

**THE GREAT COMMANDMENT**  
**Matthew 22:34-40**

It is Wednesday of Passion Week. In two days, Jesus will die on the cross to make atonement for sin. After his TRIUMPHAL ENTRY into Jerusalem, Jesus cleansed the temple of the dove-sellers and moneychangers. The religious establishment determined to get rid of Jesus. Their initial strategy was to trap Jesus with theological questions. This is the setting of Matthew 22. In verses 15-22, the Pharisees ask about paying taxes to Caesar. In verses 23-33, the Sadducees ask about the resurrection. In verses 34-40, the Pharisees ask about the great commandment. None of these trap questions succeed. Mark 12:34 reports: *“And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.”* When their trap questions failed, the religious leaders conspire to get rid of Jesus through crucifixion.

Our text records THE GREAT COMMANDMENT in this context of hostile debate. Verse 34 says: *“But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together.”* The Sadducees questioned Jesus about the resurrection from the dead. Jesus’ response proved they did not know the scriptures or the power of God. Concerning resurrection, the Pharisees agreed with Jesus, not the Sadducees. But their animosity toward Jesus would not permit them to enjoy his victory over the Sadducees. They regrouped to plot their next move. Verse 35 says: *“And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.”* This Pharisee was a lawyer. He was not a civil attorney. He was an Old Testament scholar. This lawyer asked a question to test Jesus. His motives were ulterior. But his question was legitimate: *“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?”*

This lawyer’s question is not about the Ten Commandments. It is about the entire Old Testament. The religious leaders categorized the Old Testament into 248 positive and 365 negative commands. And they subdivided these 613 commands as heavy or light, ranking them by importance. This created an ongoing debate about which was the greatest commandment. The lawyer presented the question to test Jesus. Note the irony. This lawyer tested the true lawgiver and only law-keeper with a question about the law. Verses 37-40 record Jesus’ answer to the lawyer’s question. It teaches us that true religion is all about loving God and loving people. *What is the greatest commandment in the law?* Jesus summarizes the duty of true religion with a double-commandment to love.

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**I. LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD.**

Verses 37-38 record the first part of Jesus answer to the lawyer’s question about the greatest commandment: *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. This is the great and first commandment.”* Consider four elements of this great commandment.

**A. THE ESSENTIAL DUTY.**

In verse 37, Jesus answered the lawyer's question, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*" This is a direct reference to the Jewish *Shema*. Deuteronomy 6:4-5 says: "*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*" This is the fundamental creed of Judaism, which devout Jews recited twice a day. But what does this great commandment command? It is a command to *love*. Jesus did not wade into the debate about heavy and light commands. He presented the command at the heart of all commandments. It is the law of love. MATHEW HENRY commented: "All the law is fulfilled in one word, and that is, love."

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#### B. THE WORTHY OBJECT.

The GREAT COMMANDMENT is not a call to love in general. It commands us to love a specific person: "*You shall love the Lord your God.*" This name gives two reasons why God is infinitely worthy of your all-encompassing love. First, GOD IS THE LORD OF CREATION. The title "*Lord*" emphasizes sovereign authority. God created the heavens and the earth. And God rules over the heavens and the earth. Divine sovereignty demands more than holy fear. It demands wholehearted love. Likewise, THE LORD IS THE GOD OF COVENANT. The Lord of heaven and earth is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The God who reigns sovereignly over his creation relates personally to his creatures. He is "*the Lord your God.*" Exodus 20:2 is the first word of the TEN COMMANDMENTS: "*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*" Before God gave any commands, he established his right to give commands: "I am the Lord your God." We should love God because of who he is *Lord*. We should love God because of what he has done for us as *our God* in Christ Jesus.

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#### C. THE TOTAL DEVOTION.

Verse 37 says, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*" The *heart* is the seat of personhood that includes the mind, the will, and the emotions. The *soul* is the immaterial spirit being that lives underneath your skin. Deuteronomy 6:5 says love God "*with all your strength.*" Jesus specifies your *mind*, rather than the strength. We do not know why Jesus made this change. But it may be that Jesus viewed the mind to be the true place of strength, not the body. Whatever the rationale, Jesus has the sovereign right to change the terms. And he chose to emphasize loving God with the mind, which teaches us that love is more than what you feel. It is about how you think. Heart, soul, and mind are not separate parts of human nature. The three nouns stand together to speak of the loving God with one's total being. The key word here is "*all,*" used three times: "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all*

*your soul and with all your mind.*" The command can be rendered this way: "Love God with everything you are in every possible way."

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#### D. THE ULTIMATE PRIORITY.

Verse 38 comments on verse 38: *"This is the great and first commandment."* Jesus called the command to love God *"great."* It is the greatest, most weighty, ultimate command. Jesus also called this commandment *"first."* It is not merely first in order. It is about priority and prominence. There is no more important duty than to love God with your whole being. Loving God is the supreme duty of true religion. Augustine said: "Love God and do as you please." This is not a license to do whatever your sinful nature wants to do. It is a bold declaration that love for God will change your nature and cause you to do the things that pleasing to God. Psalm 37:4 says: *"Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart."*

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## II. LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.

The lawyer tested Jesus by asking which is the great commandment in the law. Jesus's passed the test and gave an extra-credit answer in verses 39-40: *"And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."* It is a reference to Leviticus 19:18 that says: *"you shall love your neighbor as yourself, I am the Lord."* This second commandment teaches us four truths about the GREAT COMMANDMENT.

#### A. THE GREAT COMMANDMENT IS TWOFOLD.

In verse 39, Jesus says: *"And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* How is this second command to love your neighbor like the first command to love God? They are not alike simply by the incidental connection of a common theme. They are organically connected and inextricably linked. LOVE FOR GOD PRODUCES LOVE FOR YOUR NEIGHBOR. Divine love issues in interpersonal love. You cannot love God and hate people. 1 John 4:20 says: *"If anyone says, 'I love God, and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen'"*

LOVE FOR GOD PRECEDES LOVE FOR YOUR NEIGHBOR. The link between the first great commandment and the second great commandment is essential. So is the order. You cannot love God without loving your neighbor. And you cannot love your neighbor without loving God. Of course, you can have care, affection, and devotion to people without regard to God. But that is not the kind of love Jesus is talking about here. The same word used for loving God is used for loving your neighbor. It is *agape* love that seeks the highest good of the one loved to the point of self-sacrifice. It is the God showed us when he sent his only Son into the world to die on the cross for our sins.

You cannot love truly love your neighbor if you do not truly love God. Your love with be tainted by sin it does not flow from a wholehearted love for God.

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#### B. THE GREAT COMMANDMENT IS UNIVERSAL.

Verse 39 says: *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* The Jews viewed the reference to one's neighbor in Leviticus 19:18 to speak of fellow-Jews. But Leviticus 19:33-34 says: *"When a stranger sojourner with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."* One's neighbor is not necessarily the person looks like you. It is not the person who shares your background. It is not the person you are most comfortable around. The fact that God loved you when you were a stranger obligates you to love strangers as neighbors.

In Luke 10:25-29, a lawyer asked Jesus how to inherit eternal life. Jesus asked the lawyer what his understand of the law was. And the lawyer answered by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. Jesus commended his answer and told him go do it and he would live. But to justify himself, the lawyer asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" The lawyer wanted Jesus to place people in categories of who those he was obligated to love. Jesus shifted the question by telling THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN in Luke 10:25-37. You do not find your neighbor by looking in the mirror. You find your neighbor by looking out the window. Whoever is in need along your path is your neighbor. The Bible does not teach the universal brotherhood of all people. It does teach the universal neighborhood of all people. The person in need you can help is the neighbor you are commanded to love.

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#### C. THE GREAT COMMANDMENT IS SELFLESS.

The first commandment is to love the Lord your God. The second commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself. But some see two commands in this second commandment: *"Love your neighbor as yourself."* And they conclude that you cannot love your neighbor until you learn to love yourself. In the children's choir of the church I grew up in, we used to sing *"The Greatest Love of God,"* It says the children are our future. Right. It also says learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all. Wrong. The greatest love of all is to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind. And the first runner up is loving your neighbor as yourself. The phrase *"as yourself"* is not a command. It's a presupposition. We do love ourselves. That's our problem. 2 Timothy 3:1 says: *"But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty."* What will these times of difficulty look like? 2 Timothy 3:2 answers: *"For people will be lovers of self."*

Jesus presupposes we love ourselves. This not is about self-worth, self-esteem, or self-identity. The point is practical. You take care you. You do is best for you. You do what you have to do to meet your needs. This is the way you should love

your neighbor as yourself. In Matthew 7:12, Jesus gives the Golden Rule: *“So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”* Many taught you should not do to others what you do not want them to do to you. Jesus said do unto others as if you were the others. Treat people the way you want to be treated, not the way they treat you. Love your neighbor as yourself.

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#### D. THE GREAT COMMANDMENT IS IMPOSSIBLE.

In verse 40, Jesus concludes: *“On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”* The word *“depend”* literally means, *“to hang.”* The two great commandments are the hinges upon which the door of the Law and the Prophets stands. In Matthew 5:17, Jesus says, *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”* Jesus was not abolishing the Law and the Prophets by giving these two commandments. Jesus was teaching that fulfill these two commandments is to fulfill them all. And this law of love has been the Christian position going every since. In Romans 13:8-10 Paul says: *“Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law For the commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and any other commandment, are summed up on this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”* MICHAEL GREEN said it well: *“With God first and neighbor second, all else in the law is commentary.”*

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True religion is all about loving God and loving people. It is that simple. Yet it is impossible. The GREAT COMMANDMENT is not the way of salvation. It is the evidence that convicts us of the guilt of sin. No one loves God with all his heart, soul, and mind. And no one loves his neighbor as himself. You may love God with my heart, soul, or mind; but not with all three or with all of all three. We have not loved my neighbor as myself. We fight with family, we mistrust friends, and we avoid neighbors. If getting to heaven is as simple as loving God and loving people, I cannot trust the best five minutes I have ever lived to get me to heaven. Neither can you. The Great Commandment is impossible for sinners to obey.

Mark 12:32-33 records the lawyer’s response to the Great Commandment: *“And the scribe said to him, ‘You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”* He came to Jesus with ulterior motives. But he could not deny the truth when he heard it. In Mark 12:34, Jesus replied, *“You are not far from the kingdom of God.”* But how far is not far? To be not far is to still be lost. True religion is all about loving God and loving people. But you cannot be saved by religion. You need a Savior. You need Jesus. You need the blood of his cross to atone for your failure to love God and love your neighbor. 1 John 4:10

says: *"In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."* God does not love you because you are loveable. You are loveable because God loves you. Only the love of God the Father, the blood of God the Son, and the power of God the Holy Spirit can enable you to love the Lord your God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself.

I WAS SINKING DEEP IN SIN, FAR FROM THE PEACEFUL SHORE  
VERY DEEPLY STAINED WITHIN, SINKING TO RISE NO MORE  
BUT THE MASTER OF THE SEA, HEARED MY DESPARING CRY,  
FROM THE WATERS LIFTED ME – NOW SAFE AM I.