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**Leviticus 19:18, NRSV.**

*<sup>18</sup> You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.*

**Evolving Faith: *Who is my neighbor?***

Here is Deuteronomy 6:5:

*<sup>5</sup> You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*

And here is Leviticus 19:18:

*<sup>18</sup> You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.*

Together, these should look familiar. The following are the words of Jesus from

Matthew 22:37-40. And there are versions of this in Mark and Luke, as well:

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ <sup>38</sup> This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ <sup>40</sup> On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”*

We have talked about the two great commandments before, where Jesus

declares that they subsume all of the laws in the Hebrew Scriptures and all the

teachings of the Prophets. All other laws of God follow from simply loving God

and loving your neighbor. If you truly love God and you truly love your neighbor, you will find yourself doing all that is morally important in the eyes of God. To us, in our global, multi-cultural world, we see all people as our neighbor, and we assume that this is what Jesus meant. But he, as he often did, was quoting Old Testament, traditional Jewish teaching. Leviticus focuses on holiness, purity, and the daily duties of the faithful. The word “Deuteronomy” means “second law”, and the book is in large part a restatement of Israelite law. In Deuteronomy, Moses summarizes for a generation born in the desert what it means to be a follower of God; he wants them to have this foremost in their minds when they enter the Promised Land. What does the ancient law of the God of the Israelites mean when it declares that “*you shall love your neighbor as yourself*”?

The truth is that they were not referring to all people. This law was really meant to maintain judicial impartiality and to guarantee good relationships among Israelites. The word in the Hebrew of Leviticus 19:18 is “*rea*”, which refers to someone who is physically nearby. There are ancient Jewish writings that make it clear that this commandment refers to fellow Jews, not all humans. We do assume that despite Jesus being a Jew, and despite him reiterating an ancient Israelite law that referred only to loving fellow Jews, Jesus was now broadening this to include all people in much the same way that Paul proclaimed in Galatians:

*<sup>28</sup> There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*

But the truth is that only in very modern times, that is, starting with the twentieth century, did most Christians accept this interpretation of Jesus' use of the word "neighbor". For the bulk of Christian history, this line was interpreted as referring to "spiritual" neighbors, to people who were members of the faith. This commandment was also taken less as a free-standing, independent commandment and more as an overriding filter for interpreting and understanding all the teachings of the Bible, in both the Hebrew and the Greek Scriptures.

In fact, consider the Gospel of John, 13:34-35:

*<sup>34</sup> I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*

If we read this carefully, it seems that John's attempt at approximating Jesus' words – and in the Gospels, that's what the words of Jesus are, an attempt at guessing what Jesus said in this situation – is that we must love all other disciples of Jesus. It says: *"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

Consider a different biblical verse, early in Genesis, when God is creating the world. At the point that humanity is created, we are told:

*<sup>26</sup> Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."*

*<sup>27</sup> So God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.*

It seems very clear from this statement that when God created humanity, he created all people, no matter who they are, as being made in the image of God. This is our interpretation today, and so this all seems fine. After all, this is before the creation of Israel or the proto-Jews, the Israelites, so we would not interpret this as referring only to the Chosen People. But there is an important subtlety here. Ancient Christian theologians, possibly because they were influenced by Greek philosophy, people like Augustine in the 400's and Aquinas in the 1200's, interpreted this as referring to our cognitive abilities and our ability to embrace the notion of God, but not as referring to our social standing. In other words, all people were made in the image of God, but they were not necessarily equal culturally. We would not think this way today. We would assume that since we are all made in the image of God, we are all equally entitled to the same level of respect and social opportunity. So, just as with the notion that we should love all humans, our notion that we are all equal has also evolved as our culture has evolved. In general, we see an egalitarian shift in our biblical interpretation.

I had a conversation a while back with someone who was a member of a Native American nation. He was somewhat younger than me and quite sick - and wasn't going to live much longer. We'll call him Tamaska. There were relatives of his on the way to see him in the hospital, but he wasn't sure that they would be there before he passed. I visited him a few times over the course of a day, and we had a widely ranging conversation about spirituality. He told me about his beliefs, specifically, how many Native Americans value forgiveness as much as Christians do, that this is seen as a way of maintaining harmony and that holding onto bitterness is seen as harmful to one's spirit. Tamaska told me that he believed that an important part of forgiveness involved restoration on the part of the offender. We talked about how Christians have a more abstract, absolute notion that has to do with inheriting God's willingness to forgive, even when the offender accepts no accountability. Tamaska asked me if his understanding of Christian forgiveness was correct. I told him yes, but that there has been an evolution in this theological concept. He spoke to me about how several Bible passages were used to legitimize the killing of American Indians and the taking of their land. He said that for him, forgiveness was a way of restoring his own internal balance. Here is a passage that is often referenced in this regard, from Exodus, chapter 23, when Moses, acting as a prophet, speaks for God:

*I will set your borders from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates; for I will hand over to you the inhabitants of the land, and you shall drive them out before you. <sup>32</sup> You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. <sup>33</sup> They shall not live in your land, or they will make you sin against me; for if you worship their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.*

God is telling the Israelites that they are to inhabit the land of Canaan. There are already people living there. But God tells the Israelites that they are to chase the Canaanites from the land, even if it means killing them, because the presence of a corrupt people who worship pagan gods will be a bad influence on the Chosen People. There is a lot going on here. First, we don't believe that there was truly a slaughter of the Canaanites, and that this is more of a myth illustrating the loyalty that God has to his people and how we can always depend on him to keep his promises. After all, God promised his people his blessing, progeny, and a homeland. Second, this story is meant to underscore the fundamental necessity of moving away from worshipping corrupt, human-like Gods and developing a higher moral standard.

The point is that another way in which we reinterpret the Bible today is that we try to take into account the very different cultural, spiritual, and literary context of the ancient Scriptures, especially the Old Testament. Unlike previous generations, we don't project our cultural situation onto ancient people, and we look at the Bible not just the Word of God but also as a human document.

Tamaska told me that Christians seemed to expect their form of forgiveness for having displaced and killed American Indians, instead of accepting a more restorative form of forgiveness that is native to his culture. But as he and I discussed, this is also something that has evolved over time. In the Book of 2 Chronicles, which focuses largely on the reign of King Solomon in the southern Kingdom of Judah and the building of the First Temple, we read:

*<sup>14</sup> if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.*

We see that there is something transactional about this, that God's forgiveness demands that people abandon immorality and return to obeying the laws of God. Forgiveness doesn't come for free.

We remember that in the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus delivers the Lord's Prayer, there is also something transactional:

*<sup>14</sup> For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; <sup>15</sup> but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

We must forgive if we expect God to forgive us. But there is a difference between the Old and the New Testament notions of forgiveness. Christians began to view forgiveness as a necessity for being forgiven, rather than as a result of accepting guilt and living a moral life. But in neither case is there a strong notion of getting

forgiveness because we have somehow fixed some harm we have done to other people. This is because the biblical notion of forgiveness, while it differs from Old to New Testament teachings, always has God in the equation, rather than it simply pertaining to the interaction between two or more humans. But modern Christianity has evolved even further in its interpretation of the notion of forgiveness. We focus more now on freeing ourselves from bitterness and ensuring social justice as part of forgiveness, perhaps bringing us a bit closer to the traditional views of Native Americans.

So, when it comes to loving our neighbor and just who is considered a “neighbor”, and what it means to be made in the image of God and how this should impact one’s social rights independent of their class level in society, and with respect to forgiveness and what this means on an interpersonal level, these notions have evolved from the Old to the New Testament, and Christian interpretations have evolved in the two millennia since Christ walked the Earth. Other theological shifts have occurred.

A primary one has to do with what it means for Christ’s death to have saved humanity, something we call “atonement”. Consider Romans 5:11:

*<sup>11</sup> But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*

In the early church, in the centuries just after the life of Christ, Jesus was seen as conquering Satan and obtaining a victory over evil powers in the world.

Reconciliation was a sort of cosmic thing. In Medieval times, a more legalistic interpretation emerged. Reconciliation took on a “substitutional” model, whereby Jesus died to satisfy God’s anger at the presence of human sin in the world. In a more modern sense, we now interpret the death of Jesus in a personal way: his crucifixion has allowed us to be transformed morally so that we can live by a much higher standard than our predecessors.

My main point today is that there is nothing wrong with evolving our interpretation of the Bible and of Jesus’ teachings. We see a shift over time in many of our core beliefs as followers of God, from the Hebrew Scriptures to the New Testament to modern times. We are thoughtful people and God gave us minds. He certainly wants us to use them. There are various traditionalist Christian sects and denominations that believe it’s wrong to reinterpret the Bible, to view it as a piece of human literature and not simply the inspired Word of God, and to take into account modern cultural, scientific, and philosophical thought. But I believe this leads to ignorance and an unwillingness to let our spiritual lives be influenced by our intellectual lives. If you ever come across someone who disapproves of the way we interpret our faith, I hope this gives you ammunition.

Tamaska did indeed pass away, although not in the hospital. He went home to die with family. I did talk to his daughter, a very young woman, on the phone the day after he died. I told her that I had had a wonderful talk with her dad, that he was a deeply thoughtful man, and that she had been truly blessed to have him as a father. She thanked me for spending time with him before family could get into town and, as she put it, “rescue” him from dying in a hospital. She also said that her father had enjoyed his conversation with me. Then she asked me if I believed that her father was in Heaven. I told her that I don’t cast my beliefs onto other people, but that I was sure her father was in a very good place.

Later, though, I realized of course that our notion of who is saved has also evolved. The Gospel of John quotes Jesus as saying:

*<sup>16</sup> “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

Many think this means only Christians are saved. But rather than holding to the traditional “exclusive” belief, many modern Christians believe that people who live good lives and who do love other people, even if they have never been exposed to God or Christ are in truth instinctively responding to the presence of God’s grace within them – and are thus saved.