

The Greatest Commandment
Matthew 22:34-40
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Matthew 22:34-40 records the third question in a series of attempts to trap Him, beginning with the disciples of the Pharisees and Herodians (22:15-22), followed by the Sadducees (22:23-33). These various sects worked toward the same end in their opposition to Jesus. This account of the question from one of the Pharisees is also found in Mark 12:28-34.

There is a similar teaching of Jesus to this in Luke 10:25-28, as an introduction to the parable of the Good Samaritan. So this is not the first time that Jesus taught these words. In both Matthew and Luke, the one asking the question is a lawyer, and there are various similarities in wording, leading some to consider Matthew and Luke to have worked off the same source document. This is highly unlikely since Matthew, as an eyewitness, would have had no need to use another source document.

It is not surprising that Jesus would address the issue of the greatest commandment more than once, since this subject was a debated topic among rabbis of Jesus' day. Just as Matthew chose to omit the story of the Good Samaritan from his Gospel, he also omitted this earlier teaching by Jesus. Luke, on the other hand, included Jesus' teaching only in the context of the parable of the Good Samaritan, and not at the end of Jesus' life. Luke's account was Jesus' answer to the question of "*What shall I do to inherit eternal life*" (Luke 10:25), which is a very different question than what is found in Matthew 22:36.

The question by the lawyer (22:34-36)

The question of the greatest commandment begins with the awareness by the Pharisees that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees over their question of marriage in the resurrection. This rejection of the Sadducees by Jesus would have been quite noteworthy to the Pharisees, since they also believed in the resurrection of the dead. They may well have been familiar with the argument the Sadducees posed to Jesus, since they would have faced that question themselves in their sharp disagreement over the resurrection with the Sadducees. If so, Jesus would have silenced the Sadducees in a way that the Pharisees were unable to. Regardless, they saw the need to address Jesus themselves, since their disciples, with the Herodians, were also unable to argue against Him earlier.

The statement, *“when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees,”* implies that these Pharisees were not at the temple to hear Jesus personally, like their disciples in 22:16, or the Pharisees of 21:45. Therefore, it was likely the leaders of the Pharisees who *“gathered themselves together.”* They decided to put forth one of their lawyers to pose their question to Jesus.

Mark 12:28 describes the setting for the question as *“One of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, ‘What commandment is the foremost of all?’”* A scribe was a functional synonym for a lawyer, for the scribes were the experts in the written Law, interpreting and applying it for the Jewish people. The work of a scribe involved written text, while the work of a lawyer was also the broader oral traditions, involving regulations such as dietary restrictions, prayer, farming, marriage, religious festivals, days of rest, and other rituals. There was great overlap between these functions as many scribes were lawyers and vice versa.

Those who served as scribes and lawyers were typically closely aligned with the Pharisees. We see their collaboration here, as we see Jesus addressing them together in His condemnations of Matthew 23. The lawyer that was put forth by the Pharisees was *“one of them,”* or also a Pharisee, and likely one of their sharpest minds.

The question, *“which is the great commandment in the Law?”* is prefaced by the title *“teacher.”* As has been seen in the prior two questions that were designed to trap Jesus (22:16, 24), this title is not a term of respect but should be understood in terms of a challenge, such as *“since you claim to be a legitimate teacher...”* Therefore, this title sets up the question they expect Jesus to answer, in order to prove that He is a capable teacher of the Law.

This question presumes that some commandments are greater than other commandments in the Law. Jesus does not reject that perspective. Indeed, He will validate this view in Matthew 23:23 by distinguishing between commandments, *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness.”*

The rabbis of Jesus day would debate this question of the greatest commandment. There were 613 commandments in the Mosaic Law, with 248 positive commands and 365 negative prohibitions. The difficulty of trying to keep all of these Laws led to the need to prioritize which commandment was more important.

In this debate about the commandments, the teachers of the law classified the commandments into two categories, “heavy” and “light.” Of course, the lawyers and scribes taught that all commandments were important, but the “heavy” ones were particularly important. Yet there was no uniformity of opinion regarding which commandments were heavy, and this continued to be a matter of debate. In a sense, Jesus was asked which commandment was the heaviest of the heavy ones.

The answer by Jesus (22:37-40)

Jesus answered with a quotation from Deuteronomy 6:5, “*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*” This text was a part of the Shema, which consisted of Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21 and Numbers 15:37-41. These verses were the most quoted and copied passages of the Old Testament for the Jews, and were recited twice per day by every faithful Jew. Furthermore, Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21, Exodus 13:1-10, and 13:11-16 were the four passages that were written on small pieces of parchment to be placed in phylacteries to be worn on the forehead and the left arm of Jewish men during prayer. The Deuteronomy passages were also placed in boxes that Jews put on their doorposts. This practice was based upon the words of Deuteronomy 6:8, “*You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*” Some orthodox Jews continue this practice today.

Therefore, these words were very familiar to those listening to Jesus. They had included these in their lives and thus emphasized their importance, yet were still not able to see the significance of Deuteronomy 6:5. So by quoting this text, Jesus was telling them what they already knew, but were failing to respond to.

Mark 12:29-30 records Jesus including Deuteronomy 6:4 in His response, “*The foremost is, ‘HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD; AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH.’*” This served to emphasize that God is theistic, as opposed to polytheistic. Understanding the nature of God is fundamental to obeying the command of verse five.

This is further developed by the possessive “*YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD.*” This does not mean that we have chosen the Lord as our God, but that the Lord created us. This could read, “the Lord, the God of you.” The one God, is the Lord. Because He created us, He is sovereign over us, and therefore rightly deserves our love in its entirety.

Since it is essential that we love the one Lord, the Creator of all, we cannot love Him if we are loving anything else. *“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other”* (Matthew 6:24). Anything other than God is from the creation, not the creator, which cannot be loved without committing idolatry. Replacing our love for God with any other cause, no matter how noble it may appear, is the essence of false worship.

Also, it is essential that we love the real God, not one that we call by His name, but consider Him to be something other than who He has said that He is. This certainly applies to cults, who claim allegiance to God but who deny Jesus, as He is revealed to us. Jesus is the only way that we can come to God, *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me”* (John 14:6). Jesus said, *“If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me”* (John 8:42).

This love for God requires our entire heart, soul and mind. Mark 12:30 adds the phrase *“with all your strength.”* This is consistent with Deuteronomy 6:5, which includes the word *“might,”* whereas Matthew 22:37 replaces this word with *“mind.”* Mark 12:30 keeps the meaning of *“might”* in using the word *“strength”* but like Matthew, includes the word *“mind.”* This word *“mind”* comes from the fuller understanding of the word *“heart”* in Deuteronomy 6:5. For the Hebrew, the heart is not only the center of man’s emotions but is also the center of their thinking (cf. Genesis 6:5; Isaiah 10:7). Therefore, the Gospels communicate the full sense of the word *“heart”* by including the word *“mind.”*

Taken together, Jesus taught that the greatest commandment is for our entire being to be completely devoted in love for God. The enthusiasm of our love should be with our full energy, or our might, wholeheartedly and without reservation. Deuteronomy 6:5 is *“the great and foremost commandment”* for the people of Israel and for the people of the church age.

Jesus also added a second commandment, which *“is like it,”* in terms of its character and focus on love. Jesus quotes Leviticus 19:18 verbatim, *“you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* The major difference between the great and foremost commandment and the second is the object of our love. In the greatest commandment, the object of our love is the Lord our God, while in the second greatest commandment, the object of our love is not the Creator but the ones whom He created. We must love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

1 John 4:20 reinforces the sense that the second commandment is like the greatest commandment, *“If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.”* It is impossible to love God without what He commands for us.

Jesus taught, *“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments”* (John 14:15), and true love of God cannot be achieved apart from obedience to His will. Since Jesus also taught, *“This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you”* (John 15:12), we are compelled to obey Him by loving one another. The model for how we obey this command is Jesus Christ Himself.

Likewise, it is also impossible to truly love others without loving God. We may have a desire to love others but if we do not love others in the way that God has instructed us to, then we are falling short of true love. To be actually loving, we must love others as an extension of our love for God, for anything else is rooted in our self-interest. Jesus said, *“Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends”* (John 15:13). To give up ourselves for others can only be done in the context of the giving up of ourselves to God, who is able to be trusted with the outcome of such abandonment.

Regarding the question of who is the neighbor that must be loved, the context of this commandment in Leviticus is primarily the people of Israel, *“You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD”* (Leviticus 19:18). However, the context of Leviticus 19 also includes those beyond the nation of Israel, *“When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God”* (Leviticus 19:33-34). This explains why Jesus answered the question, *“And who is my neighbor?”* from Luke 10:29 with the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Many have distorted the second greatest commandment to say that we are commanded to love ourselves in order to love our neighbor. Rather, love for ourselves is assumed. We naturally love ourselves, as Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:29, *“for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church.”* We must not be so self-absorbed that we place our interests above everyone else. *“Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others”* (Philippians 2:4).

Jesus summed up His response to the lawyer in verse 40, *“On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”* Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 do not only sum up the commandments of Law, but of the entire Old Testament. In reality, every single teaching of the Old Testament is founded upon the love of God and the love of others, for both are accomplished when we obey Him. Every commandment deals with specific applications of one or both of these two commandments. This is why these two commandments are named by Jesus as the greatest.

Mark emphasizes this point by including the response of the lawyer, who not only echoes the words of Jesus, but also adds that these commandments are *“much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices”* (Mark 12:33). The fulfillment of such sacrifices, or any sacrifice, is dependent upon love, which is much more significant, *“And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing”* (1 Corinthians 13:3).

While this lawyer agreed with Jesus, he was still lacking. *“Jesus saw that he had answered intelligently”* but his answer was still lacking. Therefore, Jesus continued, *“You are not far from the kingdom of God”* (Mark 12:34). While the man could answer Jesus well, He was still not in the kingdom of God based upon his lack of faith. It is important to have understanding, but the application of loving God by faith brings us to the kingdom of God.

This obedience is based upon loving God with our heart, mind, and soul, and not simply our actions. But our love for God will require loving actions toward others. James 2:14-17 says, *“What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.”* Also, 1 John 3:17-18 teaches, *“But whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.”*

If people would love perfectly, there would no longer be a need for the commandments, for all would be done in righteousness. But in our confusion and weakness, God has instructed us regarding how to love Him and also regarding how to love our neighbor as ourselves. By conforming our understanding of love to God’s perspective, we trust that His words are true and our thinking must change. This is the essence of making disciples (cf. Matthew 28:19).

Conclusion

This question of the greatest commandment concluded the series of attempts by the various sects that opposed Jesus to entrap Him. After this response by Jesus, *“no one would venture to ask Him any more questions”* (Mark 12:34). Jesus would now go on the offensive against the scribes and Pharisees.

Jesus' answer regarding the greatest commandment was not only the truthful response to the question that He was asked, but it also served as the basis for the rebuke of the scribes and Pharisees. These religious leaders certainly gave lip service to their love for God and their love for their neighbor, yet the reality was not consistent with their profession. As Jesus noted in Matthew 23:2-3, *“The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them.”*

This remains the great challenge for people at all times, even today, where people represent themselves as loving God and believing in Jesus, but are not sincere. The hypocrisy and legalistic judgment of those who ascend to religious leadership will always be a threat to God's people. These are the specific types of people that the Lord reserved His harshest words for, as will be seen in the next chapter of Matthew.

“Because this people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, But they remove their hearts far from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote” (Isaiah 29:13).