

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew

SERMON: **The Greatest Commandment**

SCRIPTURE: Matt 22:34-40

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The religious leaders of Israel were not the brightest bulbs in the chandelier. They never seemed to learn that their efforts to discredit Jesus and entrap Him were utterly futile. Time and again they were intellectually annihilated but kept coming back for more. In just one chapter, Matthew 22, we witness three major confrontations that spell disaster for these pompous religious hypocrites.

First the Pharisees thought they had Jesus cornered when they asked Him if it was right to pay taxes to Caesar. Surely He would either offend the Romans or offend the taxpayers, but His answer—"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's"—amazed them and caused them to withdraw to lick their wounds.

Then came the Sadducees, who were certain their superior intellectual prowess had Jesus trapped between a rock and a hard place. They pretended to know a woman who used the Levirate law to marry seven brothers, one at a time, each of whom died in turn, and eventually she died. "Now then," they asked, "at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?" The Sadducees had two purposes in this bizarre riddle—to discredit the doctrine of the resurrection and to discredit Jesus Himself. But He denied that the woman will be the wife of any of them, because in the resurrection the institution of marriage will no longer be in effect, meaning we won't have exclusive, isolating relationships, though as we saw last week, that doesn't mean we won't be family. The result of that confrontation was that the Sadducees were "silenced" by Jesus. The Greek term in Matthew 22:34 means "muzzled." They were rendered utterly speechless.

Now today we come to the third and final attempt of the religious leaders to destroy Jesus' credibility and turn the crowds against Him. And when this one too fails, as have all the others, we read. "From that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions." Does that mean they are ready to acknowledge His deity and bow the knee to Him? Hardly. The next time we encounter these religious leaders in chapter 26 they are organizing His execution.

This third challenge comes from the Pharisees. (The first one was from the Pharisees, then the Sadducees, now the Pharisees again). They undoubtedly enjoyed the blistering the elite Sadducees received in the previous confrontation, but now they have to plot their own strategy. The phrase in verse 34 that they "got together" hints at a high-level meeting of the Joint Chiefs, a formal assembly, to plan their final assault.

They choose a lawyer from among them, apparently someone with unusual expertise in the Mosaic law and skilled at arguing its fine points. And once again we notice that Jesus is addressed with flattery as "Rabbi." Let's read from Matthew's gospel, the 22nd chapter, verses 34 through 46:

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest

greatest commandment in the Law?"

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

The Pharisees test Jesus with a final question: “Which is the greatest commandment in the law?”

Why this question? The Rabbis divided the 613 laws in the Mosaic code into two categories—the weighty and the light. For example, they argued, the sixth commandment not to commit murder can hardly be equated with the commandment not to boil a kid in its mother’s milk (Deut. 14:21), and in a sense we would agree. But there is a danger lurking in this kind of thinking, for while the societal consequences of the former are certainly greater than the latter, both are forbidden by God, and we can only assume He had good reasons for doing so. It’s a small step from saying that one law is more important than another to saying that the other is not important at all. Very quickly human reason can become the arbiter of morality rather than God. This often happened with the Pharisees.

Furthermore, the more time spent on speculating about the relative importance of various laws, the less attention is given to actually obeying those laws. This, too, happened with the scribes and the Pharisees, who debated endlessly, but with very little agreement.

Asking which is the greatest of God’s commandments is kind of like asking, “Which of your children do you love the most?” No matter what answer Jesus gives, they expect it to stir up argument and controversy and have a strong possibility of damaging His reputation. But Jesus’ answer, as always, avoids the trap and drives to the heart of the matter.

Jesus answers by quoting two commandments from the Mosaic Law: “Love the Lord your God . . . Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus goes directly to what is known as the Shema for His answer—probably the most familiar passage in the entire OT to the Jewish people, quoted every day at morning and evening prayers. If you are ever in a Jewish synagogue or ever stand at the Wailing Wall, you will hear these words repeated over and over: *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*. Here’s how our Bibles read in Deuteronomy 6:4-5: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”

The Jewish people memorized these words and recited them as often as Catholics say *Hail Mary*. And they paid very careful attention to the immediately following verses:

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your

gates.”

They took this very literally, tying the words of the Shema on their hands and foreheads, and on the doorframes of their homes. I have here this morning a couple of leather phylacteries given to me by Lorene Tippin, which she obtained in Israel. Inside these little boxes are the words of Deuteronomy 6:4-9, and if you go today to the wailing wall in Jerusalem, you will see orthodox Jews wearing these on their foreheads. And on the doorframe of every orthodox home will be a mezuzah, a little metal sleeve usually 3-6 inches long, nailed at an angle, in which the same words are stored.

But glance down, if you will, at chapter 23, where Jesus offers His most scorching denunciation of the Jewish religious leaders ever. Verse 5 says, “Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long.” They were more concerned that people see the words of Deuteronomy on their foreheads than in their lives. Familiarity breeds contempt, you know, and these people had become so familiar with these words and so used to repeating them that they didn’t pay any attention to their application.

More than likely the command to tie the words on foreheads and attach them to doorframes was meant metaphorically, the point being that these words must be lived out in everyday life. But too many people were satisfied to just have the law tucked away in their phylacteries and mezuzahs. So Jesus takes this most familiar of all Scripture commands, assigns it to the top place, but in doing so He makes it clear that outward obedience to the letter of the law is no substitute for inner obedience to the spirit of it.

He does so by adding a second commandment, though He is only asked for one. It is also found in the law of Moses and comes from the book of Lev. 19:18: “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.” This, too, was a portion of the Law which was given prominent attention, as the religious leaders debated endlessly as to who qualified as a neighbor, concluding that the term applied only to fellow Jews, and not even to all of them. But once again they clearly neglected this law when it comes to application.

Let’s examine these two commandments carefully by asking several questions:

What is the relationship between them? There is clearly a vertical and horizontal dimension. We are to focus ourselves in the vertical dimension of life by loving God, honoring Him in obedience and humility. We are also to focus ourselves in the horizontal dimension of life, by loving our neighbor as ourselves. But it is critical to see that the vertical precedes the horizontal. The second commandment is related to the first, is even like it, but it is *not* the first *nor* the greatest. Why? Because God Himself must be the foundation and focus of our lives. He must be our highest good, our first priority, our greatest love. If we fail in our love for Him, we fail in everything else.

But while the vertical precedes the horizontal, they are inextricably linked. Loving God wholeheartedly cannot be divorced from seeing other people as God sees them. And they are all objects of His love. Therefore, anyone who truly loves God with all his being must and will love

others. In fact, it is probably not too much to say that love of God without love for neighbor is love of neither.

How extensive is the application of these two commandments? Let me simply say that both are all encompassing.

1. “Love the Lord your God” is all-encompassing. It stakes a claim on every aspect of our lives. It makes demands on every fiber of our being—body, soul, mind, and strength—leaving no untouched, hidden corners. These terms—heart, soul, mind, and strength (the latter term, found in the Shema, is added in Mark’s Gospel)—cannot be defined with great precision, but they are helpful categories, and since Jesus used all four, it is important that we try to understand why.

We are to love God with all our heart. I believe He is talking principally about our emotions, attitudes, and feelings. Our culture conditions us not to examine our emotions, but to simply live them: “Listen to your heart. Trust your feelings.” Yet God clearly *cannot* be worshiped through emotions of bitterness, anger, envy, greed, or lust. We need to recognize that there are wrong emotions and sinful attitudes, and we need to turn from them, cultivating instead the higher emotions of love, joy, peace, gratitude, righteous indignation, etc. Our emotions, as much as any other part of our lives, need to be surrendered to God and brought into compliance with his will. Do we love the things God loves and hate the things that God hates? Do we laugh at what God wants us to laugh at? Do we rejoice in what is truly good, or in what is merely entertaining?

We are to love God with all our soul. The focus here seems to be on the volitional aspect of our relationship with God. I must align my will and my choices with God and His priorities. What is it I am committed to doing, no matter what? What do I pursue with relentless zeal? Does it include worship? Study of God's word? Serving others? Or is it just sports? Playing computer games? Getting ahead in life? You know something?—the good is ever the enemy of the best, and we easily fall into habits that are less than God's best for us.

We are to love God with all our mind. Wheaton college historian Mark Noll wrote a book a few years back called *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. “The scandal of the evangelical mind,” he began, “is that there is not much of an evangelical mind.” Our thinking, quite frankly, is often weak and flabby. We are easily distracted and entertained. We have let ourselves be bullied and harassed by a culture dismissive of Christian faith as intolerant, unreasonable, intellectually indefensible, or at best a harmless personal belief, so we retreat into our Christian ghetto where nobody challenges our faith. And then we wonder what happens to our young people when they leave the ghetto and go out into the big, bad world of the secular university!

But either our faith is true objectively or it isn’t true at all. And if our faith is true, then we have to live like it—developing our minds to grasp God's truth, making the Gospel the filter for all competing truth claims, becoming salt and light in every area of contemporary culture, claiming the lordship of Christ over every area of human endeavor, and understanding what others believe so we can challenge untruth. We should hate sloppy thinking, illogical reasoning, and falsehood as offensive to God. That’s why I am so pleased that almost 100 of you are currently taking *The*

Truth Project in our Lay Bible Institute. We plan to offer it again next semester. What a fantastic help in developing a Christian worldview and a mind that loves God.

We are to love God with all our strength. This, you may recall, is the term that is used in Deuteronomy 6 and picked up in Mark's Gospel, though not by Matthew. We are not immaterial beings made up only of mind, will, emotions; we are also physical beings. Worshiping God with all our strength, that is, with our bodies, is an important part of loving Him wholly. I have always been struck by the fact that Romans 12:1-2 commands us to "offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship." I think the reason Paul didn't say, "Offer your spirits . . ." is that we have a tendency to isolate the spiritual from the rest of life in a sort of platonic way. We compartmentalize our lives, convincing ourselves we can have a meaningful relationship with God while we are using our bodies in sinful ways. On the other hand, if God has our bodies He will generally have all of us.

2. Love for one's neighbor is likewise all encompassing. We can see this as we examine how extensive is the quality of this love and the quantity of it.

Love for neighbor is a qualitative love. Jesus cares about reproducing in us a particular kind of love here—not emotional love, not brotherly love, not sensual love—but *agape* love, which is the Greek term He uses to translate the Hebrews here. *Agape* love is the kind that seeks the other person's highest good, that doesn't demand reciprocity. It is the love that recognizes and chooses to follow that which is righteous, noble, and true, regardless of what one's feelings are in the matter. It is so far beyond the world's perception of love that there's almost no comparison.

I think some people consider themselves loving so long as they refrain from hate. But the opposite of love is not hate; it is indifference and apathy. Love demands that we engage others, show kindness to them, try to meet their needs, be considerate, and treat others as we would like to be treated.

A second factor we learn about the qualitative nature of love for our neighbor is that it is as demanding as our love for ourselves. There is a lot of misunderstanding about self-love. Jesus is not talking about narcissism, self-absorption, doting on oneself. He's talking about the indisputable fact that all of us have powerful instincts of self-preservation and self-fulfillment. When a person is hungry, he feeds himself; when he is thirsty, he gets himself a drink; and when he is sick, he takes medicine or sees a doctor. He does not simply think or talk about food or water or medicine but *does* whatever is necessary to provide those things for himself. God created us with these drives, and there is nothing inherently wrong with them. Ephesians 6:29 says, "After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church." Clearly there is a love for self that is legitimate and necessary.

So when Jesus says "love your neighbor as yourself," He is telling us that these same instincts toward self-preservation and self-fulfillment should be exercised toward our neighbor as well. As far as we will go to provide food when we are hungry, that is how far we should go to make sure our neighbor has food. To the extent that we long to have friends and be accepted, that is how

how much we should try to be a friend to others and help them find significance and acceptance. As energetic, faithful, creative, and generous as we are in taking care of our own needs, we must be energetic, faithful, creative, and generous in loving our neighbor. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." (Matt. 7:12).

But the love Jesus talks about is not just qualitative but also quantitative. That is, He tells us how many people qualify.

It is a quantitative love. Who is our neighbor? The Jewish religious leaders interpreted "neighbor" as a fellow-Jew but at the same time taught a thoroughgoing hatred toward Gentiles. Unfortunately, many of us have a tendency to think the same way. We see our obligation to love as including our family, a few close friends, and to a lesser extent the community of God's people, the church, but only if we know them and happen to be confronted directly with their need. No wonder the main reason people visit a church and never come back is because they feel unwelcome and disconnected. "Nobody cared whether I was there or not; I didn't matter."

But "neighbor" is defined right there in Leviticus 19 where the second of Jesus' two great commandments is given, and it is defined very broadly: "When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. *Love him as yourself*, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God" (19:33-34). Now I suppose this is talking about legal aliens, so I wouldn't think this law prohibits the right of a nation to secure its own borders, but it clearly implies that if we allow aliens in, we should treat them with respect and kindness.

Furthermore, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus goes out of his way to define a neighbor as including not only aliens but even our enemies. The Samaritan, hated passionately by the Jews, is the only one who shows love to the injured Jew. Does not this imply that we should extend love and grace to liberals, gays and lesbians, people who are living together, those who have multiple tattoos and body piercings? We don't have to approve their behavior or their lifestyle; in fact, next week in chapter 23 we are going to find Jesus denouncing the Jewish religious leaders with righteous indignation. But He never took personal offence, never hated, never took revenge. And He always held out the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation to everyone.

It really is possible, you know, to hate sin and still love the sinner. People call that trite and meaningless, but the fact is everyone of us does it every day; that is, we hate some of the things *we* do, but we continue to love *ourselves*. Every day hating the sin and loving the sinner is practiced at Choices Medical Clinic and the Pregnancy Crisis Center. The volunteers who work there hate abortion with every fiber of their being for what it does to the child and what it does to their mothers. But they love those women with a godly love.

How important are these commandments? In verse 40 Jesus says that on these two commandments "hang *all* the Law *and* prophets." I think He means that everything else God

requires of believers, as revealed from Genesis to Malachi, is really summed up by, “love God and love people.” In fact, if we loved God and each other as we should, there would be no need for any other laws. That was Augustine’s point when he said, “Love God and do what you please.” The one who truly loves God will never take His name in vain, never worship idols, never fail to obey, worship, honor, and glorify Him as Lord.ⁱ And the one who loves others will never do them harm, never use them, never abuse them, but always seek their highest good.

Unfortunately, we are masters at rationalization, so as long as we are in this fallen world we will need God’s laws to remind us of what the loving thing to do is in any given situation.

What is the indispensable lesson to learn from Jesus’ answer? Every one of us here this morning knows that in our natural selves, we are both unable and unwilling to do what the greatest commandment and its companion commandment tell us to do. I doubt if a single person here has ever perfectly fulfilled these two commands for a single day. We have all sinned and we all continually fall short of God’s gloriously perfect standards. We are condemned by this very commandment and face the judgment of God.

That’s the bad news that we have to understand in order to appreciate the good news that God sent Jesus to do for us what we can never do for ourselves. Listen to what Paul writes to the Christians in Rome:

“For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit . . . righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (Romans 8:3-4; 3:22).

Good though it is, the law itself is powerless to save us. So Jesus lived the perfect life that we could never live and fulfilled all the requirements of God’s law. He died on our behalf to take away the penalty of sin for those who believe in him. And He rose from the dead to give us new life and a new ability to love God and obey his commandments.

By faith in Jesus’ death and resurrection, His righteousness is credited to us, and the Holy Spirit comes to live in us and to help us fulfill this perfect law. We must turn to God in humility and repentance and receive the forgiveness He offers.ⁱⁱ

Conclusion: Let me return to the lawyer who questioned Jesus in verse 35. We haven’t heard the last of him. In Mark’s account of the story, he responds to Jesus’ teaching about the greatest commandment with affirmation rather than hostility. Listen to Mark 12:32-33:

“Well said, teacher,” the man replied . “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

That is at the same time both an extremely encouraging and frightening statement. If he is not far, then the implication is that he needs to take but a small step to arrive. He is very close. He understands what his moral responsibility is. He understands that religious ritual will not suffice. But if he doesn't take that step, he will be decisively separated from God for all of eternity. It is possible to be within an inch of heaven, yet go to hell!

Alexander MacLaren wrote, “Convictions not acted on, die; truths not followed, fade; lingering can become a habit; and we can either go in or go further away.”ⁱⁱⁱ Are you near the Kingdom of God, but not in? Perhaps a single step will make the difference. I urge you this morning to take that step of faith. Invite Jesus Christ into your life.

i. John MacArthur, *Matthew 16-23*, 342.

ii. A former colleague of mine, Jeff Schultz, who is now pastor of Salem Evangelical Free Church in St. Louis, preached a great sermon on this passage in 2000 and gave me permission to borrow some of his ideas and concepts. I am indebted to him, particularly in this section.

iii. Quoted by R. Kent Hughes in *Mark, Jesus, Servant and Savior*, Volume 2, 120.