

***The Greatest Love***  
Series: Devoted  
Matthew 22:34-40  
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**INTRO:** On behalf of the WorldVenture family of missionaries, staff, and Board of Directors, I want to thank you, the church family here at First Baptist of Danville, for your 81 years of partnership in gospel impact among the nations! I am grateful for your partnerships with Barry & Peggy Owens, Corby & Ashley White, and with Lucas & Bekah Grudda.

Down through the years, you all have partnered with other WorldVenture all-star missionaries: Glenn & Lynn Boese, Michael & Debbie Bannon, Bill & Dianne Grudda, Tim & Jackie Faulkner, Sam & Connie Gill, and Keith & Beverly Sellers. When I think about each one of these missionary couples and the gospel works they were or are engaged in, I thank God for your significant impact among various peoples and countries around the world!

This morning, we are focusing on a conversation, somewhat of a debate between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day called the Pharisees. At stake in the debate is an ultimate question in life: *What can I do to earn God's favor?*

I want you to discover what Jesus is teaching via 4 questions as we look more closely at Matthew 22:34-40.

- ***What does this passage tell me about God?***
- ***What does this passage tell me about people (or myself)?***
- ***How will I obey this passage?***
- ***To whom will I share this passage?***

**CONTEXT:** Lest you think that baseball fans originated the endless debate of ‘who is the greatest MLB player?’, back in the day, Jewish religious leaders had their version of endless debate on the greatest...wait for it...commandment! Yeah, probably not riveting debate for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century! But their question mattered and matters still today. Many peoples around the world are following the commands of their religion, hoping that God will accept their sacrifices. Front and center days before his arrest and crucifixion, the Jewish religious leaders of the day put Jesus on the hotseat with a question up for debate and likely, entrapment. Which commandment is the greatest? Jewish religious leaders and groups held to varying teachings according to their rabbis.

- *The law of circumcision for it was the sign of God's covenant*
- *The law of the Sabbath for its practice preserved the law of Moses*
- *The laws of sacrifices for the forgiveness of sin*
- *The laws of dietary purity for by them Israel was set apart from the Gentiles*

**Matthew 22 (NIV)**

<sup>34</sup> **Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together.**

<sup>35</sup> **One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question:**

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

<sup>37</sup> **Jesus replied: “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 first and greatest commandment.**

<sup>39</sup> **And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’**

<sup>40</sup> **All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”**

In his response to the lawyer Jesus shifted the focus from conduct to character, from activities to affections. In so doing, his response here is comparable to his radical teachings captured in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 when he said, “you have heard it said, but I say to you.” Jesus’ answer is a sobering *“all in or not at all”* invitation.

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

## 1. Love God wholeheartedly

Jesus quoted Moses' command to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 6:4-9

<sup>4</sup>Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. <sup>5</sup>**Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.** <sup>6</sup>These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. <sup>7</sup>Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. <sup>8</sup>Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. <sup>9</sup>Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

In Jewish Old Testament thinking,

**Heart** is the seat of our intellect, will, and intentions

**Soul** is the entire inner self of emotions, desires, and personal characteristics that makes each person unique

**Strength** is synonymous with greatly or exceedingly

Permit me a paraphrase of Jesus' answer:

*Love the Lord your God with total commitment (heart), with your total self (soul), to total excess (strength).*

Jesus is not creating a new teaching here. Consistently throughout the Old and New Testaments, we discover that God wants our whole selves to love Him. Lest we forget, this is a really big deal from God's perspective, for every time Israel strayed from God, he likens their idolatry to adultery.

- Samuel in 1 Samuel 12:24  
<sup>24</sup>But be sure to fear the LORD and serve him faithfully **with all your heart**; consider what great things he has done for you.
- King Solomon in 1 Kings 8:61  
<sup>61</sup>And may your **hearts be fully committed** to the LORD our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands, as at this time.
- King Asa in 2 Chronicles 16:9  
<sup>9</sup>For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen **those whose hearts are fully committed to him**. You have done a foolish thing, and from now on you will be at war."
- King Josiah in 2 Kings 23:25  
<sup>25</sup>Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the LORD as he did—**with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength**, in accordance with all the Law of Moses.
- Jesus reframes discipleship expectations in Matthew 16:24 (Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23)  
<sup>24</sup>Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

## 2. Love our neighbors wholeheartedly

Jesus quotes Moses' command to the Israelites in Leviticus 19:18

<sup>18</sup>"Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people but **love your neighbor as yourself**. I am the LORD."

Jesus makes explicit that we are to have as deep and sacrificial love for those around us as we have for ourselves. Herein is the social and moral ethic of Jesus' "Golden Rule" in Matthew 7:12

<sup>12</sup> So in everything, **do to others what you would have them do to you**, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

While Moses taught Israel to love their neighbors, mostly people like them, Jesus expanded the concept of neighbor beyond what most people are comfortable with. Remember the question, *Who is my neighbor?!* This was another one of those entrapment inquiries by a religious leader wanting to justify himself before Jesus.

The Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37

<sup>36</sup> "Which of these three do you think was a **neighbor** to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" <sup>37</sup> The expert in the law replied, "**The one who had mercy on him.**" Jesus told him, "**Go and do likewise.**"

Love costs the one who loves. *"No one would remember the Good Samaritan if he'd only had good intentions."*

Jesus has a way of answering questions that leave us speechless. Jesus shook his hearers to their very core with his scandalous expansion of neighbor to include enemies. Our old assumptions with inherent prejudices and hatreds are exposed. *How can I possibly love "them" like I love my own?!*

### 3. The 'So What?' of the greatest commandments

These greatest commandments stand in stark contrast to the vitriolic enmity of our society and the world in which we live. If we're honest, it's hard to love God with our whole selves. And others? Let's just say that feels nigh unto impossible. The Bible is painfully clear – we are dead in our sin. Listen to how Paul wrote about our human condition:

Galatians 5:19-21 (The Message)

It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community.

Which begs the question,

*Is wholeheartedly loving God and others even possible?*

The Pharisees were trapped in a performance mindset that placed enormous value in seemingly right behaviors rather than the transformation of one's life. What they completely missed is that the two greatest commandments are not about image management. Repeatedly in the Gospels, Jesus strongly opposed the idea that cleaning up the external behaviors of one's life without dealing with the matters of one's heart relationship with God is unequivocally a false religion.

Look at how Jesus replied to the Sadducees just a few verses prior to our text today:

Matthew 22:29

Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. And yet, every religious system in the world places enormous value in "right behaviors" over the transformation of one's very being. At our core, this is the "why" of WorldVenture. The peoples of the world live in spiritual darkness and confusion, and they need to hear the Good News that Jesus offers the only redemption that sets us right with God, with others, and with ourselves.

God, in his everlasting and unfailing love has made possible through Jesus our reconciliation with himself and our reconciliation with others. Knowing Jesus changes everything about us. In very tangible ways, we experience true love when we are made right with God in contrast with the relational transactions that we confuse for love. When we know the redeeming grace of God in Jesus, we can wholeheartedly love God and others. What kind of love am I referring to?

Listen to how Paul prayed for believers to experience love and ask yourself if this is what you want too.

Ephesians 3:16-19

<sup>16</sup>I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, <sup>17</sup>so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, <sup>18</sup>may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, <sup>19</sup>and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

It is only in Christ that all the families of the earth are blessed as God promised Abraham so long ago. It is only in Christ that a new humanity is released from our self-interests and loveless ways. It is only in Christ that the venomous power of ethnocentrism is defanged. In Christ, love for our neighbors as fellow image bearers of God is core to our sharing the gospel and the love of Christ with them. The ongoing story of the gospel of Jesus is a beacon of redemption and transformation in the darkest despair of our human condition. Only by God's empowering presence can I put to death the ingrained destructive choices and ways I have known and practiced and experience life, true living and true love, in Christ.

- ***What does this passage tell me about God?*** God wants to be loved by us in the ways he wants to be loved. God wants us to love others in the ways in which we love ourselves.
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- ***What does this passage tell me about people (or myself)?*** Most times, I don't love God or others for who they are but for what they can do for me.
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- ***How will I obey this passage?*** I want to love God with my total commitment (heart), with my total self (soul), to total excess (strength). I want to love others in ways they understand and in ways that reflect God's love for us.
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- ***To whom will I share this passage?*** In my work travels this week, I am praying that God will make my path connect with someone who needs to hear that God wants them to love him.

**Love as the core response to engage in missions**

Missiologist estimate that there are about 1 billion people who identify as Christ-followers. About 1.6 billion people identify as nominal Christians. Another 3.2 billion people have some idea of who Jesus is and have access to churches but not responded to Jesus. That leaves about 2.2 billion people who have never heard the name of Jesus, have no access to the gospel, the bible, or a church.

Just as God so loved the world that He sent His Son, so we as Christ-followers are sent to those who have not responded to Jesus yet. Billions of people do not know Jesus. At WorldVenture, we're not okay with that. We desire to love others, especially those who have no access to the gospel and have never heard the name of Jesus, to live among them, to learn their ways, to tell them of Jesus and how he makes it possible to love God and to love others as God intends. This is our heart beat as disciples of Jesus, that others may love him too.