

# Love Thy Neighbor: The Expansive Command

*An Invited Position Paper By*

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**Abstract:** *John Hartung asserted in “Love Thy Neighbor: The Evolution of In-Group Morality” that the command to love, and the later use of it by Jesus, does not apply to everyone but only to those within one’s own group. Through a close reading of Leviticus and the Gospel of Matthew, this essay questions Hartung’s hermeneutic and assesses his conclusion as erroneous. By interrogating the world of the text using a literary method, this essay argues for an appreciation of the complexity of the language and the importance of literary context.*

**Keywords:** Love, Leviticus, Jesus, Morality, Hermeneutics

## And Who is My Neighbor?

“**L**ove your neighbor as yourself and wear a mask.” Variations of this message are appearing on social media since mask wearing became an issue. The idea of loving another as yourself is deeply rooted in Christian ethics. At its purest, the command transcends the barriers that typically keep us separated: race, class, gender identity, nationality, politics, etc. Preventing your potentially Covid-positive-droplets from lingering in the common air is an act of loving others. This makes sense.

John Hartung wrote a provocative essay suggesting that the command to love one’s neighbor as oneself, in its original context of Leviticus 19:18, applied only within one’s group.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John Hartung, “Love Thy Neighbor: The Evolution of In-Group Morality,” *Skeptic* 3, no. 4 (January 1995), [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/216842386\\_Love\\_Thy\\_Neighbor\\_The\\_Evolution\\_of\\_In-Group\\_Morality](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/216842386_Love_Thy_Neighbor_The_Evolution_of_In-Group_Morality).

<sup>18</sup> You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord. (RSV)<sup>2</sup>

Hartung argues that context makes it explicitly a condition between Israelites and not those outside that community. He goes on to argue that when Jesus reiterates this command in two separate Gospel accounts, he too limited its application only to Jews. To borrow a sentence from Hartung’s essay, “This is plain wrong.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Hermeneutics is the Key to Reading**

Hartung’s errors sprout from an inconsistent hermeneutic. He fundamentally reads the Bible like a fundamentalist, though with the occasional nod to scholarship that pushes beyond his “plain reading” of the text. Most notably, he has words of praise for Geza Vermes and others from the Jesus Seminar whose primary methodology did not take the words of the Gospels in their “plain” sense. They were aware that the Gospels record the “remembered” words of Jesus and not his actual speech. It is also clear that some speeches are created by the text’s author (Anonymous is the correct name for the authors of all the Gospels). A prime example of Hartung’s uneven hermeneutic is on display when proof texting from the Gospels.

Hartung interprets Matthew 18:15–17 in such a way as to support his claim that:

“Jesus explained to his disciples that Jews who sin against fellow Jews and cannot be made to see the error of their ways should be considered as gentiles because, like gentiles and tax collectors (Jews who collected taxes for the gentile government), they were going to be rejected from heaven.”<sup>4</sup>

Here is the text he is interpreting:

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<sup>2</sup> Revised Standard Version (RSV) Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1946, 1952, and 1971 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/Revised-Standard-Version-RSV-Bible/>.

<sup>3</sup> Hartung, “Love Thy Neighbor,” 13.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 16.

admits the folly of his own thinking and heals the woman's daughter. Through this episode the narrator demonstrates that Gentiles are to be included.

The Gospel concludes with Jesus stating that the "good news" is to be taught to all nations (ἔθνος). This gospel is an inclusive one, not an exclusive one. Through the narrative, we can see Jesus coming to terms with what the narrator knows, which is that the good news is for everyone. In the incident with the Canaanite woman, Jesus is confronted with his own limited imagination of who can receive God's miraculous power and who cannot. He is quick to admit the error and pronounce her a worthy recipient of God's gift.

### **Conclusion**

Hartung's error in stating that the Book of Leviticus and Jesus himself taught an in-group morality is due to his faulty hermeneutic. Reading a single verse, out of context, cannot correctly represent the interpretive range of a robust hermeneutic. Nor can one ignore the history of interpretation by both Jewish and Christian exegetes. That history reveals a complex and rich appreciation for the many ways that various groups of Jews and Christians have understood Scripture.

Perhaps Leviticus 19:18b does mean only other Jews, in the same way that "all men are created equal" from the Declaration of Independence means only white, male, landowners. This view, however, has been opposed from early on by the multiple witnesses within and without the biblical text. "Love thy neighbor as thyself" also includes "Love the alien as thyself," or in a possibly more "correct" translation, "Love your neighbor who is like you" and "Love the foreigner who is like you." This is the second greatest commandment.

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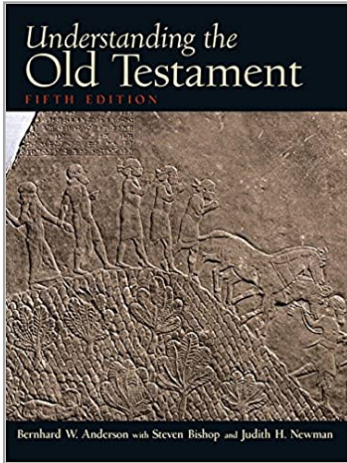
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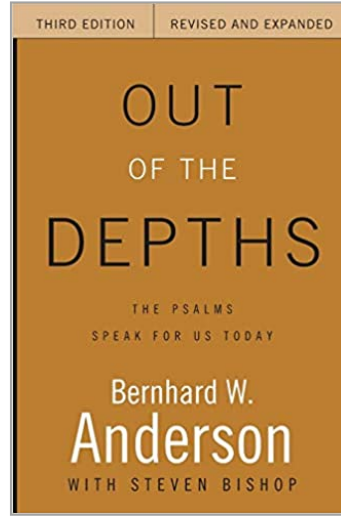
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[Steven Bishop](#) holds a PhD from Boston University and is associate professor of Old Testament at Seminary of the Southwest. Formerly an ordained minister of the Church of Christ, he served churches in Texas and Massachusetts before beginning graduate studies. Dr. Bishop's academic interests include the poetry of the Hebrew Bible and literary translations of it into English, and the influence of Hellenistic thought on Hebrew wisdom literature. In addition to writing book reviews and presenting scholarly papers, Dr. Bishop assisted the well-known Old Testament scholar Bernhard Anderson in editing and revising two books: *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today* and *Contours of Old Testament Theology*. Dr. Bishop worked again with Anderson as an editor and contributor for the fifth edition of *Understanding the Old Testament*, published in spring 2006. In 2015, Dr. Bishop was elected to the steering committee of the Anglican Association of Biblical Scholars.

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