

What Faith Asks of Us *Engaged Minds*

Matthew 22:34-40

October 8, 2023

The question is asked by an attorney—an expert in religious law. It comes as part of a larger, extended back-and-forth between Jesus and a group of leaders during which they also ask him about death and taxes. This is a tough crowd. The final question, like the two that come before it, is offered as a test. Not a test to measure knowledge, but to set up debate.

Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest? Name one.

Regardless of interlocutor intent, I am grateful for the question. I'm especially glad that this lawyer asked it in such a direct way—that's a talent of the profession, I've found. We have a few of them in this congregation. But thanks to this attorney, we don't have to wonder what Jesus thought was most important for people of faith. He tells us what faith asks of us. Love God. Love your neighbor. There is nothing more important than this. Everything is subordinate to love.

You may know that Jesus is not writing a new script here. He is drawing on his own religious tradition, the faith of his childhood. The words come from his Bible, from Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Still, as is often the case in exchanges between Jesus and attorneys, there is a twist in the text. Our Lord makes an interesting and utterly unexpected revision to the passage. The verse Jesus quotes first, Deuteronomy 6:5, reads, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might (or strength)."

Did you catch the change? Jesus commands his followers to love God with all their *minds*. The Greek word here is *dianoia*. It can be translated

intelligence, or understanding, or imagination. Context matters. Here, Jesus is in a conversation with educated, smart, well-versed religious leaders, and he intentionally shifts the perspective. Love God with all your mind. Your brain. Your intellect. Your understanding.

How can we do that? What does "loving God with our minds" look like in practice? These are important questions for us, not just because Jesus makes loving God with our minds a part of the greatest commandment, but also because faith and knowledge, heart and mind, have a complex and complicated relationship. Hear again: Context matters. Ours.

Russell Moore is a Baptist pastor and the editor of *Christianity Today*, and he has just written an important book which he has framed as an altar call to American Christians. Based on his own experience and the witness of many who have grown disillusioned by expressions of Christian witness that put tribalism over basic truth and political power over inner integrity, Moore raises a call for repentance and renewal. Such a movement might begin by loving God with our minds. The uncomfortable reality is that many so-called Christian leaders have expected (or even demanded) lockstep uniformity even as they twist the message of the Gospel to justify immoral means that increase their own power and influence. And the implicit expectation is that worshipers will simply and mindlessly fall in line. That's not a problem here.

But let me be clear. When divergent viewpoints are squashed and preachers make only emotional

appeals to anger and fear, we have left the truth of faith for the worship of idols. Here's how Moore describes it, writing, "The gospel...does not go forward by propaganda or demagoguery or by cynical appeals to popular conspiracy theories or folk religion. The gospel goes forth...by the 'open statement of the truth' (That's 2 Cor. 4:2)." I add my *amen*.

There is now a justifiable skepticism among those outside the church who perceive religion as hostile to intellectual pursuits or healthy debate. I would suggest that this hostility is not simply ineffective evangelism, though it is certainly that. More importantly, such sanctimonious contempt for a thinking faith betrays the message of Jesus. I believe that when Jesus answered this direct and provocative question from a local attorney with an equally direct and provocative response, he really meant what he said, including the charge to love God with our minds.

As the proud son of a Presbyterian pastor, I was literally born into this Reformed theological tradition. And even at a young age, I was grateful to belong to a community that encouraged deep thinking and wrestling as an essential component of faith formation. This was no accident. There is, at the core of our theology, an appreciation for the life of the mind and a sense of its importance to the journey of discipleship. That we must grow in understanding as we grow in faith. That our minds as well as our hearts must be stretched as we continue the journey of discipleship.

I'm always grateful when someone who worships here says something like, "I'm glad that we don't have to leave our brains in the parking lot when we come to worship at Second." Indeed, worshiping God requires our minds as well as our hearts and our souls.

Faith requires intentional effort and openness to growth, even to changing our perspective. In my experience, this happens best in community. The

classes, small groups, Bible studies, retreats, and enrichment programs that are offered here at Second are one testament to our conviction that God calls us to use the brains that God gave us. A century ago, C.S. Lewis insisted: "God is no fonder of intellectual slackers than of any other kind of slackers. If you are thinking of becoming a Christian, I warn you, you are embarking on something that is going to take the whole of you, brains and all!"ⁱ

Whenever we choose to engage our minds, we will find that loving God expands our understanding and deepens our capacity for discernment. Context matters, and this is particularly important right now. We are *not* suffering from a lack of access to information. Quite the contrary. Incalculable inventories of human knowledge literally exist at our fingertips in ways that would have been inconceivable even a few short years ago. And yet, drowning in a sea of information, wisdom still eludes us. The truth is not in us. We accept and perpetuate falsehoods. And perhaps most of all, access to knowledge has not made us more compassionate, more just, more generous, or gracious.

What we lack is not information but discernment. Not knowledge but wisdom. Please note that Jesus did not offer as the greatest commandment the instruction to grasp God with all our minds, to understand God with all our minds, to figure God out or explain God. We are commanded to employ our intellect in the cause of love. When we grow in understanding, we grow in our love for God.

There is a wonderful moment in Paul's letter to the Romans that illustrates this point. The Apostle has been wrestling for several chapters with a thorny and complicated theological issue. His brilliant mind has been twisted into pretzels trying to understand and make logical, rational sense of God's plan for salvation. He's tried several different approaches,

several ways into the problem, and none seem to satisfy him. And so, finally, he throws up his hands. Not in exasperation, but in praise.

Here is what he writes: "O the depth of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways!" Paul makes the shift from debate to doxology—words of prayer and praise.

I experienced something similar in a powerful way back in March. I had the privilege of teaching a class for a group of high school seniors at Brebeuf, the Jesuit Prep School just a couple of miles from here. The course was titled Faith and Politics. I was given forty-five minutes—the last class of the day. I quickly learned there was no need to be concerned about filling those forty-five minutes. I was two slides into my carefully prepared presentation when a student raised her hand. She asked an excellent question, and from that point forward, discussion and debate were the modes of engagement in the classroom. Students pressed each other, and me, with different viewpoints and insights from a variety of angles. We were in deep intellectual waters, and I was enjoying every single moment of it. Engaged minds. Brilliant brains. Tough questions. No easy answers. In fact, I was enjoying it so much that I completely lost track of time. And so, I was surprised when the intercom buzzed, but the students were not. They closed their laptops and set their pens on notebooks. Their heads bowed as a student's voice came through the speaker. *In God's presence, review the events of your day. Recall the moments during the day for which you are grateful. Remind yourself that God is in all of these moments. Now consider the challenges you may have faced today. Remember that God is present when we face our difficulties and gives us courage, peace, and wisdom. Now, reflect on where you may have fallen short today. Recall that God helps us to understand our failings and forgives us. Finally, let us give thanks to God for the gift of this day and look forward to the graces God has for us tomorrow.*

With that, the bell rang, and the students filed out of the classroom. It's the Daily Examen, a practice first instituted by St. Ignatius in the 15th Century, calling for two minutes of quiet reflection at the close of day. I watched in absolute wonder as these students moved from debate to doxology without missing a beat.

The command is clear. Heart, Soul, and Mind. Love God with *all* you've got.

ⁱ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Part III, Chapter 2.