

October 24th, 1985. Busch Stadium in St. Louis. World Series, Game Five. The Kansas City Royals are behind the St. Louis Cardinals three games to one. In the bottom of the seventh, Royals pitcher Danny Jackson did something that no other pitcher has ever done in a World Series.

He struck out the side in *nine* pitches. Three batters, three strikeouts. Pitchers call that an immaculate inning.

Last week, we heard a group of Pharisees and Herodians try to trap Jesus. They left stunned in amazement. Then, in a passage that is not part of the lectionary, a group of Sadducees tried to challenge Jesus. They also left, stupefied by his teaching. And today, the Pharisees return with a lawyer, an expert on Torah, that is, not an attorney. The Pharisees have brought their best expert to test the abilities of this upstart rabbi. He, too, does not prevail.

Three attempts to defeat Jesus. All three turned away, including this final contest that Jesus handles so spectacularly that no one dared to ask any more questions. The Gospel equivalent of an immaculate inning. That's the flavor of the decisive drama Matthew is describing.

Jesus gave an answer that the Pharisees' Torah expert couldn't question and then delivered a question their expert couldn't answer.

The Torah scholar intended to start a rigorous debate with his question: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" The Pharisees, you see, counted 613 commandments in the Torah. Some rabbis distinguished between serious commandments and light ones, while others insisted that all were equally weighted. There was little agreement about which might be greatest.

It was not unusual for a teacher or scholar to summarize all the Torah in a smaller number of guiding principles. King David suggested eleven, the books of Isaiah submit six and the prophet Amos offered just one. The prophet Micah proposed three that are captured on the wall outside our library.

Jesus shifts the expectations for an argument by choosing to answer with a hybrid response. Not really one commandment, not really two. He begins with a segment of the prayer that starts and ends the day for every pious Jew to this day: the Shema.

The prayer gets its name from the first line: “Sh'ma Yisra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.” In English, “Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.” Jesus chose the third line of the prayer: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your reason.”

So, he has given the scholar a very traditional and orthodox summary from one of only two prayers that the Torah specifically commands. The Shema is still one of the best-known, most fundamental expressions of Jewish belief. And so, the scholar cannot dismiss it. Strike one.

Then Jesus adds to the from the Shema. “And a second (not *the* second) a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’.” And with that, Matthew’s Jesus expresses the underlying structure of love that is the supporting essence of all the teaching and all prophecy. This second commandment from Leviticus is *like* the first commandment from Deuteronomy because the second *fulfills* the first. And the combination of these two carries all the rest of Torah and prophecy.

Standing in the center of Jewish religious life, Jesus asserts that living in loving relationships to God and our neighbor is the way that we obey God’s desires. That is to say, if we ground our awareness on the love of God and of the people we encounter in life, we can navigate all of God’s teachings and the correctives of the prophets.

Now, we do have to pause here for a second to talk about the kind of love Jesus is referring to. English uses one word, “love,” to translate at least four different Greek words that show up in Christian scripture. Matthew could have used “storge,” a Greek word that refers to family or parental affection, or “philia” – that one refers to friendship.

Matthew could have used “eros,” indicating romantic love. But the Greek word Matthew’s Jesus uses is “agape.” This is a reference to God-like love because it comes from God and leads to life. C.S. Lewis described the love of God, agape, as a love that is inhabited more than felt.

Agape is intentionally self-giving and unconditional; a love that includes our enemies as well as our family and friends, our clan and, more to the point, the people that we encounter from day to day. We can’t know all these people in advance. The course of our life makes them neighbors to us.

“Love God. Love your neighbor.” There is no simpler call to obedience. We act in response to God's love because God loves us first. The Torah scholar has no response.

Clearly, he can't hit a change-up coming directly down the middle of the plate. Strike two.

Now, ahead in the count, Jesus questions the Pharisees. “How does it seem to you regarding the Anointed? Whose son is he?” This is no idle question. A question of parentage in the ancient world is an effort to locate a person's source of power and authority. A person's origins determine who they are, where they fit into the social structure and, most importantly, how much honor must be granted to them.

Matthew has been clear from the first line of the Gospel that Jesus is an heir of David, a son of the ancient king. That alone is insufficient. The heir of David may well be the conquering hero that most of Israel has been anticipating. *That* Messiah might have been satisfied to silence his critics with anger and violence, resulting in more bitterness and revenge.

Instead, Jesus, the son of David, behaves like *more* than an heir of an earthly king. Jesus, the son of David standing before his critics is also the son of God. Blind people and a Canaanite woman have seen what the Torah expert and these Pharisees cannot or will not see.

And because the Messiah is greater than David, he is not bound to David's house. Christ is free to welcome Jews of all tribes and Gentiles of all nations. With his pending crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, Jesus – in a way that no one else can – will fulfill the combined commandments he gave in answer to the Pharisees: Love God, love your neighbor.

Jesus silences his opponents with the overwhelming scope of his obedience to that love. They have nothing to say in reply. Strike three. Game over.

Now, among the other obvious differences between what Danny Jackson accomplished in the '85 Series and what Jesus achieved, one distinction really stands out. In this last exchange, Jesus gives the win to everyone. The Pharisees, the Torah scholar, you, me – all people for all time. The only losers are those who choose not to show up.

Jesus invites all people into a new way of life—one in which hatred, divisiveness and self-centeredness will eventually be melted into love,

solidarity and selflessness. The Messiah, David's *master*, not David's heir, *will* put enemies under his feet. Not the human enemies of David's family or tribe, but the enemies that torment all of God's children: contempt, hostility and brutality. Sin that separates us from God. Sin that separates us from neighbor. Sin, that is, that leads to death.

The love that God pours over and into us animates us into action on behalf of that new way of life. For us, as it was in the ancient world, "love God, love your neighbor" implies behavior. Our interior state of awareness is crucial. So is our emotional landscape and our intellect.

These must lead to action.

The more we can center our hearts and souls and reason in the love of God and the love of neighbor, the more we can obey God's word. The more we can discover what to expand or modify. The more we can learn what may need to be dismissed in the service of spreading God's love.

The people we encounter will come to know what is good in us, not by what we *believe*, but by what we *ask*. Not by our closed *certainty*, but by our open *listening*.

Most importantly, they will come to know and share what is good, and beautiful and true in us by what we love.

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