebuttal question to the Pharisees which they cannot answer. The result was, after all these tests Jesus had been

through in the temple, people didn't ask him any more questions because he had proven to be very sharp.

This story has often been read as addressed to an audience of Jews and gentiles who are alienated from the legal traditions of Judaism. The function and meaning of this story has been read as confirming the audience in their opposition to and alienation from Jewish tradition. From this perspective, the role of the story is understood as confirming the listeners in their identity as Christians, not Jews.

Listening to the dynamics of audience address in Matthew, however, changes the perception of the story. The audience is addressed as Pharisees who are engaged in dialogue with Jesus. This is not just friendly dialogue, as is indicated by the introduction of their intent: testing. But testing someone in the tradition of Israel is not always a bad thing. As in scholarly dialogue today, testing is a central part of scholarly inquiry. The way to identify the truth is to test alternative explanations and find out which is best. Since the audience is addressed as Pharisees, it is equally possible to tell and hear this story as an engagement in mutual, if conflictual, dialogue, in order to find the truth.

In each of the two parts to this story, the truth becomes clear in the testing of Jesus. His argument about the greatest commandment is a profound and important position in the assessment of the laws of Israel. It is a good rabbinic ruling that combines two teachings of the Torah in a new and distinctive way. If anything, the emphasis falls on the addition of the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” from Leviticus because the citation of the Shema as the greatest of the commandments would not have been unusual. The Shema was the first commandment that every pious Jew was, and is, required to say every day. But no one before, that I know of, had linked in this way the Shema with the commandment to love one’s neighbor.

The impact of Matthew’s version of the story is that the Pharisees accept Jesus’ teaching as valid. Therefore, this is the impact of the story for Matthew’s audience. The audience is invited to hear the interchange as Pharisees who are convinced by Jesus’ teaching and have no further question or disagreement. The overall impact of the story is to reinforce Jesus’ authority as a Jewish teacher and his identity as a Messiah who radically reinterpreted the messianic traditions of Israel.