

THE GREAT COMMANDMENT, A STUDY OF LOVE MATHEW 22:34–40

Introduction: Jesus Christ Challenged

Jesus had just met His third group of challengers, the Sadducees. He had silenced and routed them. The Pharisees, the strict religionists of that day, heard about Christ's conquering His challengers again. In their minds, His threat to their security had increased. All three attempts to discredit Him had failed. They felt that they must somehow discredit Him before the people in order to break His hold on them. There was a very live possibility that the people might follow through with their proclaiming Him to be the Messiah by rising up against the Roman authorities. The responsibility for such action, of course, would lie at their feet as Jewish leaders; and they would be replaced as the ruling body of the Sanhedrin, losing their position, authority, esteem and livelihood.

They met together to plan and plot again. This time they took a different approach. They had, over the last few hours, challenged Christ as a body of questioners; now they chose from among their body one who was most brilliant and versed in the law, a lawyer or a Scribe.

However, there was something about this brilliant lawyer that the others did not know. Apparently, his heart had been touched by Christ. There are two indications of this. First, Mark tells us that the man was present when Christ was "debating" with the Sadducees (Mk. 12:28), and he noticed "that Jesus had given them a good answer." Second, at the conclusion of his own discussion with Christ, Christ said to the man, "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (Mk. 12:34). This indicates that the lawyer had been in deep thought about Christ and was under conviction.

Something about Christ struck a chord within this man. His heart was touched and stirred rather deeply. True, he was being put forward by the official body to challenge Christ; but personally, the spirit, the wisdom, the self-consciousness, the authority — something about Christ when He was answering the Sadducees — had stirred his heart to wonder and to want to search more into Christ.

Christ used the occasion to teach man the greatest *provision* and *duty* of human life: love. Love will provide for every need man has; therefore, love is the greatest duty of man.

I. The Pharisees plotted against Jesus (vv. 34-36).

II. First: love God (vv. 37-38).

III. Second: love your neighbour (v. 39).

IV. The conclusion: love includes and embraces all commandments (v. 40).

I. *Mathew 22:34–36 Religionists*

The Pharisees plotted against Jesus. The Pharisees and Sadducees obviously met together when the Pharisees heard about the Sadducees being *silenced* or routed by Christ. They met together in the council (Sanhedrin) to determine the next step to take.

MATHEW 22:35 LAWYER, AN EXPERT IN THE LAW (NOMIKOS)

A profession of laymen who studied, taught, interpreted and dealt with the practical questions of Jewish law. They were a special group within the profession commonly called Scribes (Mk. 12:28). They functioned both in the court and synagogues (Lk. 7:30; 10:25; 11:45, 46, 52; 14:3; Tit. 3:13). They apparently dealt more with the study and interpretation of the law. □

MATHEW 22:36 COMMANDMENT

Note the question, “Which is the greatest commandment in the law?” Through the years, Jewish teachers had set up six hundred commandments. No person could keep them all, so the question was often asked and discussed: Which commandment or commandments must be absolutely obeyed? Which ones are important and which ones are not? Can the failure to obey some be condoned or not? Which commandments are heavy and which are light? If a person keeps the greatest of the precepts, can he be excused for his failure to keep others (Mt. 19:16f)?

Note two things about the tendency to count some of God’s laws important and some not.

1. This was the sin which James attacked.

James 2:10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

2. Christ taught that some laws are all inclusive and broader than others.

Mat 23:23 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices — mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law — justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.”

The Pharisees were trying to turn the people against Jesus. People differed as to what the greatest commandment was. Some believed that it had to do with circumcision, others with sacrifices, and still others with the Sabbath. The Pharisees hoped that by stating His opinion, Christ would disturb the people who held a position different from His. He would thereby lose their following. There was the strong possibility that a man’s giving his judgment would seem to be lessening the weight of other very important commandments.

Thought 1. All of God’s laws are important — equally important. One is first and *weightier* only because it includes and embraces other laws. This means several things.

- 1) We may think in terms of supreme laws and lesser laws — that if we keep the greater laws, we do not have to pay much attention to the lesser. We may think that if we break the lesser laws we can be excused, but such thinking is false.

James 2:10 *For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.*

- 2) Just because we may deny the importance of some laws does not make them unimportant. Our unbelief and denial do not void the law, not a single one. They still condemn us. Each law, in the force of its pronouncement, strikes out at our violation. It condemns us — no matter how little value we may place upon it.

This is a common deception of man: unbelief makes a thing ineffective and voids it. A man thinks, “If I deny something, ignore it, refuse to accept it, push it out of my mind, it will not be, nor will it come to pass.” Many treat God’s Word and some commandments in this way, especially if they wish some sensual or stimulating pleasure. Too many conform their religion and their principles, their beliefs and the laws they obey to their behaviour. They want the right to do as they wish, so they make all things fit their wishes, including their principles. They follow only the commandments that allow them to satisfy their desires, and because they obey some standards, they feel acceptable and secure.

Thought 2. This passage is a profitable passage for lawyers and for other professionals, in particular if they are open and honest as this man seems to have been. Just a passing thought — in the day of judgment it will be interesting to see if this lawyer is one of the converts mentioned in Acts 6:9. □

II. **Mathew 22:37–38** *The First Commandment: Love God*

Which is the greatest commandment in the law? (Deu. 6:5.) Christ’s answer was powerful; it is an eye opener to people steeped in man-made religions.

1. Love God: “Love the Lord your God.” Love God as your very own God. The word *your* is a personal relationship, not a distant relationship. God is not impersonal, far out in space someplace, distant and removed. God is personal, ever so close, and we are to be personally involved with God on a face-to-face basis. Note another fact: the command is to “love the Lord your God.” *Loving* God is an act that is alive and active, not dead and inactive. We are, therefore, to maintain a personal relationship with God that is alive and active.

2. Love God with all your being. Christ breaks our being into three parts: the heart, the soul, and the mind (See *Heart, Soul and Mind*, Mt. 22:37).
3. Love is man's chief duty. Man is responsible to maintain a loving relationship with God. Very practically, loving God involves the very same factors that loving a person involves (See notes, Eph. 5:22-33).

- a. A loving relationship involves *commitment and loyalty*. True love does not allow lustful behaviour with others. True love does not covet; it does not care for a carnal definition of love that allows fleshly acts and sensual relationships with others.

True love is commitment and loyalty to one another. This is very significant. The first commandment deals with *commitment and loyalty*. God strikes out at the very core of man's carnal and fleshly behaviour, at his tendency to define love in terms that allow him to satisfy his lust. God irrevocably says, "You shall have no other gods" (Exo. 20:3). God demands our total commitment and loyalty.

- b. A loving relationship involves *trust and respect* for the person loved. It is loving the person just for who he is. So it is when we love God. We love God because of Himself, because He is who He is. We love Him because...
 - He is the Creator and Sustainer of life
 - He is the Saviour and Redeemer of our souls
 - He is the Lord and Owner of our lives
- c. A loving relationship involves the *giving and surrendering* of oneself. The drive is to give oneself, to surrender oneself to the other, not to take and conquer. We are to love God, to give and surrender ourselves to Him.
- d. A loving relationship involves *knowing and sharing*. The desire is to know and to share, learning, growing, working and serving ever so closely together. We are to know and share with God, learning, growing, working and serving ever so closely with Him.

Thought 1. The importance of a personal relationship with God cannot be overstated.

- 1) It is the greatest, the sum and substance of all commandments.
- 2) God demands that He be loved. It is His first commandment, and to love is both personal and active.
- 3) The commandment to love God is given by Christ, the Son of God Himself.

Thought 2. A personal relationship can be maintained only through communication: we must talk to God and allow God to talk to us through prayer, His Word, and the presence of His Spirit.

Thought 3. A person's heart, soul and mind are focused upon something: self, possessions, the world, the flesh or sinful nature, power, fame, a person. God demands that we focus our whole being upon Him.

MATHEW 22: 37 HEART

Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” Mathew 22:37

The seat of man’s affection and will (devotion). The heart attaches and focuses our will and devotion. The heart causes us to give either good things or bad things. The heart causes us to devote ourselves to either good or bad. Therefore, Christ says we are to love God “with all our heart.” We are to focus our heart, our affection, and our will (devotion) upon God. We are to love God supremely.

Mat 6:21 “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Mat 12:34-35 “You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.” (see Mat. 15:18-19) □

MATHEW 22: 37 SOUL (PSUCHE)

The seat of man’s breath and life or consciousness. The soul is the life of a man, the consciousness, the breath, the essence, the being of a man. The soul is the *animal life* of a man. The soul is the breath and consciousness that distinguishes man and other animals from vegetation.

The world of vegetation lives and man and animals live, but there is a difference in their living. Man and animals are *breathing* and *conscious* beings. The essence of their being is breath and consciousness. They are living souls. This is clearly pointed out in the Hebrew language of Gen. 1:20: “Let the waters teem with ‘*living souls*’ [nephesh].” The “living souls” that God created were different from the vegetation He had just created. The “living souls” were creatures (fish) that breathed and possessed consciousness.

Christ said we are to love God “with all our soul,” that is, with all our life, our breath, our consciousness. We are to love God with all the breath and consciousness, all the life and awareness, we have. □

MATHEW 22: 37 MIND

The seat of reasoning and understanding. God has given intellectual powers to man. Man thinks, reasons and understands. Christ says that our minds and thoughts are to be centred upon God. We are to love God “with all our mind.”

Rom 12:2 *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

Eph 4:24 *And to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*

Phil 4:8 *Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things.*

Col 3:10 *And have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.*

2 Cor 10:5 *We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. □*

III. **Mathew 22:39 Love of Neighbour, Brotherhood**

Christ gave a second commandment: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” (Lev. 19:18.) The lawyer had not asked for the second greatest commandment, but the first commandment is abstract. It cannot be seen or understood standing by itself. There has to be a *demonstration, an act, something done* for love to be seen and understood. A profession of love without demonstration is empty. It is profession only. Love is not known without showing it.

Several important things need to be said about love at this point.

1. Love is an active experience, not inactive and dormant. That is what Christ is pointing out. Love for God *acts*. Love acts by showing and demonstrating itself. It is inaccurate and foolish for a man to say, “I love God,” and then be inactive and dormant, doing nothing for God. If he truly loves God, he will *do things* for God. Any person who loves does things for the one loved.
2. The primary *thing* God wants from us is love for our neighbours, not the doing of *religious things*. Doing *religious things* is good, but it is not the first thing God wants. God wants us to make loving our neighbour the first order of our lives. To do *religious things* is only dealing with things such as rituals, observances, ordinances and laws. Such things are lifeless, unfeeling and unresponsive. They are immaterial. They are not helped by our doing them; we alone are helped. They make us feel good and religious which is beneficial to our growth, but *religious things* are not what demonstrates our love for God. Loving our neighbour is what proves our love for God. A man may say he loves God, but if he hates and acts unkindly and spitefully toward his neighbour, everyone knows his religion is profession only.

John 13:34-35 “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

1 John 4:20-21 If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

3. The great commandment to love God flows downward into another great commandment — to love our neighbour as ourselves. The fact is inescapable.

Rom 5:8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

When a man really sees the love of God for him, he cannot help but love God and share the love of God with his neighbours. It is the love of Christ for us. His death and sacrifice, that compels us to go and love all men everywhere.

1 John 4:19, 21 We love because he first loved us. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

2 Cor 5:14-15 For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

4. We are to love ourselves.

- a. There is a corrupt love of self that feels the world should centre around oneself. This self-love...

- wants all attention centred around oneself
- pushes self forward
- insists on one’s own way
- demands and revels in recognition
- shows conceit and ignores others

- b. However, there is a godly love for self that is natural and pleasing to God. It is a love that stirs a strong self-image, confidence and assurance. It is a love that even helps in preventing some illnesses such as ulcers, tension and high blood pressure. The godly love of self comes from knowing three things.

⇒ That one is actually the creation of God: the highest creation possible.

⇒ That one is actually the object of God’s love: the most supreme love possible.

⇒ That one is actually the trustee of God’s gifts: the greatest gifts possible.

- c. The godly love of self has three traits that are clearly seen.

=> It considers others better than yourself. It does esteem self ever so highly as God's glorious creation, but it esteems others more highly.

Phil 2:3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.

=> It looks to the interests of others. It looks to one's own interests as a trustee of God's gifts, but it also looks to the interests of others.

Phil 2:4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

=> It walks humbly before others.

Mat 23:11-12 The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

1 Pet 5:5 Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

5. We are to love our neighbour as ourselves. Note three very specific things about this second great commandment.

a. To love our neighbour is a command, not an option. If the commandment is not obeyed, God is displeased and we stand guilty of having broken the law of God.

b. To love our neighbour arouses the question: Who is our neighbour? Christ answers the question Himself in the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

=> A good neighbour is *he that shows mercy on any who need mercy* — even if the needy person is socially despised (Lk. 10:25-37, esp. 36-37).

Therefore our neighbour is everyone in the world, no matter his status, condition or circumstances. Every man is to be esteemed ever so highly and helped no matter who he is. No man is to be injured or wronged. Every man is to be esteemed better than oneself (Phil. 2:3). To love our neighbour is a very practical command. It involves some very practical acts that are spelled out in Scripture.

=> Love is patient (endures long).

=> Love is kind.

=> Love does not envy (is not jealous).

=> Love does not boast (does not brag).

=> Love is not proud (vainglorious, arrogant).

=> Love is not rude (unbecoming, indecent, unmannerly).

=> Love is not self-seeking (is not selfish; does not insist on one's own right and way).

=> Love is not easily angered (not easily provoked, touchy, angry, fretful, resentful).

- => Love keeps no record of wrongs (harbours and plans no evil thought; takes no account of a wrong done it).
- => Love does not delight in evil (wrong, sin, evil, injustice) but rejoices in the truth (justice and righteousness).
- => Love always protects.
- => Love always trusts (exercises faith in everything; is ready to believe the best in everyone).
- => Love always hopes (keeps up hope in everything, under all circumstances).
- => Love always perseveres (without weakening; it gives power to endure).

Thought 1. *Religious things* can enslave a person. A person can be so engrossed in religion, buildings, ritual, ceremony, rules and regulations that he neglects and ignores people, in particular the poor and down trodden.

Thought 2. The church and *religious things* are the picture of religion among men. Therefore, a man feels *good* and *religious* when he attends church and does *religious things*.

Thought 3. A man loves God when he loves his neighbour. In fact, a man loves God only if he truly loves his neighbour (1 Jn. 4:20-21; see Jn. 13:34-35). See Lev. 19:18 and Note, 1 Cor. 13:4-7.

V. **Mathew 22:40** *All Embracing Love*

Christ says that love includes and embraces all the commandments. In fact, the term “the Law of the Prophets” is a term often used to refer to all Scripture. What Christ really says is that all Scripture hangs on love for God and love for one’s neighbour. Christ actually paints a picture by using the word “hang.” He says that love for God is a *hanger* and love for neighbour is a *hanger*.

Upon these two hangers hang all that God has ever said, whether commandments or revelation of truth or practice of ceremony and ritual. The sum and substance of all that God has said and done is love. And the sum and substance of all that God wants of man is love: love of God and love of neighbour.

Rom 13:10 *Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.*

1 Tim 1:5 *The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.*

Mat 7:12 *So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets. ■*