

Matthew 22:34-40 | “The Great Commandment”
Preached on April 7, 2024 by Pastor Matt Brown

Please turn in your Bibles to Matthew 22, verses 34-40 today.

We are continuing our study in the gospel of Matthew, picking up this morning here in Matthew 22:34. *[pauseeee]*

Imagine starting a new job. *[pause]*

As you begin this new position, there are a lot of things to learn and remember.

But the things that you remember the most and keep on your mind are the things that your new boss highlights as the most important things. *[pause]*

This is because these items are at the core of what you are called to do as an employee.

They are typically called your “primary duties”. *[pauseeee]*

Well as you think about being a follower of God, what is the most important thing that you are called to do?

What is your “primary duty”? *[pauseee]*

Some people would say that the most important thing as a Christian is to attend church or give tithes. *[pause]*

Others would say that the most important thing is praying to God or evangelizing the lost.

Still others would declare that serving God or caring for the needy are the most important. *[pause]*

Certainly all of those things are good.

All of those things are things that we *are* called to do, but they in themselves are not at the very top.

For Jesus will show us what is our most important duty. *[pause]*

Let's READ it, shall we? *[READ]*

In the context, the religious leaders keep coming up to Jesus with tests to try to get him to trip up, but they keep failing.

And here we find another attempt. *[pause]*

It's the Pharisees' turn, and they gather to think of something (anything!) that will make Jesus look bad. *[pause]*

One of them is a lawyer, and he tries his best against Jesus. *[pause]*

The lawyer here is someone who is an expert in Old Testament Law.

So the Pharisees are probably thinking, “If anyone can trip Jesus up, it will be this guy, for he’s an expert in the Law, so he can ask Jesus a tricky question about the Law.” *[pause]*

And so this man comes to test Jesus and asks him, “Which is the great commandment in the Law?” *[pauseeee]*

There was actually a debate among the religious leaders of the day as to how to rank the different laws in importance, and whether that was even possible. *[pause]*

This means that they were once again trying to throw Jesus into the theological debate of the day.

And most anything he would say could be used against Him, for they could simply say: “Oh really? What about *this* law? Isn’t *this one* more important?” and make Him look bad.

But, of course, that doesn’t happen because they are going up against the Word made flesh.¹ *[pauseee]*

He answers by pointing to how loving God is most important, and a similar one is to love your neighbor, and they couldn’t argue with that!

So let’s take each one in turn, as we look deeper into what Jesus says about the most important things we are called to do. *[pause]*

First, we are called to...

I. Love God.

Jesus gets this commandment from Deuteronomy 6:5, which is part of what devout Jews would repeat twice a day.

So they knew this very well. *[pauseeee]*

Jesus tells us here that the greatest commandment is to love God, and that means that as a disciple of Jesus you *must* love God.

This is priority #1! It is the greatest commandment, Jesus says! *[pauseeee]*

When you think about the most important thing that God calls you to do, do you think of loving Him? *[pause]*

Sadly, many times we don’t think that way.

¹ A reference to John 1:14.

Instead, we think of all of the other stuff like giving, serving, tithing, attending church, etc.

But Jesus does not want us to miss the most important commandment: love God! *[pauseeee]*

Christianity at its base is a relationship of love.

But when people think of Christianity or their faith, they do not often think of loving God as the foundational thing. *[pauseeee]*

Some think Christianity is solely about doing good things, and that's it.

Some think Christianity is solely about social justice.

And some think Christianity is just about going through the motions, so that they can cover their bases. *[pauseeee]*

I was talking to someone one time, who said, "I have learned so many different religions, including Christianity, so no matter what, I'm covered by at least one of them when I die."

And I thought to myself, "Wait a second, that's not right!" *[pause]*

Christianity isn't about just covering your bases, and getting insurance out of Hell!

Christianity isn't about going through the motions of attending church, doing Communion, and giving tithe, all so you think that those things will mechanically cover you. *[pauseeee]*

So many people think, "Hey, I got baptized as a baby, I'm good to go with God."

Or, "I put money in the offering plate, so that must count as something before God."

Or, "I attended church enough, so I think God will approve of me now."

No, no, no - do you realize that going through the motions of religion is the opposite of what God calls you to?! *[pause]*

He calls you to *LOVE HIM!* *[pause]*

Empty, ritualistic religion is abhorrent to Him, we must get that in our minds!

He hates empty worship!

Rituals do no good without love for Him. *[pauseeee]*

You can't fake things or be ingenuine in your service to God and think that all is well.

Yet so many of us think that as long as we have done something, then it doesn't matter our hearts...

...Yet throughout the Scriptures, God is *most concerned* with our hearts. *[pauseeee]*

This is why in everything you must go back to, ‘Do I actually love God?’ *[pause]*

Did you get that? -- ‘Do you love God?’ *[pause]*

It’s not, “Have you done the checklist.”

It’s not, “Do you love the recognition you get for doing religious things.”

It’s not, “Do you only love the benefits and blessings of God.”

No, it’s ‘Do. You. Love. God?’ *[pauseeee]*

So many times we can be like the one woman who wrote a letter to her ex-fiance.

She wrote, “Dearest Jimmy, no words could ever express the great unhappiness I’ve felt since breaking our engagement. *[pause]*

Please say you’ll take me back.

No one could ever take your place in my heart, so please forgive me. I love you, I love you, I love you! Yours forever, Marie.

P.S. And congratulations on winning the state lottery.”² *[pauseeee]*

Do you actually love God or do you only love the things He gives you? *[pauseeee]*

Now before we go further, let’s think through: what does it mean to love God? *[pause]*

Well love points to a relationship, and it involves commitment, right? *[pause]*

When you truly love someone, you are committed, faithful, and loyal.

So also, loving God involves total commitment to Him; complete devotion.

And this commitment is shown in your actions. *[pause]*

This commitment is loyal and faithful, so that means you can’t love God and love other idols.

And since Jesus says that loving God is the *greatest* commandment that means that God must have our highest allegiance. *[pauseeee]*

Total devotion means that in order to love God, you must be willing to sacrifice other things. *[pauseeee]*

Are you devoted to God, and willing to sacrifice anything that He calls you to?

Are you willing to sacrifice some money, if He called you to?

² Original Source Unknown. Found at: <https://www.family-times.net/illustration/Love/200323/>.

Are you willing to sacrifice your comforts and wants for Him?

Are you willing to go and do whatever He calls you to? *[pauseeee]*

Many times in someone's mind they think, "God can have all of these areas, but don't touch these areas over here."

But that's not what we are called to do!

For when we truly love God, then that love drives everything we do.

It is Him that we want above all, it is Him who we pursue most, and who we will do anything for. *[pauseeee]*

This love should involve affection and feelings, too. *[pause]*

He doesn't want us to be robots, who are just mechanically doing a duty.

He wants us to *love Him*. *[pause]*

A robot doesn't love his master, but is only doing tasks in a heartless, mechanical way.

So also, God doesn't want cold obedience or reluctant actions.

He wants hearts on fire in passion and commitment to Him.

He wants us to be like Psalm 5:11, "...Let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for joy, and spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may exult in you." *[pause]*

Love for God finds refuge in Him, sings for joy, exults in Him.

So, "Love the Lord, all you his saints!"³ *[pauseeeee]*

This all means that as you think about your life, the #1 thing you should be considering is: 'am I loving God?' *[pauseeee]*

Jesus adds that we are to love God with all of our heart, soul, and mind. *[pause]*

This shows us the *extent* of our love for God, and by using heart, soul, and mind, He's pointing to how love for God should involve our whole person, every part.

From the deepest part of who you are, to all that controls your choices and actions, to your thought life -- it should *all* love God. *[pauseeee]*

So many times people see God and their faith as just a little thing that they tack on their lives, like a little add-on that they think will benefit them. *[pause]*

³ Psalm 31:23.

They think, “I got the little church box over here that I pull out on Sunday’s,” but then they put the box back when they go home after church.

That is not Christianity! *[pause]*

Christianity is foundationally a relationship of love for the Lord that molds and shapes everything in your life!

Every single part of you should love God. *[pauseeee]*

Do you truly love God above everything else?

Are you willing to serve and follow Him, no matter the cost?

Or is your Christianity just a show to you? *[pause]*

Is it all just going through the motions because, you know, you feel like this is what you are supposed to do, and your parents did it?

No, loving God is “the great and first commandment”. *[pauseeee]*

Not only are we called to love God, but we are also to...

II. Love others.

It’s interesting how the lawyer asked which is the great commandment (singular), but Jesus can’t help but share *two* commandments, when talking about the greatest commandment.

For He says, “And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” *[pause]*

These two commandments are both so important that it’s like Jesus couldn’t leave out this second commandment when talking about the greatest commandment. *[pauseeee]*

This commandment is “like” the first one.

It is “like” the first one in that it involves loving, but it also “like” the first one because it is very important. *[pauseeee]*

So I want us to think about the fact that Jesus shares that *both* of these commandments are the greatest, and what that means for us. *[pause]*

It means primarily this -- you cannot neglect one or the other. *[pauseeee]*

Imagine a person who says that they love God, but do not love others, would you believe them? *[pause]*

Of course not!

1 John makes this clear when it says, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar...”

He then goes on to say, “And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.”⁴ *[pause]*

You can’t say that you love God, if you don’t love others. *[pause]*

You see, God cares greatly that we love Him -- yes, yes, for sure!

But God also cares greatly that we love other people, too. *[pauseeeee]*

I think most times, we care about our relationship with God, yet we don’t put that much effort into our relationship with others. *[pause]*

We are flustered if something is straining our relationship with God, but we don’t seem too bothered when our relationship with other people is strained. *[pauseeeee]*

Now I want us to think about this more...

If we must love God and love others, then you can’t truly and deeply love others, unless you love God. *[pause]*

How can you love someone in the best way, if you don’t love God?

How can you love someone in the deepest way, if you don’t know the love of God, and what love actually means? *[pause]*

It is God, who is love, and so He is the very definition of love.⁵ *[pause]*

This means that if you don’t know Him, then you don’t truly know what love is.

This is why our world has such a misunderstanding of love. *[pause]*

Our world thinks that affirming someone in every single thing they do is loving, but it’s not.

Is affirming someone in their sin really and actually loving? *[pause]*

Does God affirm our sin?

No, He condemns us in our sin for sin leads to death, but in love, He forgives and rescues us from our sin! *[pause]*

He then calls us to live a life of righteousness, whereby we pursue holiness and turn away from sin.

⁴ 1 John 4:20a, 21.

⁵ A reference to 1 John 4:8.

So to truly and deeply love someone, you have to not affirm them in sin, but call them to repentance and faith in God. *[pauseeee]*

Our world thinks that love is just feelings, and this is why you see large swaths of broken, torn up, short-term relationships everywhere you look. *[pause]*

But if God loved us only based on feeling and not choice, we would be doomed because we aren't very loveable at all.

So to truly and deeply love someone, you must love them amidst the pain and amidst the hurt.

You can't just cut all of the toxic people out of your life and act like you are a loving person. *[pause]*

If you do, you don't know what true love is, and you aren't loving people, according to true love. *[pause]*

There's a reason why love is patient.

There's a reason why love bears all things and endures all things⁶ because you are going to need patience, you are going to need to bear things and endure things. *[pauseeee]*

Did you notice how Jesus said, "You shall love *your neighbor*."? *[pause]*

In the parable of the good samaritan, Jesus demonstrates that our neighbor isn't just the person who lives next door, or the people who are like us.⁷

Rather, our neighbor is anyone we come into contact with. *[pauseeee]*

We should love others, and this love should be shown in concrete ways...

If someone is in need, we should care for them.

If someone is discouraged, we should encourage them. *[pause]*

We should spend time with others in love, invite them over to our houses, give food and help.

We should think about what would bless them and do it. *[pauseeee]*

But Jesus didn't just stop at loving your neighbor, for He said, "love your neighbor *as yourself*." *[pause]*

Now this phrase "as yourself" has been so misunderstood and misused by people. *[pause]*

Many people have twisted this to mean, "You can't love others if you don't love yourself first, so you must love yourself."

⁶ See 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.

⁷ See Luke 10:25-37.

That's not what Jesus says.

Words matter! *[pause]*

Jesus says that "you shall love your neighbor *as* yourself". *[pause]*

This is not a command to love yourself, it's a command to love others in a similar way to how you love yourself. *[pauseeee]*

Let's see if plugging in something different into this statement will help you. *[pause]*

Imagine that I said, "I want you to care for that person like yourself."

That wouldn't mean that you need to make sure you care for yourself before you care for someone else.

No, it means that I want you to care for that person with the same amount of care that you do for yourself. *[pause]*

So also, Jesus is telling us to love others like we love ourselves. *[pauseeee]*

We inherently love ourselves, we don't need a command to do that.

In Ephesians 5:29, Paul says, "...No one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it..."

So Jesus is telling us that like you love yourself -- love others *that* way.

Love others with the same effort, focus, time, and intensity that you love yourself. *[pauseeee]*

Imagine the difference that would make in your relationships! *[pause]*

So often, our problems lay in the fact that we all want our own way, so we bicker and fight with each other.

But if we loved others as we loved ourselves, now that would make an impact in our relationships! *[pause]*

Imagine a husband, who isn't thinking about how he just wants to sit and veg in front of the TV, but loves his wife so much that he's thinking of ways she could be loved in that moment. *[pause]*

Imagine a friend, who isn't focused solely on their own struggles and troubles, but is thinking of others, and what struggles and troubles they may be going through, and ways to help them. *[pauseeee]*

Do you want help doing a task? So then step up and help someone who is doing a task.

Do you want to be served? Then serve others.

Do you want time to rest and relax? Then provide times of rest and relaxation for others. *[pause]*

Love others like you love yourself.

Now that's a powerful truth that could change our workplaces, our church, our marriages, and all of our relationships. *[pauseeeee]*

Love God and love others: Jesus says, "On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." *[pause]*

This means that if you had to boil down what we are called to do, it would be those two commandments.

All of the commandments flow out of and depend on love for God and others.

As D.A. Carson says, "Nothing in Scripture can...be truly obeyed unless these two are observed."⁸ *[pause]*

Everything else that we are called to do really flows out of love for God and love for others.

So we must get these two foundational commandments down. *[pause]*

You see...

As disciples, the most important things we are called to do is to love God and others!
[pause]

The most important thing is most definitely not to love yourself.

It's not to make sure you do some rituals, or go through the motions of church and religion.
[pause]

The most important things are things that come from the heart.

Love that comes from the heart and is shown in the actions, looking primarily upward to God, and then secondarily, outward towards others. *[pauseeee]*

Now maybe you are sitting there thinking, "How can I do this better? I fail so often!"

Well the answer is to look back at the larger context of the commands that Jesus quotes.

What do you see? *[pause]*

God had amazingly, powerfully delivered Israel out of bondage to Egypt, and now He was giving them laws by which they should faithfully obey Him. *[pauseee]*

⁸ D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 465.

So the love commanded here is really a response to God's love for them that was already shown.

He had protected them, saved them, and promised them a land, and now they were to love Him in return. *[pauseee]*

So also, our love for God is a response to God, who loved us first.⁹ *[pauseee]*

You see, loving God isn't just mustered in our own strength.

It doesn't just "happen", but it comes when we dwell upon His love for us. *[pauseee]*

Just think of the love of God *for you!*

Though you sinned against Him, He made the way to be forgiven, set free, and reconciled to Him.

He gave His only Son, who was beaten, spit on, and suffered for you.

He gave His only Son to die for your sins, in your place. *[pauseee]*

He has shown you countless measures of grace throughout your life, and extended His merciful arms towards you.

Talk about love! *[pause]*

How could we *not* love Him in return when we really think about His great love for us? *[pauseee]*

"A group of teenagers were enjoying a party, and someone suggested that they go to a certain restaurant for a good time. *[pause]*

'I'd rather you took me home,' Jan said to her date. 'My parents don't approve of that place.' *[pause]*

'Are you afraid your father will hurt you?' one of the girls said sarcastically.

'No,' Jan replied, 'I'm afraid I might hurt my Father.' *[pauseee]*

She understood the principle that a true child of God, who has experienced the love of God, has no desire to sin against that love,"¹⁰ but loves in return. *[pauseee]*

When you think of your calling to love God, where do you look for motivation?

Do you just try to muster the strength? Do you see it only as a duty, and that's it?

Or do you dwell upon His love for you? *[pauseee]*

⁹ See 1 John 4:19.

¹⁰ Original Source Unknown. Found at: <https://www.family-times.net/illustration/Love/200167/>.

The motivation to love God is His love for us -- we *must* start there.

So if you are lacking in love for God, then marvel at His grace. *[pause]*

His love melts and molds our hearts into hearts of love for Him.

His grace zaps our loveless hearts into action. *[pause]*

We should think, “God loves me so much, and I love Him - He is my all! What does He call me to do? I want to do that!” *[pauseeee]*

This love that God shows us should then overflow in love for others.

For as John says, “Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”¹¹

And that means that the church should be the place where the deepest love is shown. *[pauseeee]*

“One Sunday a lady was inviting children to come to Sunday school when she met a boy and asked him why he went so far, past so many Sunday schools to get to his own. *[pause]*

‘There are plenty of others,’ said she, ‘just as good.’

He said, ‘They may be so good, but they are not so good for me.’

‘Why not?’ she asked.

‘Because they love [a person] over there,’ he answered.”¹²*[pauseeee]*

May we love others so much as a church that anyone who knows us can say, “They love a person over there.” *[pauseeee]*

Love God and love others, the greatest commandments -- are we doing those things? *[pause]*

If we start anywhere, let’s make it there.

Let’s make those things our primary focus as disciples of Jesus and as a church.

¹¹ 1 John 4:11.

¹² <https://ministry127.com/resources/illustrations/love>.