

# THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

*Matthew 22:34-40*

In Matthew 21 Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph, hailed by the people and fulfilling prophecy. He entered the Temple, declared it to be His Father's house – and therefore His house – and cleansed it of those who abused it. The next morning He cursed a fruitless fig tree which symbolized fruitless, faithless Israel, an act which sets the stage for the chapters that follow. The chief priests and Pharisee elders of the people demanded that He prove His authority to do such things, and He refused, but He did tell a series of parables that condemned their faithlessness and wickedness. He then told a fourth parable which revealed the utter rebellion and hardness of heart of the Jewish people, and taught that God would populate His Kingdom by His own sovereign election, not by waiting and hoping for unrepentant sinners to change their hearts.

Rather than being humbled by His authority and appealing to God for mercy, the wicked leaders of Israel began a series of confrontations with Jesus. Their aim was to dismiss Jesus as an insignificant poser, a mere man who would tremble before their superior wisdom. The Pharisees started it off by asking whether taxes should be paid to Tiberius Caesar; they thought that whatever answer Jesus gave – yes or no – would create an insurmountable problem for Him. They failed. Then the Sadducees came, trying to show that the doctrine of the resurrection was ultimately a silly idea that couldn't bear up under the weight of the real world. They failed as well.

And now the Pharisees return. They have a better plan, they think, and surely this one will reveal Jesus to be inferior to their traditions and scholarship.

## TESTING JESUS

*Matthew 22:34-36*

34 But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together. 35 And one of them, a scholar of the Law, asked Him a question, testing Him, 36 “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” (Matthew 22:34–36, 2022 LSB)

A “scholar of the Law” was not a theologian, an expert in the doctrines of Scripture. He was an expert in the oral traditions and teachings of the Rabbis. Those oral traditions were the cumulative wisdom of the rabbis going back, they said, to the time of the return from Babylon. They were not put in written form until the third century A.D., when the Mishnah was created. Those oral traditions were the detailed practices to be followed by the Jewish people, and were a tremendous burden on the people.

For instance, Leviticus 23 commands the people of Israel to observe the Feast of Tabernacles, or the Feast of Booths, or *Sukkot* (from the Hebrew word for a booth or hut). The Scriptures contain exactly zero instructions on how to build those booths. Over time the Rabbis produced almost 2,000 words of oral tradition that they insisted were binding on the people as God’s Law.

- A booth which taller than 30 feet is invalid (although Rabbi Judah says it’s ok).
- A booth which is not at least 15 feet high, does not have three walls, or allows more light than shade, is not valid.
- Rabbi Shammai says you can’t use an old booth, but Rabbi Hillel says, “Sure, go ahead and use last year’s booth.”
- What exactly is an old booth? Any booth made thirty days or more before the Festival, unless you made it FOR the Festival, in which case it’s ok, even if it was made at the beginning of the year.

The man who approached Jesus that day was an expert in those oral traditions. He did not come with a honest or open purpose; he came to test Jesus. No one who tested Jesus ever had an honest or humble purpose. Jesus caught them at it in Matthew 22:18: But Jesus, knowing

their wickedness, said, “Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites?”

**35** And one of them, a scholar of the Law, asked Him a question, testing Him, **36** “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” (**Matthew 22:34–36, 2022 LSB**)

Now, what are the Pharisees hoping to achieve by this test? The rabbis had determined that there were 613 laws in the Torah. They recognized that some were affirmative – “You shall” – and some were negative – “You shall not.” They divided them into heavy and light categories; the heavy laws were absolutely binding, and the light laws were less binding. And, as I have already mentioned, they then created countless rules that governed the observance of each law.

As the Mishnah shows, there was little agreement on what the Law meant and how it should be kept. Rabbi Shammai says, “You must never do that!”, but Rabbi Hillel shrugs and says, “Sure, why not?” That sort of thing repeats endlessly in the Mishnah. The whole point of the rabbinical traditions was that there was no such thing as a single, simple, straightforward, “do this and live” Law in the Scriptures. Everything was up for discussion and argument and debate.

At the very best they want Jesus to offer up His opinion on the Law in order to engage Him in argument, but we’ve already been told that they don’t have the best in mind.

## THE SIMPLICITY OF GOD’S LAW

*Matthew 22:37-39*

**37** And He said to him, “**YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND. 38** This is the great and foremost commandment. **39** And the second is like it, ‘**YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.**” (**Matthew 22:37–39, 2022 LSB**)

Jesus says that the great and foremost commandment of the Law is the one they already know by heart. They had memorized it as little children. It was called the *Shema*, from the first word in the Hebrew text: *Shema Yisrael! Yahweh Elohim! Yahweh Echad!*

**4 “Hear, O Israel! Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is one! 5 You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”  
(Deuteronomy 6:4–5, 2022 LSB)**

Jesus said what Moses said, simply and clearly. The greatest of the commandments, the foremost of all the commandments, is to love Yahweh your God with all of your heart, and all of your soul, and all of your might. The word “mind” comes in through the the Greek translation of this verse, the Septuagint. Mark and Luke’s Gospels add the word “strength.”

Putting all of it together, we are to love Yahweh our God with all of our heart, all of our soul, all of our mind, and all of our strength.

I love the practicality of our Good God! He covered every possible aspect of humanity in the words heart, soul, mind, and strength. We are to love Him with everything that we are and do. There is not a single aspect of our lives that is outside of heart, soul, mind, and strength. “Should I love God with my \_\_\_\_\_?” The answer is always an unqualified, enthusiastic “Yes!”

That answers the scholar’s question: the great and foremost commandment of the Law is to love Yahweh your God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

But Jesus wasn’t done. There is a second commandment that is very much like the first: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. This time Jesus quotes from Leviticus 19:18. It’s part of a longer passage. I want to read those verses to you, so that you see how seamlessly it fits with the great and foremost commandment.

**11** You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another.

**12** And you shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God;

**I am Yahweh.**

**13** You shall not oppress your neighbor nor rob him.

The wages of a hired man shall not remain with you overnight until morning.

**14** You shall not curse a deaf man nor place a stumbling block before the blind, but **you shall fear your God;**

**I am Yahweh.**

**15** You shall do no injustice in judgment;

you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you shall judge your neighbor in righteousness.

**16** You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand against the life of your neighbor;

**I am Yahweh.**

**17** You shall not hate your brother in your heart;

you may surely reprove your neighbor, and so not bear sin because of him.

**18** You shall not take vengeance,

and you shall not keep your anger against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself;

**I am Yahweh. (Leviticus 19:11–18, 2022 LSB)**

Loving your neighbor as yourself has nothing to do with affection, and everything to do with treating them with honesty, integrity, and justice. Over and over God repeats, “I am Yahweh.” The way we treat others is inseparably tied to our relationship with Him.

In the parallel passage in Luke 10:29 the scholar tries to justify himself; he asks Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” He’s looking for a narrow definition of neighbor. He’s looking for a definition of neighbor that fits the way he already lives and thinks. Jesus then tells the parable of the Good Samaritan to show that our “neighbor” is anyone that we can show mercy to. There were about 200 million people alive in the first century. Any one of those men, women, or children could have come within this man’s reach and thus been his neighbor. Any one of

the 7.9 billion people in the world could come within your reach, your sphere of influence, and thus be your neighbor.

Jesus isn't quite done with His answer.

## TWO DOMINANT COMMANDMENTS

*Matthew 22:40*

**40** “On these two commandments hang the whole Law and the Prophets.” (**Matthew 22:40, 2022 LSB**)

The great and foremost commandment is to love Yahweh your love with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. The second commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself. The whole Law of God and every word of the prophets hangs from one or both of these commandments. Jesus used the word *hang*, as in to suspend something in the air. It's also found in Acts 5:30 where it describes Jesus' crucifixion: “The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you put to death by **hanging** Him on a tree.”

That means that these two commandments are absolutely necessary. It's not just that the Law and prophets *depend* on them; they *arise* from them by necessity. Every moral Law of the Old Testament is dependent upon them.

Let me put it differently.

If there was no command to love God with all of our being, then there would no first commandment to worship Him alone, no second commandment to avoid making images to worship, no third commandment to not take His name in vain, and no fourth commandment to keep His Sabbath day holy.

If there was no command to love our neighbor as ourselves, there would be no fifth commandment to honor our parents, no sixth commandment to do no murder, no seventh commandment to not commit adultery, no eighth commandment to not steal, no ninth commandment to not lie, and no tenth commandment to not covet our neighbor's things.

It is not that these two commandments came first in the Scriptures; they don't. It's that they were foremost in God's own holy nature and character and His design for creation.

It is because of the command to love God with our entire being that we are to worship God alone as God, that we are not to make any images of Him or anything to worship, that we are to preserve the holiness and dignity of His name, and that we are to keep His Sabbath day holy.

It is because of the command to love our neighbor as ourselves that we are to honor our parents, preserve all life, preserve our own and our neighbors chastity, defend and preserve the property and rights of each person, maintain and promote truth, and be content with our possessions in an attitude of charity toward others.

These two commandments don't possess authority because they are written in ink, but because they arise from the nature and character of God. God and God alone is worthy of our faith and trust, and our unreserved obedience. That is, we are to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. And He requires that you and I, as people made in His image, grant to every other human being the fullness of dignity and honor due to them as people made in His image; that is to say, to love them as we love ourselves.

Cancel these commandments, remove them, erase God from culture and society and thought, consider human beings to be nothing more than advanced animals, mere accidents of evolutionary chemical processes, and what do you have? You have our world as it is today. A world full of blasphemy and mockery toward God. A world where death and perversion are

celebrated and even mandated.

## BRINGING IT HOME

The great and foremost commandment is clear: love God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength. The second commandment is clear: love your neighbor as yourself. They are so perfectly and simply phrased that it's impossible to summarize them. The words are easy to understand, but the commands are impossible to follow.

The truth is that we fail at loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We fail at loving our neighbor as ourselves. We know that we fail these foundational commands because we violate the commands that arise from them. We don't trust or obey Yahweh as we should. We don't love others as we should.

This is the crisis point for many. This is where we are tempted to play word games with the Scriptures. "Who is my neighbor?" the man asked Jesus. What is love? What is the heart? Where, when, why, how? We start looking for ways to justify unbelief and disobedience.

Don't do that this morning. Don't fight the conviction of the Spirit of God. Humble yourself under His mighty hand, and He will exalt you in due time. Accept His measure of your heart. You can do this without fear of rejection or judgment. He knows the frailty of your life, He knows that you are marked by sin. He sent His Son to bear His judgment against You, so that you could be His child in joy and freedom, dressing in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, cleansed by His blood, filled with His Spirit, guided by His Word.

You see Jesus did love Yahweh His Father with all of His heart and soul and mind and strength. Jesus did love every neighbor just as He loved Himself.