

The Two Great Commands

Matthew 22:34-40

Turn to Matthew 22. This sermon is called, “the two great commands,” another of my catchy sermon titles. If I was going to give this a catchy title, it would be, “What does loving God look like?” Still not very catchy. But then you would not know that the sermon was about the Lord’s two great commands, and that won’t do.

Have you found Matthew 22 yet? Let’s read our Scripture, 22:34-40.

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Tests were usually to get Jesus in trouble, and in these discussions Jesus never ended up in trouble, except that sometimes he made people angry.

What makes this little conversation interesting is that Jesus knew the answer to the question, but he did not like the question. Jesus told them that the first and greatest commandment was “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’”

At this point, Jesus had answered the Pharisee’s question. The Pharisees would have been satisfied with this, but Jesus was not satisfied. Jesus was not satisfied because loving God is too open-ended. The first command is clear about how much we love God, without any reservation, but says nothing about how that will look. How do we love God?

So without pausing Jesus added a second command. In the mind of Jesus, the right question was “what are the two greatest commands?” Not one, and not three, but two. “The second command is like it,” Jesus said. The second is not the greatest command, but it is like the greatest in that the second also stands above all the others.

All the law and the prophets hangs on these two, said Jesus. Moses taught Israel two things: to serve only God, and how to treat each other. The prophets warned Israel about two things: they were not faithful to God, and they treated each other poorly. These two are a pretty good summary of the Law and the Prophets.

Don’t miss this obvious: we do many different things because we love God, and that’s fine, but one towers over the rest. We love God by how we treat people, and “neighbour” means the near people, not those far away but those around us. That’s how we love God. It’s quite awkward.

Now we will go over this more carefully, answering two “love” questions: What does “love God” mean? What does “love our neighbour” mean? And a third, who is our neighbour?

Loving God in Deuteronomy

The first great command is from Deut. 6. In this part of Deuteronomy, loving God and fearing God go hand in hand.

*“Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to **fear me and keep all my commands always.**”* 5:29

*“**Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength.**”* Dt 6:5.

*“**Fear the Lord your God, and serve him only.**”* Dt 6:13

*“**God keeps his covenant with those who love him and keep his commands.**”* Dt 7:9

*“**And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the Lord your God, and to observe the Lord’s commands and decrees?**”* Dt 10:12-13.

“Love” is an important word in the Bible, and it’s important in our society, but Bible and our society are not talking about quite the same thing. So if we’re going to understand what Moses meant and what Jesus meant, we need to listen to the Bible.

So here are other words that go along with *loving* God: *fear* God from the heart, *keep his commands*, *serve God only* with all our heart and all our soul, *keep his commands*, *walk in obedience* to him, to *observe his ways*.

When we tell God how much we love him, this is what God hopes we mean. Loving God is certainly from our heart and soul, and it means obeying faithfully in a covenant relationship.

And don’t make this blend of love and obedience an OT quirk. Listen to Jesus: *“If you love me, keep my commands.... Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me... Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching.... Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love.... You are my friends if you do what I command* (John 14:15 – 15:14).

So, love God, fear him, serve him, walk in obedience to him, live in his ways: let’s do this with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind and all our might.

Love Your Neighbour as Yourself – Lev 19:18; Gal 5:

“Love your neighbour as yourself” assumes we take care of ourselves. The Bible says, “no one ever hated their own body, but they feed it and take care of it.” That’s how we love ourselves, and that is good and right. We were made to do that, God built that into us and he likes it.

The command does not say, “stop taking care of yourself,” it says, “include your neighbour in this, feed yourself and them too, take care of yourself and them too.” In obedience to this command, we do for others what we do for ourselves.

This command is not teaching us to love ourselves, it assumes we will love ourselves in this way, that we feed and take care of our bodies. The second command tells us to include others.

“Love your neighbour as yourself” is in Lev 19:18. Here’s the whole verse: *Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.*

Don’t seek revenge, or bear a grudge. So the opposite of loving your neighbour will be getting even, or walking around angry at them. It involves the heart, and it means “don’t be against them, be for them.” They made you angry, but instead of getting even, or just staying angry, take care of them as well as yourself. Love your neighbour as yourself.

Gal 5:13-15 - *You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.*

What does love your neighbour mean in Galatians 5? It is the opposite of biting and devouring each other. It is to serve one another humbly. When we turn away from attack and revenge, and instead serve one another humbly, we are loving our neighbour as ourselves.

And Who Exactly is our Neighbour?

The Bible uses “neighbour,” the same word we use, but in a different way. We use neighbour to mean the people living right around us, the people across the street, the people who live beside us, the people who live on the other side of our back yard.

For the most part, that is not how the Bible uses the word. The whole verse in Leviticus read, *Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone **among your people**.* Among your people.

We read from Galatians 5, where Paul quoted this command. Who did Paul take their neighbour to be? *“You, **my brothers and sisters**, were called to be free. Serve **one another** humbly in love.... If you bite and devour **each other**, you will be destroyed by **each other**.”*

The believers in Galatia will certainly have had unbelievers living all around them, but that’s not how Paul understood this command and not how he understood “neighbour.” The neighbours were one another, their believing brothers and sisters in their churches.

Paul also quotes “Love your neighbour as yourself” in Rom 13, and that paragraph talks about loving one another.

Romans 13 and Galatians 5 are the only times the NT letters use “love your neighbour as yourself” and both are written to guide life *among believers*. The Greek word for “neighbour” is *plēsion*. Paul uses *plēsion* in these two quotations, and we find it three other times in the NT, two in Paul and one in James. In every case *plēsion*, neighbour, means other believers.

When Jesus told the people about these two great commands in Matt 22, that’s what Jesus meant. Jesus was talking to Jews, to Israelites, to those who were part of God’s covenant people. There was a Greek city in Galilee named Sepphoris (*se-for-is*) a few miles from Nazareth. In the time of Jesus, it was bigger than Nazareth or Capernaum or Bethsaida or Cana.

But although we read about these other places in the Gospels, we never read about Sepphoris. Why? Because it was a Gentile city, and Jesus never went there. He was calling Jews. He meant “neighbour” the same way Moses did: other covenant people of God.

And now you’re getting nervous, and you should be. You’re thinking, “we don’t just love other Christians, Jesus calls us to show love to everyone.” And you are entirely right. We already read in Gal 5, “humbly serve each other, don’t bite and devour each other, love your neighbour as yourself.”

In Gal 6 we read, “*as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially the household of faith.*” That line is just right. Doing good when we have a chance to do so is not exclusive, the Lord’s people do that for everyone, but there is a priority on the household of faith.

A man asked Jesus, “who is my neighbour?” That question made Jesus nervous, because God’s people are not to be exclusive in serving others. Moses himself talked about helping enemies and taking care of foreigners. Jesus told the man the parable about the good Samaritan.

If you or I are on a lonely road, and we come upon someone in trouble, do we pass by because they don’t have our faith, or are actually one of our enemies? No, not a chance. As we have opportunity, we do good to all.

Paul and James knew the Good Samaritan story, but it did not change how they used the word “neighbour.” My brothers and sisters, we don’t exclude any people from our care and help.

But we need to know how the apostles used the word “neighbour” when they wrote to churches. We need to know that when NT Letters to churches applied “love your neighbour as yourself,” they talked about how believers act toward each other. Paul and James knew the two great commands, and we need to know what they did with them.

Here’s how the apostle John wrote about the two great commands: *Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.* (1 John 4:20-21)

We're talking about these things for two reasons. One, we are right now in the middle of something that deeply divides believers. The two great commands have never been more important for us. Grasping the most important way to love God has never been more important.

Two, we are moving toward our covenant of membership. That covenant is our way of taking hold of these commands and doing what we can to build them into our life together.

You people have been strong in living this out, there's no doubt about that. The Lord has helped us. But it is not over, so let's not grow weary in doing good. Amen.

PRAYER: Lord, we can't say you weren't clear. You've been clear. You have shown us what it means to love you. And you are also showing us what you love to see on earth, your people taking care of each other like this. So we ask that the Holy Spirit will always produce this fruit in us. O God, may our hearts always be turned toward you, leaning toward you and to your ways, and may that always show in how we live with each other. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.