

May 5th, 2024

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Sermon Title: The Great Commandment

Sermon Text: Matthew 22:34-40

Matt. 22:34 ¶ But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together.

Matt. 22:35 And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.

Matt. 22:36 “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”

Matt. 22:37 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.

Matt. 22:38 This is the great and first commandment.

Matt. 22:39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Matt. 22:40 On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Main Point: Christians are called to love God supremely and love our neighbor unselfishly.

Outline:

1. Love God (v. 34-38)
2. Love Others (v. 39-40)

Introduction

After the Sadducees were shut down by Jesus last week, now the Pharisees try to have a run at it. Verse 35 says that this lawyer asks Jesus today’s question to “test him.” It looks like the plan here is for Jesus to just be asked a hard question that might trip him up.

What is his question? Well he wants to know “which is the great commandment of the Law?” The presumption is, there is somewhere in the Law of Moses that we ought to be working from or starting with.

There were 613 commandments in the Old Testament Law. Now, this number is debated among Hebrew scholars. It isn't universally agreed on, but the number is basically right. 365 of them are negative commands not to do certain things, and 248 of them are positive commands for God's people to do certain things.

You can imagine how daunting it might be for a Scribe – someone whose whole life is wrapped up in the Law of Moses, to try to figure out *which* of those 613 commandments should take the highest priority. Surely you can't make them all a priority? How do you even decide where to start?

I grew up in central Kansas. And growing up as a high schooler there was only one kind of music I was allowed to listen to in my house: Contemporary Christian Music. And if it wasn't Michael W. Smith or Steven Curtis Chapman or Carman, well I wasn't allowed to listen to it.

Well one day, it was like the Berlin wall just fell down. One day my parents just stopped enforcing this rule. And the whole world of music opened up to me finally. And I remember buying my first Beatles album at Hastings in Hutchinson, Kansas. This was back in the day where you couldn't go online to find out what a band sounded like: you had to buy it. And so you would often buy albums just based on the covers.

And what I really wanted to do was get into the Beatles. The problem is, in my town, everyone that I knew listened to country music. Just country music as far as the eye could see. But see, I hated country music. And I knew nobody who would just tell me what the best Beatles album was.

Now, if you walked into Hastings and went to the Beatles section there were 23 albums to choose from. 23! This band that had been together for only 8 years somehow had 23 albums to pick from. I needed help. But you know, when you're overwhelmed, you do need someone who knows more than you to step in and help you out. You need someone to point you in the right direction. You need a guide.

There were 23 Beatles albums, which seemed daunting enough. But there were 613 commandments in the Old Testament Law. And surely we can see that this question is infinitely more important than which Beatles album is the best.

So today let's look at Jesus' answer. It's an answer in two parts: Part one is, Love God. And part two is, Love People.

1. Love God (v. 34-38)

The first part, and the most important command, according to Jesus is "Love God."

In verse 34 this scribe comes up, and as we saw he asks Jesus a question: “which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” He wants to know where our priorities should be.

And he gets an immediate response. Jesus says in verses 37-38,

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.”

So that’s the first answer Jesus gives. Let’s just stop here for now.

How do you do this? To love God? *God*, the creator of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible? The holy and perfect and glorious God? It’s an incredibly daunting call. In fact, don’t talk yourself out of this as though what Jesus says here is not all that big: there’s literally nothing in all the world that is more important or more difficult to do perfectly than this command.

People today though are so moralistic and generically spiritual that they think this must be quite easy. “Oh, love God. It’s just two words. Easy peasy. I can fit that on a bumper sticker.”

But this is a command that in some ways we aren’t even ready, as modern people, to *hear*, let alone do. In many cases we don’t understand what it means to love, period. And we often don’t even know what we mean by “*God*.” So for your average modern person, *both* words of the command to Love God are just non starters.

What is love?

Okay, so what is love here? What does Jesus mean by it?

You know, we live in a moment when “love” is thought of exclusively as an emotion. We have been training ourselves to think of love as a thing that is primarily a spontaneous outpouring of affection. And this means that if the object of our love is worthy enough, then our affection will happen. And yet, this bumps up against the kind of love Scripture speaks of.

Deuteronomy 11:1 says “You shall therefore love the LORD your God and keep his charge, his statutes, his rules, and his commandments always.” See how he ties obedience to love. There’s no discussion here of “feelings” toward God. The emphasis is on obedience: sacrifice.

And this isn’t just a one-off. Exodus 20:6: “I, the LORD your God...show steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.” If you start with Scripture and not with our own culture, love doesn’t look like feelings, but it does look an awful love like obedience. There are dozens of other passages like this in the Old Testament alone.

Jesus speaks this way in the New Testament, as well. John 14:21: “Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me.” If you’re a modern person looking to have your “emotion-based” view of love reinforced in the Bible you start to feel disappointed after a while.

Now, this doesn’t mean that love in Scripture is all cerebral and no emotions. Sometimes we find passages that do tie together affections, love, and obedience. Like Psalm 119:47, which says, “I find my delight in your commandments, which I love.” So the Psalmist loves the commandments of God, and therefore does experience an emotion: namely an emotion of delight, fullness, and satisfaction.

I point this out because I want you to see that loving God is not *exclusively* about feelings. It *involves* our affections, but can’t be determined only by our affections. Love that is only felt is empty. Love that is only cerebral is burdensome.

Love is not merely a feeling, it is fundamentally a choice and is rooted in the will, and the will is determined by our feelings or affections. This is why God so often conditions whether we really love based on what we do and how we treat others.

So if someone cares for others from the heart in ways that are tangible they can be rightly said to love others.

And if someone obeys God’s commands from the heart, they can be rightly said to love God.

The person who only has emotions about God but doesn’t obey God doesn’t love him.

The person who only has ideas about God, or who only obeys the commandments of God outwardly but not from the heart is a moralist at best. And both of those things are repugnant to God. True love is rooted in the affections, moves within the will, and drives us to obey what we know is true.

That’s what love is. It engages the whole of our person and reflects who we are and what we treasure. It’s what God calls us to: we are meant to *love*. We were *made* to love.

Who is God?

That’s only part of the command. Because the command isn’t *just* to love. The command is to love “*God*.” In Mark’s gospel, Jesus answers this initial question by going to Deuteronomy 6:4 and 5. This passage is known as The Shema. We call it shema because the first word in it is “shema,” which means “hear.”

The Shema begins announcing who God is: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” The command begins, not by requiring something of us, but of declaring who God is. It starts with God. God is the Creator. He is the invisible, eternal, and unchangeable

maker of all things. He is who he is. He is the fundamental basis of all reality. Apart from him there is nothing. He is fundamental to creation, but he *himself* is not creation. He is distinct from what was made, even though creation depends on him.

There *is* no commandment keeping apart from God. We can have moralism without God, but we cannot please God apart from Him and who he is.

And in the Hebrew this command doesn't just use the generic word for God, but it actually says "Yahweh our God." It mentions his specific covenant name. The special name that he only tells to his people.

The text of the shema literally says "Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one."

Only after we know who God is can we be called to be who we are. And Jesus says, "The most important thing to know is that love for God is supreme."

Why do we love?

What motivates or drives our love? Is it enough for us to just to know that we *should* love God? If you look at the teachings of Scripture what you find is that when God tells people what they ought to do, on its own that command is very weak in the hands of a sinner. Because when you tell someone what "ought" or "should" happen you're giving them the law. You're telling them what should be the case and showing them how they fall short. But unless you give them good news that drives the engine of the heart, then you are only crushing them with what you say.

So even the command to love God is crushing unless there is good news that comes before.

Why do we love God? How can we love God? All over Scripture we see the answer woven in, and occasionally made explicit. Here it is: We love because God first pursues and loves his people. He moves first. He takes the initiative. He acts first. He is the hound of heaven who pursues us and loves us first. 1 John 4:19 summarizes it well: "We love because he first loved us." He does call us to love him. But his love came first. He came first. He acted first.

This isn't just the New Testament. This is the story of the whole Old Testament. Israel is in bondage in Egypt. Before they worship him, before they offer sacrifices to him, he decides to save them. He loves them, delivers them, and only then does he call on them to love and worship him. Right? He loves first, then they're called to love.

And this is the pattern over and over again: God loves them. Eventually they reject him. He disciplines them, but keeps loving and delivering them. God keeps loving.

So we don't love because we are just so full of love. We love because God is full of love and has displayed his love for us, he has loved us ultimately in the person of Christ, and his death on the cross. John 13:1, "Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." Notice again: even *Jesus'* love is pictured in terms of obedience and action. How do we know that he loved? Because he laid down his life. Love in action. Love not just as an emotion.

But our love is meant to be based in what we see here: he loved us to the end. Therefore, we love him. This is what Gospel love looks like: it is rooted in Jesus and his love and the overflowing and outpouring of his love above all else. If our love doesn't start there, it will be burdensome and crush us, and always end in either moralism and pride, or in us eventually just rejecting God altogether.

Now, I will admit, there is an intimidating aspect to this passage. Because Jesus doesn't just say we should love God. He says that the first great commandment is to love God in a specific way: "with *all* your heart and with *all* your soul and with *all* your mind."

In other words, Jesus tells us that God calls us to give him *all* of ourselves. All of our heart – that's our emotions. Like I said before, true love doesn't exclude the emotions, but it also isn't *only* emotions. Because he also says, "with all your soul and with all your mind." Because of his love, we should love him with our minds, and with our spiritual devotion and energy.

The creator made us, and so he deserves all of our thoughts – our best thoughts. He deserves all of our soul – he demands all of our worship. He deserves the height of our affections – our heart.

Now, if we are rooted in Christ and what he has done, this isn't going to feel like a condemning law for us. Instead it will feel like God is giving us the target that our lives were always meant to aim at. We are to be lovers of God. We are to aim at being people who obey God from the heart.

Now, if we try to start with ourselves, with feeling enough, doing enough, thinking enough, we'll be burdened by this passage.

But if we start with the *Gospel* first and what Christ has done, then we'll find what 1 John says to be true: "his commandments are not burdensome." If we don't start with the gospel as our basis of doing this, we'll find that the law of God is burdensome and heavier than a black hole.

Now, I think there are some who at this moment might shy away from a serious call to discipleship here because of this fear: we don't want to convey the wrong idea: that our devotion and seriousness in spiritual things is in any way a basis for our peace with God. And so what do we often do? We might shy away from making the full court press at just this moment.

But I want to lean into this command. I've made enough gospel qualifications that I think you can hear what I say here without you feeling this is a burden.

I actually want us to feel the seriousness of the call to live Gospel-rooted lives that are built around God and devoted to him. He calls for all of our heart, and soul, and mind. I don't know how to perfectly convey the radical type of devotion God calls us to here, but I want to try.

When I was a single man in high school heading off to college I feel like I really had this sense. My wife laughs at me now, but when she met me, I was dead serious: I wanted to be devoted to God like a monk. I had basically decided I would stay single and be a serious student of God who set my whole life aside to his service. She laughs at me now of course because my plan of staying single lasted like one semester.

I am not a believer in monasticism, but I did think of myself that way during my single years especially and during my studies in college and seminary. I wasn't perfect, but I was determined. And because of that I thought of myself as someone set apart to God, and as someone whose whole life belonged to God. I think we need to be more willing to think of ourselves in this way.

We do need to press ourselves toward more radical obedience and devotion to God. We need to take God's high calling seriously in Christ. We should live self-controlled and self-denying lives, because Christ has saved us and loved us, and deserves all of us. I really want to press every one of us toward a more radical whole-life devotion than we might be used to living here in the comfortable American western society.

If you are a kid, even now be resolved as you grow up that you will be devoted to God.

If you are a high schooler, resolve even now as you prepare to graduate and move into the rest of your life that you will give yourself heart, soul, and mind to God.

If you are an adult, you may need to look back on your own past and resolve that you will once again rededicate yourself – your whole self – to God again.

If you are in Christ, God calls you to radical obedience, and he calls you to devote the best of yourself to the one who saved you. And I think all of us need to hear that call. And we need to have it set before us without apologies.

Will you hear that call? To love God with everything you are, and everything you have? Take it seriously. Make him the first person you think of when you awake, and the last person you speak to before you fall asleep, and devote yourself to him in between both of those moments.

This is the first great commandment: to love God.

2. Love People (v. 39-40)

The second great commandment that Jesus mentions is “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” In other words, if the first commandment is love God, the second one is “love people.”

I mentioned before that with the modern way of thinking about love, we tend to believe that if someone is worthy of our love then we will feel affection for them, and that is love. And then we’ll do things for the people we love.

That’s a very passive form of love: I’ll love you as I feel the motivation arise, and if it doesn’t, then it’s your fault for not being lovable.

But in Luke 6:32, Jesus takes direct aim at this kind of merit-based love. He says, “If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.”

So Jesus says to us as Christians, if your love of others is based on their worthiness, you aren’t really loving at all. This exclusively merit-based, affection-based view of love totally falls apart with the second part of this commandment because Jesus says we should “love our neighbor as ourselves.”

Jesus ranks our love for God as the supreme commandment. But love for others isn’t far behind it at all. In fact, as Jesus puts it, our love for others may be *distinguished* from our love for God, but it can never be separated from it. In fact, the absence of love of neighbor is proof, according to 1 John 4:20, that we don’t have a love for God at all. “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar” (1 John 4:20). And according to Jesus, all of mankind are our brother and our neighbor.

So many people have claimed to love God while neglecting their fellow man. They say, “I’ll help people who deserve it.” Jesus even told the story of the Samaritan, in part to say, “Look at all these super religious men who said they loved God, but they neglected this suffering person. And they did it in the name of love for God. They did it in the name of staying religiously clean.”

No, Jesus says. If you think you love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, but you don’t love your neighbor... it’s proof that you don’t have the first and most important

kind of love, either. Your religiosity has become a nice-looking cover for self-love. Our lack of love for neighbor is proof that our love is only in our head, and that we have *deceived* ourselves into thinking that we love.

You don't really love God. Because loving God moves us outside of ourselves. Outside of our little world.

Loving God means we stop orbiting around ourselves and being our own little planet. Loving God means that we start to really see God's image in others.

And we're freed to do that because we know that someone is looking out for us, and that's God... not us. This is why I keep emphasizing the gospel first, gospel-rooted aspect of this. When we're in Christ we no longer bear the responsibility of caring for ourselves... now we know that we rest in Christ. **He cares for us now, so that we're freed to care for others.**

And so today as we close, we have two things before us. **On the one hand**, we have the standard that we haven't met. And in Christ Jesus, God forgives us for not meeting that standard.

On the other hand, we now have the power to keep that standard, because he's shown the love to us. He took the initiative, stepped out, loved *his* neighbor as himself, and took their punishment.

If you trust in Christ, that's you. And you receive and rest in him alone for your salvation and now know peace with God.

Jesus keeps the law the we can't keep. And in him, we are freed now to love our God and love our neighbor with all that we have, because it was done first for us.

Let's pray.