

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor
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Before reading the text: God is the ultimate reality. You cannot escape Him. If you are not right with Him, if you do not please Him, then nothing else really matters. And to help us please Him, He has revealed His will for our lives by giving hundreds and hundreds of commandments to obey.

Have you ever wondered what are the greatest and most important commandments in the Bible? Well someone asked Jesus such a question. In our text today, the Lord Jesus is going to tell us what are the greatest and most important commandments in the Bible. If you learn and practice just two commandments, you will please God, and fulfill the rest of the commandments. Now listen to God's Word (read text).

Matthew 22:34-40 “The Greatest Commandments”

Intro. Now in the context we see that Jesus had silenced the Herodians, who tried to trap Him with a political question with a religious implication. Then He silenced the Sadducees, who tried to make the doctrine of the resurrection seem ridiculous. But instead, Jesus proved the validity of our hope in life after death. His victory must have pleased the Pharisees, for they believed in a bodily resurrection, unlike the Sadducees. Yet the Pharisees were opposed to Jesus, and they would much rather have seen Jesus discredited than the Sadducees silenced. Yet once again Jesus manifested His wisdom. So the Pharisees have a huddle, and they plan *their* move to try to trip Jesus theologically. They put forth a very smart lawyer,¹ that is, an expert in the Mosaic Law, to put forth a question for Jesus. Perhaps this particular Pharisee was a cut above the average scribe, an expert among the experts. They were hoping that he would be a more formidable adversary than the previous questioner. Mark's gospel indicates that this man had better motives and a better attitude than his fellow Pharisees that sent him. Perhaps he even asked a different question than the one assigned to him.

Notice what his question was in v.36, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” Actually, his question is literally translated, “What kind of (*poios*) a commandment is great in the Law?” This was not a new question, for the scribes had been debating it for centuries. After all, the rabbis had identified 613 commandments of the Law, just as there are 613 Hebrew letters in the 10 Commandments. Then they divided those commandments into 248 affirmative commands and 365 negative commands, one negative commandment for every day of the year! And of those, they had determined that some were not as important as others. And no doubt they argued and debated among themselves as to which commandments were the greatest.

Now what were they trying to do with this question? The Pharisees were hoping to entangle Jesus in a web of theological hair-slitting. Perhaps His answer would give them opportunity to make an accusation against Him. Perhaps He would even say that none of the commandments were as important as His own commandments. Then they would have accused Him of speaking against the Law. Or if He answered by elevating an insignificant commandment, they would have at least questioned His scholarship. Now Christ agreed that some commandments are more important than others. In Mt. 5:19 He refers to “one of these least commandments.” In Mt. 23:23 He accused the scribes and Pharisees of neglecting “the weightier

¹ Matthew normally used the word translated “scribe” to refer to someone who was an expert in the law, but here he used a different word. Matthew is the only evangelist to associate this expert in the law with the Pharisees.

matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.” Indeed, we must understand what our priorities should be. Too many religious people major on the minors.

Jesus did the opposite of what the Pharisees expected Him to do: He quoted Moses directly from the Old Testament. And He not only quoted Moses, but He also quoted the most familiar passage Moses ever wrote, for every Jew of that time had to recite it twice every day. It is called the *Shema*, and is found in Dt. 6:4-5. The commandments that Jesus chose said nothing directly about outward conduct, but dealt with our inner character, which is the source of our conduct. He talks about the heart, soul, and mind of man. The Pharisees majored on outward religious rituals, but these are no substitute to being right with God on the inside.

So what are the greatest and most important commandments? Jesus tells us in this text of Scripture. And since these are the most important commandments of the Old Testament, then this message is very important. So the first commandment is this:

I. LOVE GOD WITH ALL YOUR BEING

We see this greatest commandment in v.37, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” Are you obeying this commandment? Can you honestly say that you love God with all your being, and that you love God above everyone else, and above everything? Well as we reflect upon this most important commandment, let’s consider first:

A. The Meaning of this Love – Love can be an abstract concept, so I want to share with you some practical ways we are to love God.

1. Choose to Love God - I believe that our love for God is first an act of the will, where we choose to love God, regardless of the fluctuating state of our emotions. After all, we are *commanded* to love God. Such love motivates you to do what is right and noble. It is akin to the *agape* love of the Greek language. In fact, the verb form of *agape* was used in the Greek translation of Dt. 6:5.

Furthermore, a key to understanding is found in v.37 of our text. Notice that our heart, soul, and mind are to be involved in our love for God. So to love God also means to:

2. Give Your Heart to Him - The heart is the hub of the wheel of man’s existence, the center of your being. Prov. 4:23 says, “Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life.” So love God by giving yourself to Him, give your heart to Him. Have you given yourself completely to God? Jesus gave Himself completely for you. What is your response to Him? When you understand how much He loves you, loved you enough to come to earth and even die on a cross for you, then you say “Okay, God, I surrender myself to You.” Why don’t you give yourself fully to God?

That’s what happens in a wedding. About 43 years ago I fell in love with Cheryl and she fell in love with me. At some point in our relationship she told me that she loved me. That was nice. But when she married me, and gave herself completely to me, she *demonstrated* that she loved me. You can’t say that you love God if you haven’t given your heart to Him. I’m going to give you the opportunity to do that today, by trusting in Christ as your Savior. We had two youth demonstrate their love and commitment to God through baptism.

Now when we love God with our heart, when we give ourselves to Him, we will obey Him. Jesus said in John 14:15, “If you love Me, keep My commandments.” Where there is love, there will not only be obedience but also service. And when we give ourselves to God, we will give our time, talent, and treasure to Him. As in marriage, this also means that God is to be preferred above all others. Our love for God must be supreme.

3. Give your Affection to Him – Notice that we are to love God with all our soul. The soul here probably refers to the seat of man’s emotional activity. In Mt. 26:38 Jesus says, “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful.” So we are to love God with all our emotions.

Now when you have an emotional love for God, how will that manifest itself? Well, cannot hug God. He is spirit. So tell God that you love Him! That’s what you do in a love relationship. When was the last time that you told God that you love Him? Do you do it often?

4. Love God with your Mind – One way we show our love for someone is by giving them our focused attention. In a typical day, is your mind on God, or on everything else? Guys, your wife wants to know that your mind is on them. When you are in love with someone, you think of them often. Right? But if your mind is always on football, and the newspaper, and on everything else, you are not showing love to your wife. Even so, God wants us to love Him with our minds. Listen, we ought to give God our attention in Bible study, prayer, and worship. That is loving God with your mind. Do you ever zone out in church? Your mind is everywhere but on God. I’m sure that never happens while I preach! If you zone out, if your mind wanders, you are not loving and worshipping God with your mind. So we must love and worship God thoughtfully. It is good to think about God throughout the day. By the way, this has a positive benefit for us. Isa. 26:3 says, “You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You....” When you focus on yourself or your circumstance, the inevitable results are thoughts of worry, insecurity, anxiety, and conflict. But when that focus shifts to a loving, all powerful God, then you have peace.

In her bestselling book, *No Bad Dogs*, trainer Barbara Woodhouse writes: “Thousands of dogs appear to love their owners, they welcome them home with enthusiastic wagging of the tail and jumping up, they follow them about their houses happily and, to the normal person seeing the dog, the affection appears to be true and deep. But to the experienced dog trainer this outward show is not enough. The true test of real love takes place when the dog has the opportunity to go out on its own as soon as the door is left open by mistake. Some dogs will go off and not return home for hours. Our dog was like that for the first year or two! Yet true love in dogs is apparent when a door is left open and the dog still stays happily within earshot of its owner. For the owner must be the be-all and end-all of a dog’s life.”

Even so, the real test of our Christianity in this: When we have an opportunity to wander away, to disobey, to leave His presence, do we choose instead to stay close to Him, to abide in Christ, and to obey? Is your love for Christ seen in your obedience and utter loyalty to Him and to Him alone?”²

So I hope you can see the meaning of the kind of love we are to have for God. But notice also:

B. The Extent of this Love – Christ said that we are to love God “with *all* your heart, with *all* your soul, and with *all* your mind.” Note the triple “all” in this verse. The point is that God’s wholehearted love must not be answered in a half-hearted manner. When God loves, He loves the world; when He gives, He even gives His Son. His Son is even willing to die for us. Greater love is impossible (John 15:13). He truly deserves a love that is given “with *all* your heart, with *all* your soul, and with *all* your mind.”

So do you love God with all your heart, soul, and mind? Have you given yourself wholeheartedly to Him? Is God the supreme object of your devotion? Do you love Him more than everything and everyone? For many the honest answer is “No.” So consider with me also:

² David Jeremiah, *Turning Point Daily Devotional*, 5-5-05 [Illus.#C-1285]

C. The Means of Having Such Love – It is impossible for us to generate this kind of love on our own. Most people love self more than God. The only way we can love God in this way is first to contemplate the great love of God for us. Romans 5:8 says, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” God’s great love was unconditional and sacrificial. And once we contemplate God’s great love for us, then we must respond to His love. 1 John 4:19 John said, “We love him, because he first loved us.” And as we turn to God and trust Christ as our Savior, we are given the Holy Spirit, who imparts God’s love into our hearts. Romans 5:5 says, “the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.”

So the only way you can obey the greatest of the commandments is to trust in Christ as Savior, receive the Holy Spirit and contemplate His great love. Then you can truly love God. And then you can also obey the second most important commandment:

II. LOVE OTHERS AS YOURSELF

Love for God cannot be divorced from love for one’s neighbor; so in v.39 Jesus also quoted Leviticus 19:18, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” John said in 1 John 4:20, “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?”

Once again, let’s begin by considering:

A. The Meaning of this Love – Someone asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Our “neighbor” is anyone who has been providentially placed in our path who needs our love in the form of sympathy or help. We are to bear one another’s burdens, and help meet the needs of others. Perhaps the highest form of love for our neighbors is to help them have a right relationship with God. Jesus even went beyond this great Old Testament law. He said that we should even love our enemies! (Mt. 5:44). Someone said, “The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because they are generally the same people.” (G. K. Chesterton). What was sad was the fact that the Pharisees were not showing love for Jesus, but plotting His death!

Are you obey this great commandment? Are you showing love to your neighbor and everyone else that you come in contact with?

Notice also:

B. The Extent of this Love – Christ said, “love your neighbor as yourself.” Man has been created with love for himself. Paul said in Eph. 5:29, “no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it.” The standard of our love for others is high. We are to love our neighbor as ourselves.

So this means that our neighbors’ interests must be as dear to us as our own. The second commandment means to take care of someone else in the same way you would take care of yourself. We are all concerned with our comfort and meeting our own needs. But are we as concerned with the comforts and needs of others? When you are hungry, you feed yourself, but when someone else is hungry, do you take care of him with the same concern? When you are uncomfortable, you find comfort. Do you have the same feeling for someone else who is in need of comfort? Or to state it in another way, Jesus gave the Golden Rule saying, “Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them...” (Mt. 7:12; cf. Lk. 6:31). If someone is grieving, comfort them. If someone is lonely, visit them. If someone is sick or hurt, offer to take them to the doctor, or pick up a prescription, or take them food.

C. The Means of this Love - God's love for us, and our love for God is foundational for loving others. This second commandment is second partly because it is a consequence of the first. Innate self-regard will yield to no force but that of love to God. It is vain to try to create brotherhood among men unless the sense of God's fatherhood is its foundation.

Have you obeyed these two greatest commandments consistently? This is not something you can treat lightly. Jesus said that these are the two greatest commandments of all.

Now based on this text of Scripture, and I want to make one more main point:

III. MAKE LOVE A PRIORITY

Both duty to God and duty to man can be summed up in the word "love." Let's make sure that we major on what's most important. Now we should make love a priority for the following reasons:

A. Because Jesus Said These Are the Greatest Commandments - Notice that He did not pick any of the Ten Commandments. He picked the commandments that dealt with love. And Jesus emphasized love again and again. He said in John 13:35, "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Gloria was ready to take her life. She had untold numbers of prescription drugs that she had saved for this moment. Her life was a heart-wrenching story of drug abuse, failed relationships, and multiple rejections. Gloria turned on the television lest any apartment neighbors hear her make any noises as the drugs did their deadly work. In the sovereignty of God, the television turned on to a Billy Graham crusade. A telephone number was on the bottom of the screen for anyone needing help. Gloria called the number before she took the pills. The wise counselor for the Graham organization recognized that Gloria was suicidal. She told Gloria to find a church immediately, that someone would help her. A Wesleyan church was on the list of churches the Graham organization had that were near Gloria.

Gloria decided to put off her suicide and try the church the next day, for that would be Sunday. Again, in God's perfect timing, Gloria ran into the pastor just before the worship service began. "Billy Graham sent me," she told him, and proceeded to attend the service. Later, she said, "Billy Graham saved me from killing myself, but my church showed me how to be saved from my sins." What was it about the church that made Gloria want to listen to them? She said, "The love of the people was incredible. I never knew someone as dirty as me could ever receive love again. The people accepted me just as I was." She paused for a moment, then continued. "I have seen Jesus in the faces of all these people who love me."³

Indeed, love is the greatest commandment. Love is the mark of true believers. By the way, Islam is totally lacking an emphasis on love.

There is another reason why these are the greatest commandments:

B. Because Jesus Said These Two Commandments Uphold All Scriptures – Notice that Jesus said in v.40, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." These two commandments actually summarize the entire Mosaic Law. Not only that, but these two great principles cover the more advanced teaching of the Prophets. This twofold command is the peg on which the whole "law and the prophets" hang. Remove that peg, and all is lost, for the entire Old Testament points to the love of God which demands the answer of love in return. Likewise,

³ Thom S. Rainer, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched*, 166.

Paul said in Rom. 13:10, “Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.” So Jesus says that if we truly love God and our neighbor, we will naturally keep the other commandments as a consequence.

So you do not need a law degree to understand what the Bible is all about. Christianity is not complicated. If you can just grasp the concept of love for God, and love for others, you have a grasp of the Christian life. If you love God with all your being and love everyone as you love yourself, you don’t have to have any further rules. All the other commandments are simply an extension or practical application of those two commandments. If you love God with all your heart, you will obey the first four of the Ten Commandments. If you love your neighbor as yourself, you will obey the last six.

Conclusion: Do you love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength? Do you love others as much as you love yourself? When they have needs, do you seek to meet their needs? Are you making love the priority of your life?

Now remember to whom Jesus is speaking. He is talking to Pharisees, who believed they were saved by keeping the law. But who among them or us obeys these two greatest commandments consistently, and to the extent described? No one but Jesus! We can’t be saved by keeping the law. We need a Savior, and His name is Jesus. And you need to be saved and indwelt by the Holy Spirit even to be *able* to love like this. So will you trust in Christ as your Savior today?

If you are already a Christian, I want to encourage you to grow in your love for God, and for others. Paul wrote in Php. 1:9, “And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment.” Let us make growing in our love for God and others the priority of our lives, especially in this day when COVID-19 is separating people to such an extent.

Sources: Ronald A. Beers, ed., *Life Application Study Bible* (Tyndale House & Zondervan, 1991); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973); John MacArthur, Jr., *Jesus Silences His Critics: Matthew 22:15-46* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1987); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture, Vol 6* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); John Phillips, *Exploring The Gospel of Matthew: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew*, reprint, Christian Publishing Co.; Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Loyal: Matthew* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1980); Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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