

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on August 16, 2020.

But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” 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. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:34–40).¹

The Pharisees were determined to entrap Jesus, to witness the Word of God stumble in his own words. The irony abounds! The Greek word (*peirazo*) translated in the ESV “test” also means “trap,” which this time appears to be in Jesus understanding of the Law. Within the Pentateuch there are, it was calculated, 613 commandments.² To narrow the scope down to one “great commandment” could be tricky. What if Jesus’ summation alienates certain key aspects of the Law? Or worse, what if ignoring certain laws could render him an antinomian? Unsurprisingly, it is a lawyer who introduces the question asking, “Which is the great commandment in the Law?”

When you hear the word “commandment” what comes to mind? Some of us immediately think of something negative, a rule stating what we must not do. We would typically not associate the word “love” with “commandment,” but Jesus does. When Jesus is asked, “which is the great commandment in the Law?” he does not begin with “you shall not” but with “you shall love.” And though not asked, he offers a second which likewise begins with love.

Though I doubt the Pharisees’ expected Jesus’ answer to begin with love, he was not on unfamiliar ground. His answer draws from a familiar and oft-quoted passage, the Hebrew *Shema*, which as every Jew knew begins, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4). But, Jesus’ emphasis is on the verse that follows: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” He then couples his answer with another, offering an unrequested second commandment drawn from Leviticus, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18).

In beautiful simplicity, Jesus uses these two commandments to silence the Pharisees and summarize not only the first five books but the entirety of the Old Testament canon, “the Law and the Prophets.” What could be more gloriously simple? Love God. Love others. Simple? Yes. Perfect? Indeed. For, as “God is love” (1 John 4:16), love must be our response.

Love God

What then does it mean to love God “with all your heart, soul, and mind”? To love God with all your “heart,” and “mind,” and as the Gospel of Mark includes “strength,” is simply a

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

² R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 842.

comprehensive list of our entire being. We are to love God with every square inch of our existence. What you believe, what you do, what you think, everything is to be directed first and foremost to love for God. Of first things in life, this is first.

But it is not just putting God first; it is an all-consuming love for him. As John Calvin points out, Jesus did not say serve, or obey, or fear, or bow to the Lord your God. He said, “love the Lord your God.” Why this distinction? Love for God motivates everything else that follows.³ Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and you will serve, obey, fear, and worship him.

However, to say that we love God can sound a bit abstract. What Christian would deny the importance of loving God first? But what if God gave us specific, practical expressions of this love? Consider the first four of the Ten Commandments. For example, first, to love God with heart, soul, and mind is to love God exclusively, placing no one or no thing before him (Ex. 20:3), which includes not only the bad but the good: our spouse, family, even our church. There are many worthy things in this life that may be unintentionally put before God. If we are honest, exclusive love for God then cannot be passive but requires intentionality and action. What directs our intention? What mobilizes our action? Love.

Second, to love God with heart, soul, and mind means that we worship only God (Ex. 20:4-6). Because we are innately worshipers, we will worship something, and this life offers plenty of options. What makes you feel fulfilled? What excites you, energizes you, encourages your devotion? What fills your soul with meaning? What gives your life significance? What defines you as a person? What do you consistently think about? What is on your mind when you awake? What consumes your thoughts throughout the day? Where does your mind go when you lay down at night? Your answers may surprise you, as they may reveal idols of your heart. We must have, as Thomas Chalmers put it, the expulsive power of a new affection. It is an intentional and active love for God that displaces idolatry of the heart.

Third, to love God with heart, soul, and mind is to revere God’s name (Ex. 20:7). We revere what we love. We would never treat someone as worthless *because* we love them. No, to treat someone in a worthy way reveals love. Similarly, we will revere God’s name, that is his revelation of who he is, because we love him. In fact, because we love him first, reverence for his name is comprehensive: “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:17). Such a comprehensive reverence for God’s name requires intentionality and action in word and deed, which only love can do.

Fourth, to love God with heart, soul, and mind means we worship him as he pleases (Ex. 20:8-11). He has set apart one day in seven to be devoted to worshiping him, the Lord’s Day, the Christian Sabbath. Have you ever considered that how you perceive and treat the Lord’s Day is a reflection of your love? Ceasing from our work to worship God, reveals that we love him more than our work and its benefits. Assembling together in Sunday worship, reveals that we love him more than our time and attention. Yes, setting apart one day for worship and rest can be difficult

³ John Calvin, “Matthew 22,” BibleHub, accessed August 13, 2020, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/calvin/matthew/22.htm>.

in an age of distraction and busyness, but love for God leads us to intentionally set apart the day and to actively rest in what God desires.

So, love for God with our entire being may be revealed in very practical ways: loving him alone, worshiping him only, revering him above all, and worshiping him as he pleases. Of course, you can turn the commandments into drudgery, as the Pharisees had successfully done, but in love. Rather than drudgery, love actually renders love. As we love God as he commands, our love for him grows, and so does our love for others.

Love Others

But, to say we love our neighbor can sound as concrete as wanting world peace. The intention is good, but what does it mean practically? To love your neighbor means to love others as you love yourself. Don't let the therapeutic lingo of our day make this complicated. Who knows your favorite food? Who cares what you wear, or that you wear anything at all? Who knows best where and how you want to live? Who loves to hear your opinions and defend you? You. Jesus says simply that you are to love others like you love...you.

How then do we do this? What if God gave us specific, practical expressions of loving others? Consider the latter six of the Ten Commandments. For example, we will honor what we love, such as our parents (Ex. 20:12). Revering, obeying, showing gratitude to our parents are expressions of our love for our parents. When Mother Teresa won the Nobel Peace Prize, she was asked what could be done to promote world peace. She responded, "Go home and love your family."⁴ To borrow from this, perhaps we should ask: where could we start in learning to love others? We could start with our family, by honoring our father and our mother.

Second, to love others as yourself means you respect the life of others (Ex. 20:13). This includes not only physical life but also our heart attitude (Matt. 5:21-22). You won't murder or hate those you love. Is our zeal for the rights of the unborn matched by our respect for those of a differing opinion? In an age of divisiveness, do we really think we are revealing our love for God by hating one another? It's easy to say you love God but what you think of others tells the truth. The Apostle John put it this way: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar ..." (1 John 4:20). A genuine respect for life, unborn, living, and dying, will reveal a true love for God.

Third, to love others as yourself means you protect their purity (Ex. 20:14). Just as loving others can be as close to home as honoring your parents, it can also be as intimate as fidelity to your spouse, physically and mentally. And just as hatred can violate loving your neighbor near and far, adultery violates love in the most intimate of relationships. In the over-sexualized culture of our day, sexual immorality is often called "love," but in reality, it defiles it. Real love protects the moral purity of another. Love also means not regarding your neighbor as a sexual object but as a person made in the image of God, whom we love.

Fourth, to love others as yourself means you respect and protect what is theirs (Ex. 20:15).

⁴ Daniel M. Doriani, *Matthew* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 320.

Love in Christ

Such love includes dealing ethically with others, seeking what is best for them. Taking advantage of someone or a situation may reveal your business savvy, but it does not reveal true love. Instead, let us reveal our love for God by defending the best interest of others, whether it be through laws, virtues, or practices.

Fifth, to love others as yourself means you help protect their reputation (Ex. 20:16). If slandered, we will defend ourselves. We want the truth to be known. Do we feel the same way about others? Do we have the same zeal that the truth be known about someone else? The truth is that truth matters and speaking it and defending it for others is telling of our love for God.

Sixth, to love others as yourself means you trust God's providence, rejoicing when others are blessed, regardless of your circumstances (Ex. 20:17). I love my neighbor when I desire his good rather than his goods.⁵ If I am constantly lusting over my neighbor's house, spouse, job, or stuff, I'm not thinking about him or her as a person but as an impediment to my desires. But, when we trust God and his providence, rejoicing in his bestowed blessings on others, we may truly love our neighbor because of our love for God.

What then do we learn about ourselves in considering the first and second commandments? That which seems so simple, Love God and Love others, we find is remarkably difficult. We find that we often do not love God and fail frequently to love others. Yet, as often as we fail, God does not.

In Christ

God does not await our love so he may reciprocate. In fact, his love is the source of our love, because he loved us first (1 John 4:19). He loved us before the foundation of the world and predestined us in love to be his child and part of his beloved family (Eph. 1:4-6). And in his love, he sent his Son to live and love perfectly, to die a death of sacrificial love, and be raised from the dead that we too might live and love through faith in him (1 John 4:8-10).

Our love then is a God-glorifying response to his love. Though we do not love God and others perfectly, our love for God and others reveals that we are his child (1 John 4:7). By his grace, the Spirit of Christ in us enables us to love, progressively perfecting our love for God and others and preparing us for an eternity of perfect love. Let us therefore, in humble reliance upon the Holy Spirit, love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and love our neighbor as ourselves. Love in Christ.

⁵ Ibid.