

## **Matthew 22:34-40**

### **“Love: The Greatest Commandment”**

#### **Introduction**

For several Sundays now, the theme for our study of God's Word has been living as Christ's disciples. Today, which is the 3<sup>rd</sup> message in this series, we will focus on the most important of God's commandments. The first message focused on living with Jesus, the second message taught us what it meant to follow Jesus (devotion), and through today's message we will learn about love. The greatest commandment is to love: first, love God and then love your neighbor.

In Buddhism, there are five all-important precepts. Do not intentionally kill living things. Do not steal from others. Do not engage in immoral sexual acts (adultery). Do not lie. Do not drink alcoholic beverages. In Islam as well, there are five commandments, or principal practices: confession of faith, praying five times a day, offering money (renunciation), fasting during Ramadan, and making a pilgrimage to Mecca.

Seen in this light, it is quite unique that Jesus made loving God and loving our neighbor the most important commandments that sum up the entire Bible. Our lives tend to be disjointed, but these commandments integrate our lives into one, and make it easier to narrow our focus and our passion.

#### **Matthew 22:34-40**

<sup>34</sup> But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together.

<sup>35</sup> And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.

<sup>36</sup> “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”

<sup>37</sup> 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.

<sup>38</sup> This is the great and first commandment.

<sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

<sup>40</sup> On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

In today's Scripture, Jesus encourages us to focus first and foremost on love. Every day, we are surrounded by so much teaching and advice. This can be very good, but often it is misleading. Let's focus on love.

Second, what does Jesus teach about love? Let's see how we should express love through our actions. In a word, love is giving of yourself. Our third focus today is, how can we love? It is difficult for us to love others and it is easy for us to become self-centered.

### 1. Live with a focus on love.

The Pharisees posed radical questions to Jesus. They wanted to somehow trick Jesus into a corner and expose him. With a mixture of flattery and sarcasm, they called him "Teacher" and asked, "Which commandment in the Law is the most important?"

This was not simply a question. The Pharisees wanted to test Jesus, who was popularly believed to be the Messiah. Jesus had already defeated the Sadducees, who were rivals of the Pharisees. The Pharisees must have felt a sense of crisis if even their strongest rivals were no match for Jesus.

The Sadducees were the ruling class of Israelite society at that time. They were the chief priests and elders who made up the majority of the assembly called the Sanhedrin. They seized political power and collaborated with the Roman Empire. In religious terms, they denied the existence of messengers and spiritual beings, and did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. They were a more secular sect, so to speak.

In contrast, the Pharisees were an empiricist movement, that sought to win salvation through strict observance of God's law. People at that time respected the Pharisees' zealous religious life to some extent. However, the way they flaunted their observances of the commandments was often criticized by Jesus.

"Which commandment in the Law is the most important?" How would this question test Jesus or trap him?

According to the scribes of the time, there were 613 commandments in the Bible that one must keep. Among these commandments there were some heavier commandments that were more important and some lighter ones. Of course, since they are all God's commandments, the lighter ones should not be neglected. As Jesus said, "Not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished." (Matthew 5:18)

And, there was debate as to which commandments were more important and fundamental. The rabbis of the time argued that the Torah could be summarized in eleven principles from Psalm 15, six from Isaiah 33:15-16, three from Micah 6:8, etc.

So, if Jesus had declared a certain commandment to be the most important one—the one of central importance in all the Law—there would surely have been scribes who would have opposed it. They were bound to criticize Jesus, not containing their anger. And they expected that a more authoritative and well-known biblical expert would surely be able to outwit Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, what do you consider to be the most important thing to you? What is your heart's motivation? Of course, there are many good teachings and excellent advice in the world. I am sure you have found comfort in words that have stirred your heart.

Steve Jobs said, "The most important decision is not what to do, but what not to do."

Konosuke Matsushita said, "The most important duty of a businessman is to be loved and to do work that will be loved."

The Bible is also full of many wonderful teachings. But Jesus addresses the motives of our hearts when he says that we are to love God first and then our neighbor. He taught us to live with love as our standard and foundation. It is important that love be our first priority and motive when we try to live out the various teachings and commandments.

I am sure what Jesus is saying rings loud and clear in our ears. "**Love God with all of your life!**" Love must become the focus of your life. These words are taken from Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

When I was a child, I used to sneak my father's camera out of the house to play with. Those were the days when there was no such thing as auto-focus or digital cameras. We had to adjust the shutter speed and the amount of light as well. If we didn't focus and release the shutter, we would end up with a picture that was out of focus. In an unfocused picture you can't tell what the subject is and it becomes meaningless. In the same way, if we do not focus on the most important thing in life, which is loving God and loving others, our life will be like a ruined photo that is out of focus.

Another important thing is to love your friends, family, and all those around you in the same way in which you want to be treated. This is also found in the Old Testament in Leviticus 19:18. In other words, all things can be summed up in, and consolidated under the command to love God and love your neighbor. In so doing, you too will be treated in like manner.

### **1. What is love?**

But one may ask, "What is love?" "How can we love?" According to the Bible, love is not merely a feeling of liking something or having a fondness for something. Rather, it is an action based on a decision. Let's look at Deuteronomy 6, which Jesus quoted to teach us about love for God.

*Deuteronomy 6:4, 5. "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."*

These words were recited twice a day by the Jews and written on the doorposts of their homes. Everyone understood that it was an important commandment. The point is clear. We are to love God with all that we are and all that we have. Daily, we are to think of God, turn our hearts to Him, pray, trust, worship, sing praises, hear His Word, obey His commandments, and do His will.

If that still seems hard to grasp, consider how Jesus loved God. Jesus shared everything for the sake of God and for the sake of mankind. Love is giving.

Jesus' life was a life of giving. It was a life of sharing what the Father had given Him. He gave all that he had...He did not withhold anything, not even his own life. (Robert Coleman, p.84-85)

In particular, John 3:16 shows how God loved through Jesus and clearly defines what love looks like.

*John 3:16. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."*

In the first place, because God loves us, he gives us everything. He loved us so much that He even gave us His only begotten Son. Therefore, Jesus, who became incarnate as a man, abandoned his own rights and gave his life for sinners. "God's infinite love can only express itself in infinite ways." (Coleman p. 86)

*John 15:13. "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."*

Surely in Jesus we find the love of God and the love of neighbor united in one. The second commandment, love of neighbor, is taken from Leviticus 19:18.

*Leviticus 19:18. "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord."*

The Jews at that time interpreted "neighbor" to refer only to fellow Jews. But Jesus teaches that "neighbor" refers to all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, kinship, or friends. We tend to love those who are easy to love. We value people in our own circle of friends, but if we give greetings only to them, we lack true love. Matthew 5:44-47.

*Matthew 5:44-47. "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?"*

These are words that pierce our hearts! We are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. In fact, Jesus said of those who crucified him, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34). This is the key to life! Loving is the key to rebuilding a broken world. It is the foundation of true happiness.

## **2. How can we love?**

If that is true, how do we learn to love? We know what Jesus wants us to do. To love even our enemies. God is love, and Jesus put this love into practice. He prayed even for those who persecuted him. So how do we learn to love?

To answer this question, let us consider why we *cannot* love. In the second commandment, Jesus teaches us to love our neighbor "as ourselves." We usually put ourselves first. We prioritize ourselves and our interests, and we take various precautions to ensure our own fulfillment. We are concerned for ourselves. We protect ourselves, defend ourselves, and try to save ourselves. This keeps us from loving others.

What is another way of saying this? Namely, loving means "giving priority." To love is to put the needs of one's neighbor above one's own needs. The Apostle Paul's words are very helpful. Philippians 2:3-4.

*Philippians 2:3,4. "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."*

In the way that we care about ourselves, we should also care about others, putting their needs first instead of our own (which we see as superior). That is the heart of love. What this requires is that we are no longer concerned only about ourselves. Parents take care of their children because they care for them and are concerned for them over and above themselves.

Therefore, if you can ultimately not worry about life because of the love of Jesus, the love of God, and the salvation of the cross, then you have room in your heart. If you are wounded, troubled, and exhausted because of sin, you must tend to your wounds. You need to rest your troubled heart. You will need to feed your exhausted and disappointed soul.

However, Jesus has radically taken away your worries. He has healed and saved you. Jesus has healed the fundamental wound in our souls. We are made children of God, we are loved, and at the most foundational level, we have nothing to worry about. Of course, we will experience problems and troubles, but in these, we are loved, healed, and saved, so we are able to have room in our hearts. We can think about others and pray for them.

But this kind of love is not possible by human power. It was through the Spirit of God that Jesus sacrificed Himself to love in the first place. When Jesus began his ministry, he was baptized by John the Baptist. Then the heavens opened, and the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus like a dove, saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Even Jesus was baptized by the Holy Spirit. Even Jesus did not show his love by human power. It was a work of the Spirit.

If you are focused on loving and are motivated by love as you walk as a disciple of Christ, the Holy Spirit will work in your heart. He will heal anger, sadness, envy, hatred, and the rancor of the heart, and give you a heart to love. Let's be disciples of Christ who love with the love of the Spirit.