



The Love Commandment in Mark 12:28-34 and Family Relationships in Africa

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Abstract

The family, God's first established institution for human interactions and the fulcrum for all other societal structures and relationships has presently become problematic in the African context. However the family unit remains a prominent nexus in the social life of Africans despite contemporary changes taking place in many African societies as a result of the modernisation process. Noticeably, there are increasingly deteriorating family relationships in Africa with evidential reports on mainstream and social media coupled with the alteration of traditional African family patterns aided by the factors of modernisation, urbanisation, and globalisation. More so, the instructive templates embedded in a lot of portions of the Bible that are meant for ordering family relationships reveal a missing character emphasis in Africa – love. This situation calls for intervention that is biblical and contextual. Therefore, the paper, utilising the analytical research design approach, analyses the dialogical love commandment in Mark 12:28-34 intending to exhume life applications necessary to rebuild the collapsing and dysfunctional family relationships in the African context. The bifocal love commandment trumps all other biblical instructions because all other commandments, as affirmed by Jesus Christ, are fulfilled in love. Jesus' love commandment affirms a healthy interrelation principle that can mitigate the exacerbating family problems in Africa hinged on the lack of a loving lifestyle.

Keywords: Africa, *agape*, family, love-commandment, Mark 12:28-34

Introduction

The family unit remains a prominent nexus in the social life of Africans despite contemporary changes taking place in many African societies as a result of the modernisation process. On the other hand, the Bible has a lot to say about family relationships including family dynamics. The first institution that God established for human interactions was the family (Genesis 2:22-24). All other societal structures and relationships grew from the family. Hence, family relationships, which every human being is inextricably linked to, are the fulcrum of society. But family life is becoming more and more complicated and throwing up a lot of problems or challenges. Most of these problems hinged on the lack of applying the love quotient to the interacting dynamics of family life. Some of these family problems that thrive in the absence of love application are, but are not limited to, sibling rivalry, jealousy, waywardness, children's rebellion, spousal infidelity, divorce, negligence of care for the aged, increase in divorce rates, sexual misbehaviour, among others.

There are many instructions given in the Bible about how family members are to treat each other (Ephesians 5:22-33; 1 Peter 3:1; Ephesians 6:1-4; Exodus 20:12; 1 Timothy 5:8; Matthew 15:5-6). Despite this, the love commandment trumps all of these biblical instructions because all other commandments are fulfilled in it: "Three things will last forever - faith, hope, and love - and the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13 NLT). Love, often synonymous with having strong affection for another, is one of the commonest terms in usage in human communications today and one of the most abused action-mediated terms. However, the theme of love needs to be appropriated in the context of deteriorating family relationships in Africa. Therefore, the paper analyses the dialogical love commandment in Mark 12:28-34 to exhume life applications necessary to rebuild the collapsing and dysfunctional family relationships in the African context. Jesus' love commandment affirms a healthy interrelation principle that can mitigate the exacerbating family problems in Africa hinged on the lack of a loving lifestyle.

The study employs the analytical research design. Primary data sourced from the Bible and secondary data sourced from literature sources both online and offline are descriptively analysed. The primary data obtained through context analysis of Mark 12:28-34 is to determine the meaning of the biblical text in its socio-historical context and to determine its applicability to family relationships in Africa. The endpoint is to arrive at life applications (practical implications) for the family context in Africa concerning action and belief. The commandment to love God and to love one's neighbour as oneself, in Viljoen's assertion, form the hermeneutic programme for



the understanding and application of the *Torah* and the Prophets.¹ So, the double love commandment is worth our consideration if every one of God's commandments hangs on them, especially in the context of the family which forms the bedrock of all other human relationships.

State of Family Relationships in Africa – A Synopsis of the Current Realities

Before now, family relationships in Africa were relatively healthy and functional. Fathers worked and came back home early without having to work overtime, while most mothers were full-time housewives and spent more time with their children. But changing life patterns, in respect of jobs or professions, socio-cultural processes, and religious practice is making the quest to build healthy family relationships practically impossible. This situation has thrown up a lot of new injurious and damaging realities. In times past, African families were mostly rural, patriarchal, hierarchical, polygamous and open to kinship networks, and they attached substantial importance to lineage continuation.²

But current trends in family systems run contrary to the picture painted above. Traditional conceptualisations of family and traditional African family patterns have been slowly and progressively altered as a result of the process of modernisation aided by the trend of urbanisation.³ Thus, there is the distortion of traditional norms and values, which had long characterised rural communities in Africa. Also, contemporary family patterns are being subjected to changes that are hinged on emerging economic conditions, education, and health opportunities. Socioeconomic circumstances that are becoming prevalent in Africa have triggered considerable changes in the fundamental cultural values in the family. The changing family patterns are seen more in the merger of traditional and modern marriage norms.

One other significant area that contemporary lifestyles of modernity and globalisation have greatly impacted is the conceptualisation of family in Africa. Broadly defined, a family includes all persons existing in an area or a group of people with common ancestors. This definition connotes an extended family system which is the pillar of the African support system.⁴ The traditional African culture does not recognise a nuclear family structure, but rather cherishes and practices the extended family system whose membership includes not only the man, his wife or wives and

¹ Francis P. Viljoen, "The Double Love Commandment", *In die Skriflig* 49, no. 1 (2015):8, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ids.v49i1.1869>.

² Paulina Makinwa-Adebusoye, *Sociocultural Factors Affecting Fertility in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Lagos: Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research, 2001), 5.

³ Thomas W. Merrick, "Population and Poverty: New Views on an Old Controversy", *International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 28, no. 1 (2002):41.

⁴ Ojua, Lukpata and Atama, "Exploring the Neglect of African Family Value Systems", 45.

children but also blood relations of a common descent such as grandchildren, grandmothers and fathers, nephews, nieces, cousins and aunts.⁵ Consequently, Africans value being rooted in kinship which is an important existential characteristic of the Africans and so a person is an individual to the extent that he is a member of a family, a clan or a community.⁶

Makinwa-Adebusoye outlined the major characteristic features of the African household: mostly rural, patriarchal and hierarchical, polygamous, open to kinship networks, and the attachment of substantial importance to lineage continuation.⁷ However, the African family structure has undergone and is still undergoing dramatic changes over the last three to four decades as a result of the changes in marriage patterns, increasing life expectancy, rapid urbanisation, and changing fertility patterns.⁸ Also, traditional family structures or patterns in Africa are slowly but progressively being altered as a result of the process of modernization which is exhibited through trends like urbanization and acculturation. The family patterns that were the norms in traditional rural African societies are gradually being substituted by modern values.⁹

The Context of Mark 12:28-34

Mark 12:28–34 occurs during the last week before the crucifixion. Jesus spent time in the temple courtyard, teaching the people and debating Jewish religious and civil leaders. This story falls within a series of conversations between Jesus and various sectarian leaders residing in Jerusalem which began in Mark 11:27. This was the final discussion initiated by one of these leaders.¹⁰ The mention of “dispute” or “debate” (Mark 12:28) refers to the previous story whereby Jesus held a theological conversation with the Sadducees over the belief in the resurrection. Thus, this story

⁵ C. Maduekwe, and H. Maduekwe, African Value System and the Impact of Westernization: A Critical Analysis. *Society for Research and Academic* (2002), <http://www.academicexcellencesociety.com>

⁶ Ojua, Lukpata and Atama, “Exploring the Neglect of African Family Value Systems”, 45.

⁷ Paulina Makinwa-Adebusoye, *Sociocultural Factors Affecting Fertility in Sub Saharan Africa*, 5

⁸ J. Bongaarts and J. Casterline, “Fertility Transition: Is Sub-Saharan African Different “, *Population and Development* 38, no1 (2013): 154-160.

⁹ Wilhelma Kalu, “Modern Ga Family Life Patterns: A Look at Changing Marriage”, *Journal of Black Studies* 11, no3 (1981):350.

¹⁰ Emerson Powery, Commentary on Mark 12:28-34. Working Preacher (2015), <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-31-2/commentary-on-mark-1228-34-4>.



situated in Mark's Gospel is set in the context of conflict between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders who were the main opponents of Jesus.¹¹

The scribe mentioned in this pericope apparently agreed with Jesus' earlier submission (Cf. Mark 12:18-27). So, he must be a scribe (an expert in the Law) associated with the Pharisees (Cf. Acts 23:7-8). But unlike the Pharisees, the scribe did not act in confrontation to trap Jesus nor was he part of the earlier heated exchanges.¹² The Pharisees were always out to attack Jesus because of their jealousy and animosity towards him. Also, the aim of these confrontations or public challenges by the religious leaders was to shame Jesus by trapping him with tricky questions. And being caught out publicly would dishonour Jesus in the eyes of the crowd. So, to affirm his honour, Jesus engages in a rhetorical riposte. This text is the climax of a day of confrontation between Jesus and the religious authorities in Jerusalem.

Exegetical Analysis of Mark 12:28-34

Our attention turns to the exegetical analysis of the various sections of this text and as relevant to the subject matter of family relationships which is the focus of this paper. Verse 28 (NLT): "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" The concern behind the question of the scribe is how to lead a life of moral integrity and the question asked by the scribe, an expert of the Law, was contentious. "Which" is not the normal Greek word for "which" or "what" (*tis*)? It is the Greek *poios*, which is a qualitative interrogative pronoun meaning, "of what sort, kind, or quality".¹³ The question does not refer to identity ("which one") but to quality and nature. It means which was the most important and why. Notably, the Pharisees had codified the Law into 248 positive commandments and 365 prohibitions that total of 613 precepts.¹⁴

Verse 29 - 30 (NLT): "Jesus replied, 'The most important commandment is this: Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength'". Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:5 as the primary commandment. These two verses were part of what is called *Shema*. "Hear" (KJV) or "Listen" (NLT) is the

¹¹ B. Repschinski, *The Controversy Stories in the Gospel of Matthew: Their Redaction, Form and Relevance for the Relationship Between the Matthean Community and Formative Judaism* (Gottingen; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 325.

¹² Cynthia A. Jarvis, "Between Text and Sermon: Mark 12:28-34", *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 70, no. 2 (2016), 197.

¹³ Emerson Powery, Commentary on Mark 12:28-34. Working Preacher (2015), <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-31-2/commentary-on-mark-1228-34-4>.

¹⁴ Viljoen, "The Double Love Commandment", 5.

Hebrew word *Shema*, the imperative form of *shama*, “to hear and obey”. “The most important” are the opening lines of the *Shema*, a portion of the Bible quoted by the devout Jews in the morning and evening and worn in phylacteries on the arm and forehead by the Pharisees.¹⁵ The citation of the *Shema* is significant as it was a central and well-known text in Judaism.¹⁶

The word “first” meant more than the “first in order” or the “most important”. The word “first” here can mean foremost, most important, or greatest... “First” (*protos* in Greek) literally meant “guiding principle”, “foundational”, or “principled”. Thus, the “first” commandment would provide the key that would unlock the religious philosophy of Jesus, implying how he considers the relationship of people with God. In a way, Jesus’ response to the commandment question reveals what he considers to be the greatest or foremost or most important commandment - the one to know.¹⁷

We turn our attention to the word “love”. The Greek New Testament speaks of at least four types of love: *eros* (physical or romantic); *philia* (friendly or familial); *storge* (empathetic); and *agape* (unconditional or self-sacrificial or divine). In this text, Mark uses *agape* to express the love of God and of neighbour. *Agape* is expressed as “goodwill, boundless and aggressive, extended to those who may have no personal charm for us and maybe beyond the boundaries of family or tribe or nation.”¹⁸ Therefore, the love that Jesus refers to in this text is the unconditional, self-sacrificing sort - the kind of love God has for us.

Jesus’ instruction to love one’s neighbour is taken from Leviticus 19:13-17. In the context of Leviticus 19:13-17, the people were warned not to “oppress”. The word “oppress” means to keep someone in hardship; to cause distress, anxiety, or discomfort; to judge our neighbour unjustly; to slander our neighbour in our hearts;

¹⁵ Phylacteries were leather pouches containing four strips of parchment on which were written verses of Scripture.

¹⁶ J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew, Rethinking the Historical Jesus: Love and Law* (Yale: New Haven, 2009), 490.

¹⁷ John Herrin, “Interpretation of the New Testament: The Greatest Commandment - A Redaction - Critical Approach to Mark 12:28-34”, *Academia. Edu* (2020), https://www.academia.edu/43990685/Interpretation_of_the_New_Testament_The_Greatest_Commandment_A_Redaction_Critical_Approach_Mark_12_28_34.

¹⁸ John Herrin, “Interpretation of the New Testament: The Greatest Commandment - A Redaction - Critical Approach to Mark 12:28-34”, *Academia. Edu* (2020), https://www.academia.edu/43990685/Interpretation_of_the_New_Testament_The_Greatest_Commandment_A_Redaction_Critical_Approach_Mark_12_28_34.



and to take revenge or bear a grudge against our neighbour.¹⁹ “Love” is the verb *agapao*. *Agapao* is a “willful love, a determined love that generously chooses for the interests of another”. *Agapao* and *agape*, the noun form, speak of a love that grows out of knowledge. *Agape* does not work by emotions.²⁰

“With” is the Greek preposition *ek*, which denotes origin, the point from which action or motions proceed. The word “all” is the Greek *holos* from which we get the word, “holistic”. It means “whole, entire, complete”. This implies that there can be no holding back or incompleteness in our devotion and commitment to God without repercussions.²¹ The reference to ‘heart’, ‘soul’, ‘mind’, and ‘strength’ is to the entirety of the human faculties. These faculties of the human that were mentioned represented the entire person. One cannot love God with some of one’s faculties while excluding others.²²

Verse 31 (NLT): “The second is equally important: Love your neighbour as yourself. No other commandment is greater than these”. The Greek words *on a aun* show that the “second” in “The second is equally important” means that the second part of the *Great Commandment* is equally important as the first.²³ “...as yourself” affirms the incorporation of “neighbour” to go beyond the members of one’s group. The concept of “neighbour” includes the people that the Jews would consider as outsiders.²⁴ The Jews largely limited neighbourly love to the Israelites.²⁵ Hence, Jesus, running contrary to the established norms of neighbour broadens the boundaries of love. Furthermore, “greater” is from the Greek root word *me gas*. In this case, it refers to a law that is greater in shape and degree than any other.

Interpretive Analysis of Mark 12:28-34

The scribe asked a question from Jesus to identify the most important commandment. This question was beyond mere identity. The Pharisees had codified the Law into 248 positive commandments and 365 prohibitions. These 613 precepts were imposed by the Pharisees on the people without offering them help or encouragement to obey these laws. The Pharisees acted out a strict legalism. Over time, there have been

¹⁹ Emerson Powery, Commentary on Mark 12:28-34. Working Preacher (2015), <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-31-2/commentary-on-mark-1228-34-4>.

²⁰ Daniel Wallace, *Selected Notes on the Syntax of the New Testament Greek*, 4th ed. (Dallas: Dallas theological Seminary, 1981), 7.

²¹ Wallace, *Selected Notes on the Syntax of the New Testament Greek*, 7.

²² W. D. Davies, and D. C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (London: T & T Clark International, 2014), 241.

²³ Viljoen, “The Double Love Commandment”, 7.

²⁴ Viljoen, “The Double Love Commandment”, 8.

²⁵ Meier, *A Marginal Jew, Rethinking the Historical Jesus: Love and Law*, 492.

debates over the most important commandment. Thus, the Pharisees were always describing the Law in terms of light (of less demand), heavy (with severe repercussions for disobedience), and small and great. The idea was that God would accept you if your good deeds outweighed the bad and would reject you if the case was reversed.²⁶ This was clearly a shallow and terrible explanation that can cause people to miss the sense of their depravity and sinfulness, thereby nullifying the necessity for God's forgiveness offered in Jesus Christ.

Jesus' response to the scribe's question of the most important commandment was deeply rooted in the Old Testament. Jesus' combination of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (about loving God) and Leviticus 19:18 (about love for the neighbour) summarised the entire 613 laws of the Torah that the scribe community attest to. Jesus' answer implies that God desires love for him and love for others. But it must be stated that one causes first - loving God with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength. This encounter between Jesus and the scribe shows that the scribe only wanted to know what Jesus taught about a subject matter - knowledge, rather than live by what Jesus taught. Simply put, his interest was theological and not relational. That was why in Jesus' submission, the scribe was not far (or near) the kingdom of God, but not in it. This is not to discourage the pursuit of knowledge (Cf. Isaiah 1:18; 2 Timothy 2:7).

Jesus' reference to Deuteronomy 6:4 in verse 29 of the text - "Hear oh Israel" (KJV), refers to Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, as the one and only true God. In addition, Yahweh is the independent, sovereign God of the Universe who revealed himself to the nation of Israel and redeemed them from slavery. It was a reminder to Israel about the redemptive work done on their behalf and contingent upon God's love. So, they were to respond appropriately by loving God and responding to his word. Their knowledge of God should provide the motivation for loving and obeying God.

Jesus drew on scriptural traditions, citing Deuteronomy 6:4-5, traditionally called the *Shema*, the standard daily prayer, and Leviticus 19:18. These provided Jesus' theological understanding that love for the other clearly elucidates - one's love for God. This scribe agreed with Jesus. The scenario runs contrary to the situation between Jesus and the Pharisees. Throughout Mark's Gospel, the religious leaders were always evaluating Jesus' activities. In contrast, the scribe's acknowledgement of Jesus' dialogical assertion about love was in tandem with that of other Jewish leaders, who also believed in the correlation between loving God and loving one's neighbour (Cf. Luke 7:3-5).

²⁶ Viljoen, "The Double Love Commandment", 5.



There are seven (7) types of love explicated in the Bible and find better expression in the Greek language. *Eros* (“romantic love”) is an intense desire for someone that could cause someone to lose control of their words or actions. This is seen in Samson’s love for harlots and Delilah (Judges 6:1; 15:5; 16) and in David’s desire to have Bathsheba, who was married to Uriah (2 Samuel 11).²⁷ *Eros* love is sexual love and it is the most misunderstood, the most abused, but most tangible area of human physical life. And the Bible licenses it to be expressed only in marriage between two opposite sexes.²⁸ *Phileo* (“affectionate love”) does not involve any passion or sexual impulse. It is more like the love between good friends or goodwill between two people who respect and admire one another. This is seen in the love that Jesus had for his disciples and in Jesus’ use of “love” in the third question he asked Peter (John 21:17 Cf. 1 John 3:16, 18). *Storge* (“familiar love”) is the love a family feels for each other, a very strong bond that is not easily broken. This is seen in God’s love for his son, Jesus Christ (Matthew 3:17), the centurion’s love for his servant (Luke 7:1-10; Matthew 8:5-13), and the woman who begged Jesus Christ to deliver her daughter from demon possession (Matthew 15:21-28). *Pragma* (“enduring love”) is a practical kind of love that stands the test of time, a kind of love a husband and wife have after 50 years of marital relationship. It matures and grows over time. This is seen in the relationship between Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 21:1-7).²⁹

Philautia (“self-love”) is love for oneself in a healthy way. It is having self-compassion and good self-esteem. Self-love has been defined as “a state of appreciation for oneself that grows from actions that support our physical, psychological and spiritual growth”. Self-love focuses on the self and is a healthy appreciation of oneself, but has the potential to easily become excessive, narcissistic, and selfish. This is seen in Daniel’s action when he insists on eating vegetables rather than the king’s food in Babylon so that he can look good and appear intelligent (Daniel 1). *Ludas* (“playful love”) focus more on fun rather than building a relationship. It is having “butterflies in the stomach” at the appearance of a loved one. This is seen in the love between King Solomon and the unknown maiden in the book of Song of Solomon (Song of Solomon 4:3-5 Cf. Ecclesiastes 9:9).³⁰

²⁷ D. Khoshaba, “A seven-step prescription for self-love”, Psychology Today (2012), Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/get-hardy/201203/seven-step-prescription-self-love>.

²⁸ Peter Tan, *Growing in Agape Love* (Canberra: Peter Tan Evangelism, 2008), 4-5.

²⁹ D. Khoshaba, “A seven-step prescription for self-love”, Psychology Today (2012), Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/get-hardy/201203/seven-step-prescription-self-love>.

³⁰ D. Khoshaba, “A seven-step prescription for self-love”, Psychology Today (2012), Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/get-hardy/201203/seven-step-prescription-self-love>.

The seventh term of reference to love in the Bible is the verb *agapao* (*agape*). It is the most important and highest type of love. It is unconditional love unlike all other forms of love which are based upon mutual exchange and upon set conditions. Agape love possesses the characteristics of loving without expecting anything in return from the loved, selflessness, compassion, pure sacrifice, and boundless empathy.³¹ Agape love is not contingent on any value or worth of the object of love. It is not just an attribute of God; it is the very essence of God, who is fundamentally love.³² Agape defines God's immanence and incomparable love for humanity.³³ Furthermore, agape love is always a gift and it is exemplified in God's love for sinful humanity and provided salvation Jesus Christ (Romans 5:8; John 3:16). Jesus was the personification of agape love that God has for humanity.³⁴ Agape love is more than an emotion. It demonstrates itself through exemplary actions.

Love towards God provides a logical link to love one's neighbour. As Malina and Neyrey assert, in the context of the ancient Mediterranean world, the identity of the group was dependent on the honour and status of personages or patrons of the group and members considered themselves linked with these personages. Consequently, the one linked to the personages is required to love the personages in terms of faithfulness and loyalty.³⁵ Hence, the concept of group orientation of the 1st-century Mediterranean world informs our understanding of the love assertion of Jesus in this pericope. Love formed part of a positive reciprocity within the group.³⁶ Balanced reciprocity implies that one should return in equal measure to the favour one receives.³⁷ The love of God that bestows mercy and grace on God's people incites them to respond with honour, loyalty and devotion.³⁸ Loving God implied attachment to God and consequently the exhibition of a behaviour that would honour him with this reciprocal relationship.³⁹

³¹ Phillip Clingan, "Types of Love Between People: A Modern Perspective Using a Descriptive Assessment of Survey Research", *International Journal of Scientific Advances* 2, no.3 (2021):332.

³² Tan, *Growing in Agape Love*, 11.

³³ Jack Zavada, "4 Types of Love in the Bible", *Learn Religions* (2020), Retrieved from <https://www.learnreligions.com/types-of-lover-in-the-bible-700177>.

³⁴ Tan, *Growing in Agape Love*, 10-13.

³⁵ B. J. Malina, and J. H. Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul: An Archaeology of Ancient Personality* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996), 167.

³⁶ B. J. Malina, and R. I. Rohrbaugh, *Social - Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 56.

³⁷ Meier, *Marginal Jew, Rethinking the Historical Jesus: Love and Law*, 490.

³⁸ Viljoen, "The Double Love Commandment", 6.

³⁹ Meier, *Marginal Jew, Rethinking the Historical Jesus: Love and Law*, 490.



Therefore, Jesus' submission to the *Great Commandment* in Mark 12:28-34 implies that the love of God requires loyalty to his will and commandments, which entails loving other members of the group. The obligation to show love towards one's neighbour is motivated by the love one receives from God.⁴⁰ Love of God and the love of one's neighbour are incomplete without one another. In the ancient Mediterranean world, performing one's duties towards one's neighbour was regarded as part of one's piety directed at God.⁴¹ Loving one's neighbour as oneself implies not doing harm to a neighbour (Romans 13:9) because people will not do wrong to themselves. But it must be stated that from Jesus' response to the scribe's question, loving God comes first, while loving neighbour comes second. As Sayers notes: "The second commandment depends upon the first, and without the first, it is a snare... If we put our neighbour first, we are putting man above God, and that is what we have been doing ever since we began to usurp humanity and make man the menace of all things".⁴²

According to Jewish interpretation, the love for God and the love for one's neighbour are closely related, as also found elsewhere in Jewish sources.⁴³ As a matter of fact, in Matthew 10:40, Jesus emphasises the close link between the love of God and the people and states that a person who welcomes a disciple also welcomes Jesus and God. Also, in Matthew 25:31-46, the love of God is demonstrated in feeding the poor, housing the homeless, and clothing the naked.⁴⁴ In the Jewish interpretative principle of *gezerah shewah* (equal category), it was common to link two commandments based on their opening words.⁴⁵ Thus, each part of the *Great Commandment* is of equal weight.⁴⁶

Essentially, the second commandment can be seen as a result of the first, while the two commandments are interconnected. As Turner affirms: "Fallen humans cannot love their neighbours as themselves if they have not first acknowledged their obligation to love the only true God ... the theocentric vertical obligation is the basis of the anthropocentric horizontal obligation".⁴⁷ Loving God and loving others reflect

⁴⁰ Viljoen, "The Double Love Commandment", 6.

⁴¹ Malina and Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul: An Archaeology of Ancient Personality*, 167.

⁴² Dorothy L. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church: Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 142.

⁴³ Viljoen, "The Double Love Commandment", 7.

⁴⁴ W. Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Socio-political and Religious Reading* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2004), 445.

⁴⁵ Viljoen, "The Double Love Commandment", 8.

⁴⁶ Repschinski, "The Controversy Stories in the Gospel of Matthew", 263.

⁴⁷ D. L. Turner, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 537.

the two tablets of the Decalogue. The first four concerns our relationship with God and the last six concerns our relationship with one another.

In another vein, Viljoen, in his analysis of the Matthean account of the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:39), connects Jesus' echoing of Leviticus 19:18 - "Love you neighbour as yourself" - to ethics.⁴⁸ Jesus had previously referred to Leviticus 19:18 in Matthew 5:42 and 19:19 in order to show that loving one's neighbour includes loving enemies and it is the fundamental summary of the moral elements of the *Decalogue*, namely, "You shall not murder", You shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, You shall give false testimony, honour your father and mother".⁴⁹ Davies and Allison state that Matthew thus fuses religion and ethics.⁵⁰

Furthermore, neighbourly love in the ancient Mediterranean world was different from ours. As Malina and Neyrey point out, the Mediterranean people of Jesus' day lived in collectivist societies that were group-orientated and non-individualistic.⁵¹ Vilhojen adds that the individual person was always a group-embedded person connected to a social unit that forms around a notable person. The individual shares the group's loyalty towards the notable person and forms a virtual identity with the group as a whole and with other members of the group together.⁵² In Jewish thought, one may extend charity to aliens or strangers, but love was reserved for fellow Jews. Jesus' command to love others apart from those whom we have close affiliations with is revolutionary (Cf. Luke 10:22-37 - the story of the *Good Samaritan*). The term "neighbour", as applied by Jesus in the context of the *Good Samaritan*, included everyone irrespective of gender, race, religion, and other social stratification.

Life Applications of the Love-Commandment in Mark 12:28-34 to Family Relationships in Africa

The love commandment (*Great Commandment*) in Mark 12:28-34 is the core of the correct Christian lifestyle and derived from Leviticus 19:18 and Deuteronomy 6:4-5. This love prescription by Jesus can be applied to the deteriorating state of family relationships in Africa. Jesus' assertion about loving God and others as us is not theologically orientated but relational-focused. Jesus echoes God's command to Israel to respond to his redemptive work and their knowledge of him by obeying him and loving him. Obedience and love are inextricably connected (Cf. John 15:10). As Christians live a life of obedience to God, showing they love God, then, they cannot but act selflessly towards others. Such selfless actions predicated on obedience will

⁴⁸ Viljoen, "The Double Love Commandment", 7.

⁴⁹ Viljoen, "The Double Love Commandment", 7.

⁵⁰ Davies and Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 241.

⁵¹ Malina and Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul: An Archaeology of Ancient Personality*, 153 - 201.

⁵² Viljoen, "The Double Love Commandment", 8.



create a scenario that helps to mitigate the supposedly selfish actions that largely contribute to the dysfunctional paradigms in families. Human actions stem from the desire to please God and would not be in response to how others act. Hence, such issues as jealousy, rivalry, revenge, hatred, and other contentious behaviour will find no place in the family.

Also, the Christian faith is one premised on the knowledge of God through faith in Jesus Christ. But as seen in the first part of Jesus' assertion about the *Great Commandment*, knowledge of God becomes evident by loving him. And loving God is obeying God. This preoccupation with loving God cannot stand alone by itself but is made complete in the expression of love for others. Family relationships will become more positive, beneficial and fruitful when each component of the family begins to express the agape love, which is selfless and altruistic in all its concerns.

One key inhibiting factor that has altered the traditional and progressive family structure in Africa is that of expressive and non-conforming individualism. According to Nwaomah, expressive individualism often leads people to treat a person in the abstract – isolated and separated from others.⁵³ This attitude of expressive individualism is an indication of a “me-first” philosophy, which makes the individual components of the family want to have their way, leading to chaos, distrust, and enmity. But the “love your neighbour” command counters the “me-first” philosophy, which Henry points out as what our human existence has deliberately and routinely collapsed into in contemporary times.⁵⁴ A “me-first” philosophy is at the root of most evils emanating from human relationships and inevitably has the capacity to disrupt and distort family relationships. In this case, each individual component of the family will only seek out his/her own concerns and will imbibe a predator instinct in individuals. A “me-first” philosophy is in contradiction to the altruism that the “love your neighbour as yourself” prescription engenders. Rather a “me-first” philosophy leads to autonomous humanism. Family members will enjoy profitable family relationships when there is an attitude of self-concern for the other.

Another significant challenge confronting contemporary families in Africa is the disintegration of communal and corporate living consequent upon the trend of migration. Some of the effects of this challenge are the increasing number of absentee spouse (s), “long-distance” marriages, compromised and delegated parenting, loss of

⁵³ Sampson Nwaomah, “Challenges and opportunities of Christian Families in Africa”, in *Adventist Families: a Pan-African Perspective*, edited by Willie Oliver and Elaine Oliver (Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2019), 31.

⁵⁴ Carl F. Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1984), 15.

family values, breakdown in communication, and marital infidelity.⁵⁵ However, the application of agape love focused on pleasing God will put other members of the family first in personalised decisions rather than the socio-economic reasons attached to migration. More so, the decisions to migrate are often, reasons premised on individualism.

In addition to the above submission, the “neighbour” reference to “others” or every other person agrees with the conceptualisation of “family” in the traditional African context, which the trends of westernisation and globalisation have ruptured and desecrated. Family is more than just biological parents, siblings and blood relations. It incorporates others who are not blood relations. In essence, the love commandment in Mark 12:28-34 impinges on Africans the necessity to advance healthy relationships in the general society - seeing another person as a family. Also, love for neighbours coincides with having respect for neighbours -family members. By this, Christians live out the mission of human dignity, which in turn, represents a love for God.

In another vein, the interconnection of the love of God command with the love of one’s neighbour command shows that without loving one’s neighbour, one cannot claim to love God, since one expresses one’s love of God by obeying his commandments and many of these commandments are about human relationships. By implication, relationships within the family settings will become beneficial if all members of the family act in benevolence towards others as a duty towards God rather than on a merit basis. Thus, the Christian faith will not be lived out as a religion but as a lifestyle. Invariably, orthodoxy (Christian beliefs) will be evident in orthopraxis (Christian practice).

Conclusion

Jesus’ assertion to love God and to love one’s neighbour as oneself is considered to be the overarching principle to which all the commandments in the Bible are connected and should be interpreted. Love has both a vertical dimension (relating to God) and a horizontal dimension (relating to others apart from God and ourselves). One’s love for God motivates one’s love for others (“neighbour”). The love commandment of Mark 12:28-34 shows the dialogical essence of human relationships. Jesus’ love commandment is situated in the collectivist lifestyle of the ancient Mediterranean world of the 1st century. Their societies were group-orientated and non-individualistic. This is contrary to the “I-me” philosophy that ruins filial relationships. Family relationships in Africa will become more and more fruitful if individual members become group-orientated and operate group loyalty.

⁵⁵ Nwaomah, *Challenges and Opportunities of Christian Families in Africa*, 32 – 33.



Family relationships in Africa have become disoriented and less and less attractive as a result of the gradual move away from the attitudes once imbibed by African traditional societies and the craving for Westernisation and globalisation. But the analytical propositions of Jesus' love-commandment in Mark 12:28-34 promote the virtues that will engender healthy family relationships in Africa, namely, interconnectedness, communalism, altruism, human dignification, selflessness, benevolence, solidarity, and loyalty. The welfare of the group (family) becomes the concern of each member of the family. This attitude encourages the protection of the other person's interest and welfare, while the propositions of the love commandment will nullify the vices that breed unhealthy family relationships in Africa, namely, autonomous humanism, selfishness, greed, disloyalty, and individualism.

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