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The First and Second Tables of the Law in the New Testament*

Jeffrey Peterson

What is the relationship between knowing God and doing justice? The topic might seem more readily answered by a study of Old Testament texts than by the New Testament, with a text like Micah 6:8 most economically stating a recurrent theme. But to Micah 6:8 we find scarcely an allusion in the New Testament; the only text listed in the Nestle-Aland index of OT allusions is Matthew 23:23, where Jesus summarizes the weightier matters of the Torah as consisting of “justice and mercy and faith” (*tēn krisin kai to eleos kai tēn pistin*), this summary echoing the “doing justice and loving mercy” of the LXX of Micah 6:8 (*tou poiein krima kai agapan eleon*). Matthew 23:23 does develop a theme that is important in the Gospel according to Matthew, stating in a nuanced manner a point made more starkly earlier in the Gospel, in Jesus’ two quotations of Hosea 6:6: “I desire mercy and not sacrifice” (Matt 9:13; 12:7).

This same ranking of acts of kindness over performance above ritual is found also in Matthew 5:23–24, in the instruction to “leave your gift at the altar” if you recall that your brother “holds something against you.” E. P. Sanders has observed that the gift referred to here is most likely the guilt of-

* This essay originated as an invited paper presented in the Christian Scholars Conference section on “Knowing God and Doing Justice” in Nashville, Tennessee, 27 June 2008.

fering, prescribed in Leviticus 6:1–7 (5:20–26 in MT and LXX) to restore fellowship between brothers when one defrauds the other in regard to a deposit, or commits robbery or coerces a brother, or finds lost property and keeps it wrongfully, as detailed in Leviticus 6:2–3. If the guilt offering of Leviticus 6 supplies the background of the Matthaean text, then the “something” that a brother has against a disciple in Matthew 5:23 is likely a money damage rather than the more nebulous sort of offense that interpreters often envision.¹ Leviticus 6:4–5 requires an Israelite to restore what he took wrongly to the rightful owner along with a 20% penalty before making a guilt offering as directed in vv. 6–7; Jesus endorses this and requires it of his disciples.

Understood in this way, Matthew 5:23 relates strongly to our theme, as it insists that injustice between brothers is inconsistent with knowing or remaining in relationship with God, here indicated by honoring him properly in sacrifice. Jesus treats this theme from the other side in Matthew 18:15–17 and elaborates a procedure by which his disciples may seek reconciliation with those who have “sinned against” them. Also relevant here is the Lord’s Prayer, which makes God’s forgiveness of our debts to him contingent on our extending forgiveness to those in our debt (Matt 6:12, underscored by the explanation in vv. 14–15). On the surface, there appears to be some tension between this petition in Matthew 6:12 and the warning in Matthew 5:23–24 that Jesus’ disciples should forgive debts so that their sacrificial offerings not be vitiated. The question that resolves this tension is whether the disciple finds himself in the position of creditor or debtor; Jesus’ disciples seek reconciliation with their fellows, whether this requires us to extend restitution we owe to others or to forego restitution that others owe to us.

¹ E. P. Sanders, “Jesus and the First Table of the Jewish Law,” in *Jews and Christians Speak of Jesus*, ed. Arthur E. Zannoni (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 61.

The allusion to Micah 6:8 in Matthew 23:23 has led us to recognize a significant development of our theme in the first Gospel, but this takes us only one book into the New Testament canon. If we look further, the results are not initially encouraging. We find a few references to “knowing God” (Rom 1:21; Gal 4:8–9; 1 Thess 4:5; 2 Thess 1:8; 1 John 4:6–8) as well as references to “justice” as a description of human duties (e.g., Matt 5:20; 6:1; Acts 10:35; Rom 6:19–20), but scarcely any explicit reflection on the relation between the two. The New Testament passage that most clearly brings knowledge of God and human conduct together is 1 John 4:7–8, though the term it uses for our obligations to one another is not justice but love: “Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love.” We return to this context below; I mention the text here only to note that this may seem like a meager result.

We should not despair yet, however, because Dale Allison and W. D. Davies observe that the Micah passage itself falls into the genre of summaries of the Law, a genre of which we have a number of New Testament examples.² If we turn to these summaries, we will find material to serve at least as kindling for theological reflection on the theme of “Knowing God and Doing Justice,” and perhaps also as fuel.

Two-Point Summaries of the Law

The best-known summary of the Law in the New Testament is found in the Synoptic pericope on the Great Commandment(s). The passage reflects the early Jewish tradition of treating the two tables of the Ten Commandments as classifying the Law under the two headings of duties to God and duties to other people; this tradition reflects the broader Greco-Roman classi-

² W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, ICC 3 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997), 294–95.

fication of human duties under the headings of piety (*eusebeia*) and justice (*dikaioσynē*), duties to the divine and duties to other people.³ The most familiar version of the passage is found in Matthew 22:34–40.⁴ Jesus is asked by a Pharisaic scribe which is the greatest (literally, “the great”) commandment in the Law, and he responds by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 as commanding the love of God and Leviticus 19:18 as commanding the love of neighbor. Comparable summaries of the two tables of the Law are found in Philo and other ancient Jewish writers, some employing the same Scripture passages. The most striking parallel to the Synoptic text appears in the *Testament of Issachar*: “you shall love the Lord and your neighbor” (*agapēsate ton kyrion kai ton plēsion*, 5:2), clearly alluding to both Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, just as Jesus does.⁵

Sanders is right to observe that in the Jewish tradition generally as in the Synoptic passage, the word “‘love’ does not describe only, or even primarily, an emotion”; rather, “love [of neighbor] is expressed by just and honest treatment.”⁶ In the first instance, love in the biblical tradition describes a behavior, not a feeling. Unique to Matthew is Jesus’ statement in 22:39 that the second command to love the neighbor is “like” the first command to love God; as the question Jesus is answering is about the relative importance of

³ Ibid., 237–238.

⁴ I take the earliest version to be Mark 12:28–31, however, for reasons stated in my essay, “Order in the Double Tradition and the Existence of Q” in *Questioning Q*, ed. Mark S. Goodacre and Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 28 n. 2.

⁵ Cf. the other parallels cited by Davies and Allison (237): *Testament of Issachar* 7:6 “I loved the Lord and every man with the whole heart”; *Testament of Dan* 5.3, “Love the Lord with all your life and one another with a true heart”; Philo, *On the Virtues* 51 (“humanity” and “piety” as paired virtues), 95 (“piety” and “humanity” as the queens of the virtues); *Special Laws* 2.63 (“high above the others [i.e., truths inculcated in the Torah] [stand] two heads: one of duty to God as shown by piety and holiness, one of duty to men as shown by humanity and justice”).

⁶ Sanders, “Jesus and the First Table,” 58.

the commandments, to say that the second is like the first presumably means that they are comparable in importance. This fits nicely with the teaching in Matthew noted earlier that our just treatment of others is inseparable from our relationship to God.

As part of an argument that “love cannot serve as a focal image for the synthetic task of New Testament ethics,” Richard Hays has offered an interpretation of this Synoptic pericope, especially the Marcan version, that minimizes the importance of this two-point summary for the life of discipleship:

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus’ promulgation of the double love commandment (Mark 12:28–34) stands as an isolated element, not supported by other references to love in the story. In its narrative context, this pericope, part of a cycle of controversy discourses (11:27–12:44), serves [only] to demonstrate that the Jewish religious authorities stood condemned by the norms that they themselves professed. ... [But f]or Mark ... the Torah has been eclipsed by the coming of Jesus; consequently, the call of Christian discipleship cannot be understood simply in terms of continuity with the commandments of the Law, even the greatest ones.⁷

When Hays comes to offer his principal categories for presenting the New Testament’s ethical witness, he employs the images of cross, new creation, and community, intentionally omitting love as an organizing category because “[f]or a number of the major New Testament writers [and notably Luke in the book of Acts], love is not a central thematic emphasis.”⁸ Interestingly,

⁷ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation, A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1996), 200. This interpretation, faintly and uncharacteristically redolent of Marcion, echoes John Howard Yoder’s rejection of the common understanding “that the key concept of Jesus’ ethic is the ‘Golden Rule,’” which Yoder maintains Jesus offers “not as the sum of his own teaching but as the center of the law” (*The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2d ed. [Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1994], 119).

⁸ Hays, *Moral Vision*, 197.

however, in elucidating the cross as a focal image for New Testament ethics, Hays says that “Jesus’ death is consistently interpreted in the New Testament as an act of self-giving love.”⁹

Hays’s interpretation of the Greatest Commandments is called into question by the conclusion unique to Mark; Jesus tells the scribe who accepts Jesus’ summary and recognizes love of God and love of neighbor as “greater than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices” (Mark 12:33) that he is “not far from the kingdom of God” (12:34), which is Mark’s summary expression for the new divine order being revealed through the ministry of Jesus. This gives a much more central place to the two-point summary of the Law in terms of love than Hays suggests. The same is true of Matthew, who reports that Jesus came “not to abolish [the Law and the prophets] but to fulfill” them (Matt 5:17) and taught that “whoever does and teaches [the commandments, even the least] shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:19). The identification of the two commandments “on which all the Law and the prophets depend” (Matt 22:40) is hardly an insignificant matter for Jesus’ disciples in Matthew.

Luke’s version, the briefest in the Synoptics, appears in the Journey to Jerusalem (Luke 10:25–28), in which Luke details the responsibilities of discipleship.¹⁰ In Luke, Jesus offers the two-point summary not in answer to the question which commandment of the law is greatest but in answer to a lawyer’s question, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?”¹¹ In the parallel to this passage in Luke 18:18–24, Jesus refers to eternal life in 18:30 as the reward of those who have forsaken the comforts of home and family for the

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Tony Ash provides a helpful topical survey of this section in *Directions for Disciples: Studies in the Gospel of Luke* (Abilene, TX: Hillcrest Publishing, 2002), 47–105, and his title concisely summarizes its major concern.

¹¹ The same question is put to Jesus by the rich young man in Mark 10:17.

sake of the kingdom of God, and so for Luke also the two-point summary would seem to have value beyond what Hays ascribes to it. And while we can grant the lexical point that the word “love” does not occur in Acts, we should note that Luke depicts the followers of Jesus repeatedly performing concrete acts of mercy on one another’s behalf, beginning with those who in the wake of Pentecost “held all things in common and sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44–45).

One-Point Summaries of the Law

We have seen that Jesus’ two-point summary of the Law establishes a connection for his disciples between relationship with God and the just treatment of the neighbor. But even stronger evidence for this connection is supplied by the New Testament’s one-point summaries of the Law as epitomized in the love of neighbor. Sanders notes that we also find such one-point summaries of the Law in Jewish writers. The negative summary “Do not do to anyone what you would hate that person to do to you” is found with minor variations in Tobit 4:15 (Tobit’s testament to his son Tobias), in Philo’s *Hypothetica* 7.6, and in the Babylonian Talmud (*Shabbat* 31a), where it is attributed to the first-century rabbi Hillel.¹² Sanders makes two important observations about this negative form of the Golden Rule, as it is sometimes called: first, it is phrased in general terms (“anyone”), alluding not only to Leviticus 19:18 (“you shall love your *neighbor* as yourself”) but also to Leviticus 19:34, which enjoins loving “the *stranger* who sojourns among you ... as yourself.” Second, Sanders notes, “[t]he negative version follows naturally from Lev. 19, where ‘love your neighbour’ summarizes prohibitions, such as: do not deal fraudulently with your neighbor, do not rob him,” rather

¹² Sanders, *Jewish Law From Jesus to the Mishnah: Five Studies* (London/Philadelphia: SCM/Trinity, 1990), 70–71; Sanders, “Jesus and the First Table,” 56–58.

than being a weaker version of the Golden Rule than the positive formulation in the Gospels.¹³

This one-point summary understands the whole law to be epitomized in the second table, in our fulfillment of obligations towards other people. This does not imply that those who made such summaries regarded the first table of the law as dispensable. Rather, as Richard Bauckham observes, Leviticus 19 repeatedly offers as a basis for the conduct enjoined there the declaration, “I am the LORD.”¹⁴ It was by loving the neighbor as oneself that Israelites would confess that the LORD is God.

The Synoptics attribute a one-point summary of this sort to Jesus, in Matthew 7:12 and in the briefer version in Luke 6:31: “Just as you wish that people do to you, do likewise to them.” This is stated in general terms (“people,” as in the one-point summaries in Jewish writers, and so applicable to the treatment of all people). Paul and James both include one-point summaries of the law as fulfilled in Leviticus 19:18. Paul twice offers such a summary, in Gal 5:14 and Rom 13:8–10; and James refers to the command to love the neighbor as oneself as “the royal law” (2:8), perhaps in the sense of the Law laid down by the messianic king for his people.¹⁵ These passages likely derive from a catechetical tradition based on Jesus’ teaching about the Great Commandment. Such a traditional origin is explicit in the case of the command to “love one another” in the Johannine tradition; 1 John presents this as “the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another” (3:11). The phrase “from the beginning” should be

¹³ Ibid., 70.

¹⁴ Richard Bauckham, *James: Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Sage* (London: Routledge), 143–45.

¹⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 37a (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 230: “the law articulated or ratified by Jesus ‘the glorious Lord’ whose name ‘is invoked over them’ (2:7).”

taken both in the sense of “stemming from the beginning” of the recipients’ Christian experience, and also in the sense of 1:1, as originating in “that which was from the beginning,” the word of life which appeared in the person of Jesus. An origin of the command to love one another in the teaching of Jesus is strongly suggested by 1 John 3:23 and explicit in the Gospel (John 13:34).

The “new commandment” to “love one another” is not explicitly offered in the Gospel and 1 John as a summary of the Law, but this is implicit in John’s use of the word “commandment” (*entolē*, one of the provisions of the Law, which by synecdoche can stand for the whole, as in Rom 7:7–12). In 1 John 4:20–21, we move from a one-point summary of the Law to a two-point summary: “If any one says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also” (RSV). This passage, the conclusion to the exhortation quoted above (p. 49), makes explicit the logic involved in the one-point summaries generally: fulfillment of the second command demonstrates that one has fulfilled the first.

The one-point summaries that we find in Paul, James, and John are all stated in terms only of the “neighbor” (cf. Lev 19:18). Does this imply a retreat from the more expansive summary employing Leviticus 19:34 to “do to others as we would they do to us” in the teaching of Jesus, or “not to do to others that which we would not want them to do to us,” as we find in Jewish writers? I think not, not even in the case of the Johannine literature, where such a retreat is often seen; its dualism notwithstanding, John’s Gospel regards “the world” as the object of God’s saving concern (John 3:16–17), and the First Epistle similarly regards the atonement as potentially universal in scope (1 John 2:2). The general early Christian attitude is captured in Paul’s

statement in Galatians 6:10 (one chapter after his one-point summary of the Law in terms of Lev 19:18): “as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” Early Christians’ most frequent opportunities to assist others involved other Christians, as we can see from Acts and from Paul’s description of his efforts to assist the poor among the Judean saints (Gal 2:10; 1 Cor 16:1–4; 2 Cor 8–9; Rom 15:25–28).

Love of Neighbor Today

Christians in modern Western countries like the US have greater resources and greater opportunities to do good than the Christians to whom the New Testament was originally addressed. We therefore have an increased responsibility to do so, but also a concomitant responsibility to ensure that our actions genuinely do good rather than merely salving our consciences. Many Christian teachers, especially those who have received our intellectual formation (and no small part of our spiritual formation) in the Western academic milieu, must overcome a degree of misinformation to see the world and our responsibilities clearly.¹⁶

In his widely read book *Simply Christian*, for example, N. T. Wright affirms that “Christians should campaign for” the elimination of “global debt” as an element of “the cry for justice in the world.”¹⁷ This appeal mani-

¹⁶ David Bentley Hart supplies a bracing introduction to such a project of discernment in his *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

¹⁷ N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), 227. Bishop Wright has contributed much to understanding the New Testament, but this book does not encourage confidence in his grasp of recent history. From his survey of the horrors marking the last century, one would conclude that there was greater oppression and loss of life in Armenia under the Turks, in South Africa under apartheid, or indeed among Native Americans on the frontier than in twentieth-century China or Russia, as he refers to neither (6–7). While appropriately critical of materialist capitalism (8), Wright fails to note the body count of materialist statism, in which ten million dead constitute a rounding

festly no recognition that the concrete effect of such an expression of concern in many cases would be to ease the economic pressure constraining the actions of corrupt third-world governments, rather than relieving the suffering of the people ruled by them. Christians seeking to aid those in the worst living conditions in the world can benefit from the sort of work that researchers contributing to the “Copenhagen Consensus” have undertaken to determine what actions would most help those in the poorest countries.¹⁸ If love means action that helps another and not simply the feeling of concern for those with fewer resources, then Christians seeking our neighbor’s good are obligated to familiarize ourselves with the real conditions our neighbors face and with the effects of our efforts to assist them, rather than simply taking actions that assuage our feelings of guilt because of our unmerited privilege and comfort.

For similar reasons, I am reluctant simply to contribute money to people begging on the street in the US, as the evidence suggests that most cash contributions to the homeless are used to sustain alcohol or other chemical abuse, which doesn’t benefit those we seek to help.¹⁹ A better practice is that of a friend who keeps lunch bags of non-perishable food in her car, as well as blankets in the winter, and offers these when asked for money. Even more

error. One sentence late in the book mentions “eastern European Communism” as a (presumably harmful) ideology now abandoned, but the reader is left to infer that its collapse was to the good, and the magnitude of the carnage inflicted on the peoples who suffered is left unacknowledged (226). It is evident (e.g., from p. 5) that Wright has failed to appreciate Hayek; one is left to wonder if he has ever read Solzhenitsyn.

¹⁸ See Bjorn Lomborg, ed., *Solutions for the World's Biggest Problems: Costs and Benefits* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), summarized in Lomborg, ed., *How to Spend \$50 Billion to Make the World a Better Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Rather than debt relief, Lomborg and his colleagues prioritize the prevention of HIV/AIDS, the provision of micronutrients (notably iodine) to address malnutrition and hunger, the removal of barriers to trade, and the control of malaria.

¹⁹ See for example Stephen J. Dubner, ed., “Freakonomics Quorum: The Economics of Street Charity,” *New York Times*, 9 August 2007 (<http://freakonomics.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/08/09/freakonomics-quorum-the-economics-of-street-charity/>, accessed 19 August 2009).

helpful to those who have lost their way would be relationships with Christian communities organized to introduce (or re-introduce) the recipients of aid to structures of mutual responsibility and concern and to relationships that foster a recognition of the reality of others and of one's impact on them—a significant element of what Scripture means by “love.”²⁰ Such ministries will be costly, in effort and time as well as money, but it is through such acts of genuine help for those in need that we can most truly express our love for God.

²⁰ Such relationships as a context for restoring persons to wholeness are explored in Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Washington: Regnery, 1992); the impersonal structures of the nineteenth and twentieth century welfare state compare unfavorably in Olasky's judgment. For Christian love as “recognition of the reality of others,” see Diogenes Allen, *The Path of Perfect Love* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1992), esp. 11–38.

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