

Session 1

LOVING GOD

Matthew 22:35-40

Memory Verse

“Teacher, which command in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command.

The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.”

– MATTHEW 22:36-40, CSB



Loving God

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Loving God in every possible way is at the heart of a whole life. Doing so, though, demands loving those whom God loves.

In the classic 1991 mid-life crisis film, *City Slickers*, three friends who are each disillusioned, dissatisfied, and depressed about the condition of their lives agree to an extreme vacation on a working ranch. Wallowing in angst and frustration, the friends debate, bemoan, and offer advice regarding each other's predicaments. In one of the more iconic scenes, the joyless main character (Billy Crystal) seeks advice from the leathery and experientially wise cowboy (Jack Palance) who is leading their cattle drive. With a mixture of condescension and annoyance, the cowboy clarifies that instead of worrying about every single aspect of his life, the hapless urbanite needs to focus on his "one thing" and forget about everything else. Only that "one thing" is ultimately important.¹

There is a nugget of truth to the power of knowing the fundamental thing that makes life work and worth living. The glorious benefit for the believer is that one should never need to worry about not knowing what that "one thing" is. The Bible states it clearly in multiple places, most notably from the mouth of Jesus. The tremendous gift of Jesus answering the question of the most important commandment grants clarity and focus for the believer in a world of dizzying options.

Any attempt to live a whole life the whole way must begin with a clear understanding of what is most important. It is not an elusive truth that requires codes to decipher. It is not a secret that only a select few understand. It is clearly recorded on the pages of Scripture as part of a conversation in which Jesus was also being challenged by those who wanted to discredit Him. As the Savior explained the foundational truth for life, His critics were hushed and His followers were given a path.

? What are some of the competing “most important things” that the world promotes as being of ultimate importance? What shortcomings do you see in those offerings?

? Who inspires you with evident peace and contentment in his or her life? What do you know about that person’s relationship with Christ? What particular aspects would you like to emulate?

Session Summary

In this week’s session, Matthew recorded the numerous attempts of the Pharisees and Sadducees to trap Jesus with seemingly impossible questions. In doing so, however, the religious leaders opened the door for Jesus to reveal the truth of God time and again. When asked about the greatest command, Jesus responded with the two-fold answer of loving God in every way and demonstrating that by extending God’s love to others.

1. The Important and Impossible Question (Matthew 22:35-36)

In his gospel, Matthew recorded many of the incidents during Jesus’ teaching ministry in which religious leaders would question and challenge Him regarding His doctrinal understanding or practices as they pertained to their customs for obeying the Law. While some of the questions might seem straightforward to the modern reader, the religious leaders’ questions were always slanted toward discrediting Jesus. If their questions addressed particular issues in religious life (divorce, food laws, fasting, temple tax, etc.), those questions were almost always asked because those matters were hotly debated in Jesus’ day. In this light, no matter His answer, the leaders thought they would catch Him offending one faction of Jews. For the questions that addressed doctrinal understanding, the goal was the same; they desired to ask Jesus a question that would corner Him into offending one side or the other. So it was with the religious leader who was an expert in the Law asking Jesus about the greatest law.

When the Jews spoke of the Law, they had in mind more than simply the Ten Commandments that were written by the finger of God for Moses. As rabbinic tradition grew, the rabbis had identified 613 additional commands from the Torah that must be obeyed with equal devotion as the Ten Commandments. According to Leon Morris, of those commands, “the rabbis divided the commandments in the law into the light and the weighty. They did not mean that some commandments were so slight that they could be neglected. All the laws were God’s, and therefore all were to be treated with full seriousness. But obviously some commandments were more important than others...”² Tragically, the religious leaders’ approach to doctrine and obedience was simply fodder for contentious debate.

? How does it make you feel when you suspect someone is asking you a question to set you up for backlash? Describe a time when someone asked you a leading theological question to pick a fight. How did you handle it?

? What do you learn about the expert in the Law that challenged Jesus, knowing that his question was specifically meant to test Jesus?

The question that the expert in the Law posed to Jesus as a vehicle to discredit Him wound up being a tremendous launching point for Jesus to correct the leaders’ view of a whole life. For the religious leaders, as Jesus pointed out repeatedly in the Gospels, the greatest value was being experts in the details of the Law. The application of the Law to their daily living and heart condition, however, was sorely lacking. This question posed by the expert in the Law demonstrated as much. Morris says, “This is another question that must have looked to the questioner as though it should give matter for argument and controversy no matter what answer Jesus gave. There is no objective yardstick for measuring one commandment against another, so

that whatever commandment Jesus selected for the first place would certainly have been placed lower by others.”³

While the expert asked Jesus about the most important command, Jesus’ answer looked at the importance of the command in a different light. The expert in the Law asked with the intent of arguing about which commandment should come first in the pecking order. Jesus’ response was as vastly more significant as was His understanding of the Father to the understanding of the expert in the Law. Jesus offered an understanding of the most important commandment as that which was ultimately foundational.

2. Loving God (Matthew 22:37-38)

Those in the crowd listening to the exchange likely waited with hushed breath, anticipating Jesus’ response to such a foundational question. In effect, the man had asked Jesus about the singular most important thing that a devout Jew must do. The answer to the question could have gone a number of different ways. Jesus could have mentioned one of the actual Ten Commandments as the most important command. Perhaps He would mention one of the commands pertaining to one of the holy festivals. Instead, Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:5, a passage, along with Deuteronomy 6:4, commonly known as the Shema (sh’mah). The Shema was a pivotal text for Israelites. It was spoken several times throughout the day and displayed on the headwear of Jewish men. It was to be taught to children at a young age and accompany the teaching of the Law in the family.

It would not have been a surprise to the listening crowd that Jesus selected that particular commandment, given its centrality to daily Jewish religious practice and culture. There was a slight difference in the commandment as Jesus recited it and the passage in Deuteronomy, as Jesus substituted “all your strength” (Deut. 6:5) with “all your mind.” The possible reasons for such a substitution are many, but should not be overstated. The meaning of both renderings was the same: loving God must include everything about a person’s life. The more significant grammatical feature was the repetition of “all” three times in Jesus’ answer. The repetition strongly underscored the all-inclusive nature of what it means to biblically love God.

? What does it indicate to you that Jesus' response addressed a person's love for God instead of a specific rule to follow? How does His answer reconcile right belief and right practice without diminishing either?

? What was the impact of selecting such a familiar passage as the most important one? How do you think it impacted His hearers to know that the most important thing was something they spoke of frequently but gave no evidence of practicing?

For those actually interested in Jesus' response so that they could make sure to follow it, the fact that He identified the most commonly uttered passage in the Law must have been incredibly convicting. The grammar Jesus used to identify the Shema as the most important commandment was more emphatic than the words used in the question that was posed Him. The manner in which Jesus specifically mentioned loving God included emotions, spirit, and intellect. None of these broad categories could be ignored and still be considered as loving God biblically. For the Pharisees and Sadducees, their primary focus was on the intellectual/academic knowledge of the Law as their primary way of loving God. However, they lacked the application of knowledge that would actually lead them to faithfulness to God.

3. Loving God Means Loving Others (Matthew 22:39-40)

Unexpectedly, Jesus continued with His answer. Where the expert's question anticipated a solitary answer, Jesus included a second part to His response. The second part that Jesus mentioned was included because "the second is like it." Being like it meant having the same character and ultimate end. Loving God obviously had the ultimate end of worship in all things. The second being like it meant that worshipping God appropriately meant extending His love and character to those around them, who were also made in God's image just as they were. Morris points out, "Therefore anyone who truly loves God with all his being must and will love others, and this is expressed in the commandment."²⁴

? Why is it so important to connect the outflow of God's love to others with personal worship? In what ways does this reflect God's love for His people?

? How should Jesus' explanation that all the Law and the Prophets depend on these commands impact one's understanding of the Old Testament?

All of the energy that the religious leaders expended on judging others for not adhering to every part of the Law was foolishly spent because simply abiding by the rules does not affect one's heart condition. Even if a person were able to do so, obeying all of the laws would have been nothing more than an empty obedience, lacking substance and power. Rather, it is the love of God that God has always desired of His people.

Understanding the crucial connection between transformation through personal worship and loving others, the greatest commandment refocuses the reader's comprehension of the Old Testament. Where the Old Testament has frequently been depicted as harsh and angry over against the love and grace of the New Testament, Jesus' answer makes it clear that the love of others has always been at the heart of God's will for His people.

Conclusion

In answering the religious leaders in the manner that He did, Jesus addressed many problems common to all generations when it comes to understanding love and obedience. The explanation of the Great Commandment is equally counter-cultural to the modern believer as it was in the day in which Jesus initially spoke it. In light of this, there are some important considerations for application.

First, loving God must be done with a humble heart. It is astonishing for believers to think of someone speaking with the Incarnate Christ with such devious, irreverent intent. When the expert in the Law asked Jesus his question, Matthew made it clear that it was done to test Jesus. In order for someone to love God, a humble heart must be present. That is because part of loving and worshipping God is acknowledging who He is in character and holiness. This leaves a person's heart humbled in light of the unsurpassable glory and majesty of God. For believers, one of the great ministries of the Holy Spirit is His work in conditioning hearts with appropriate humility for worship.

Second, because loving God is all-consuming, He is never satisfied with believers merely gaining theological knowledge. There is a great temptation in discipleship to become puffed up with newfound theological knowledge. There has never been a group that was more theologically knowledgeable than the Pharisees. Their knowledge of the Law was exhaustive. Their lives were spent in constant study of Scripture. They knew what it said – period. Yet when the incarnate Word of God stood among them, they repeatedly positioned themselves as His enemies. Believers cannot be satisfied with simply growing in their knowledge of doctrinal and theological aspects of Christianity. Such knowledge is empty and breeds arrogance that threatens the heart of the believer.

Third, because loving God is all-consuming, theological knowledge is critical. There remains great temptation to reduce following Christ to a collection of sanctified warm-fuzzy moments. Make no mistake; understanding the depth of the love and grace of God should reduce believers to awed silence, tears of joy and gratitude, and exuberant joy. However, the world is full of competing false doctrines and theologies about who God is. If believers are to love their neighbors by correcting erroneous thought, removing spiritual blindfolds built on false assumptions, etc., they must be able to speak of their faith and know their faith with robust, biblical theology.

Fourth, loving your neighbor as yourself means, in part, having gospel conversations. It is not substantive enough for believers to be nice to people in the hope that they somehow deduce that they are believers in Jesus Christ. Certainly, biblical hospitality, compassion, and the willingness to meet needs are critical components to loving one's neighbors. At some point—most likely early and often—it will be necessary to speak of one's faith, inviting into non-threatening gospel conversations. The name of Jesus must be spoken. An explanation of what and why one believes must be kindly offered.

? Which of the three areas mentioned by Jesus (heart, soul, mind) is the most natural for you to express your love of God through? Which one requires the most discipline for you?

? Given the community we live in, why do you think it is so important for believers to be theologically grounded? What is the danger in placing too much emphasis on theological knowledge?

? What are some ways in which your love for God has found expression by tangibly loving others? How would you like to see that change over the next months? What particular neighbors do you feel drawn toward?

CHRIST CONNECTION: Jesus demonstrated how loving God and loving others are seamlessly connected. Because of His love for the Father, Jesus demonstrated His love for others, even to the point of death.

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: For a believer to live a whole life, he or she must connect the all-consuming love for God with the natural outflow of loving others.



FOR NEXT WEEK

Living a Whole Life the Whole Way: Loving God With All My Heart

Main Passages

- Matthew 6:19-24; 22:34-40

Session Outline

1. Understanding What is Ultimately Important (Matthew 6:19-21)
2. Loving God Without Distraction (Matthew 6:22-23)
3. Loving God Without Rival (Matthew 6:24)

Memorize

³⁶ *“Teacher, which command in the law is the greatest?”*³⁷ *He said to him, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.”*³⁸ *This is the greatest and most important command.*³⁹ *The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.*⁴⁰ *All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.”*

- Matthew 22:36-40, CSB

Daily Readings

- Monday - Psalm 37:4
- Tuesday - Jeremiah 29:13
- Wednesday - Matthew 5:6
- Thursday - Luke 10:38-42
- Friday - Lamentations 3:25
- Saturday - Isaiah 40:31

References

- ¹*City Slickers*. Directed by Ron Underwood. USA: Columbia Pictures, 1991. Film.
- ²Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to Matthew*. Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992.
- ³Ibid.
- ⁴Ibid.