

The Great Commandment in the Law (Matthew 22:36)

Introduction

When observing the history of Jewish Law it is found that many of the rabbis had recorded 613 laws to obey. These 613 laws (although the number is often debated) were what the Jew strove to obey during the time of Christ. The number 613 is because of the 613 Hebrew letters in the Ten Commandments. They then divided their interpretation of the law into two parts: 248 affirmative laws--one for every part of the human body and 365 negative laws--one for every day of the year. They divided the 613 laws into light laws and weightier laws. The light laws were not always considered to be as binding as the weightier laws.

Which Laws were to be labeled as light and which laws were to be considered heavy, was many times a hotly debated topic. The Sadducees held to the authority of the Pentateuch and Moses to answer such questions, the Pharisees on the other hand, gave power to the rabbis to make such judgments. Legalism, as it often does, led Jewish scholars and students of the law to argue and speculate on which of these heavy commandments was the “greatest” of all the commandments. It is with this background that a question regarding the “great commandment in the law” is asked of our Lord.

But when the Pharisees had heard that He had put the Sadducees to silence, they were gathered together. Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked Him a question, tempting Him and saying, Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as

thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets”
 (Matthew 22:34-40)¹.

The Text

Leading up to the text under discussion, Matthew through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, records two prior attempts to test Jesus. These tests were made by religious leaders in an attempt to discredit Him and His message. First, the Pharisees and the Herodians try to test Him concerning whether or not one should pay taxes (cf. vv. 15-22). Jesus responds and the text records, “When they had heard these words, they marveled, and left Him, and went their way” (v. 22). The second test is from the Sadducees. They attempted to theologically challenge Him regarding the afterlife (vv. 23-33). Jesus again answers them magnificently, proving from the scriptures the reality of the resurrection of the dead, and thus the people are left “astonished” (v. 33). In Matthew 22:34-40, the Pharisees try once again to test Him, this time regarding the law. This was the last attempt of the religious leaders to question Jesus. Mark records that "no man after that durst ask him any question" (Mark 12:34).

The Test

The environment in which Jesus is challenged is one of great tension and arrogance. In verse 34 the text informs the reader that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus had “silenced” the Sadducees. One can imagine this would have pleased the Pharisees who disagreed with the Sadducees regarding the topic of a bodily resurrection and other teachings. The word “silence” in fact could even be translated “muzzled”. The Pharisees would have loved to have the Sadducees muzzled on several occasions. The Pharisees then gather themselves back together and one of them, maybe a spokesman for the group, addresses Jesus with the question regarding the great commandment in the Law. Matthew describes this Pharisee as a lawyer and in Mark’s

account he is labeled a scribe. Both titles carry the description of a “law-expert or one learned in the Law”².

The question of this lawyer is one that would be expected from a Pharisee well-versed in the Law. As mentioned earlier, the Pharisees, especially the rabbis and scribes, were quite legalistic and spent a lengthy amount of time debating the weight of the various commandments. The question asked by this man reflects that debate. He asks, “Master, which is the great commandment in the Law?” (Matthew 22:36). "Master" was a term the Jewish leaders used in the hopes of flattering Jesus and catching Him off guard. It is in reference to a teacher of the law. The Greek text uses the word translated "great" as a comparative term so the verse could be translated, "Which is the greatest commandment in the law?"³.

This question was again designed to test Jesus; they wanted Him to answer in a way they could declare as blasphemous. It was the hope of this lawyer and the Pharisees that Jesus would belittle 612 of the 613 commandments by elevating one above the rest. One can imagine that the crowd grew silent at this time. What was Jesus going to say? What Law would he pick or would He remain silent?

The Answer

To this potentially explosive question Jesus gives a beautiful reply by quoting the Shema from Deuteronomy 6:5. “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second *is* like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40). Jesus did the opposite of what the Pharisees expected Him to do. He quoted Moses directly from the Pentateuch and affirmed a strong solidarity with Mosaic teaching. Not only did He quote Moses, but He also quoted the most familiar passage Moses ever

wrote! A passage that would have been quite familiar to His audience. The Shema was said out loud by Jews twice a day and was memorized at a very early age. This passage was written on their door posts and placed as frontlets upon their heads. They may have expected Him to reject or go against Mosaic teaching but He didn't. Instead He supported it with one of the most well-known passages in the Old Testament. The commandment is to love God with every faculty of ones being and personality. A second command is given in relation to the first and that is to "love thy neighbor as thyself". On these two commands, Jesus explains every other principle in the law is based.

The first command in Christ's answer means we must give God a total love, a love which dominates our emotions, a love which directs our thoughts, and a love which is the dynamic of our actions. True religion starts with love which is a total commitment of life to God. The second command requires us to direct complete love to our fellow man as well.

In His answer, Jesus teaches that the whole duty of man can be summed up in one word: "love". This love, as mentioned previously, is to be directed to both God and man. The Hebrew word for love in Deuteronomy 6:5 is *ahab*, which refers primarily to love exhibited by the will, mind, and actions, rather than love exhibited by feelings or emotions. It is the highest kind of love; it would be parallel to the *agape* love in the Greek language, which is the love of intelligence, as opposed to *phileo*, which is the love of emotion, or *eros* which is physical attraction. The love Jesus speaks of is the noblest, purest, and highest form of self-sacrificing love that each person is commanded to have toward God⁴. "Jesus' answer is far more than a clever summary of all the commandments. It is the fundamental commandment underlying the whole economy of redemption. Above everything else, God desires and commands His children to love Him totally and completely"⁵.

Jesus instructs that heart, soul, and mind must all work together to develop this great characteristic of love. Our heart is our emotions and desires. Our heart is our emotional, feeling part and it merges with our mind and spirit in showing true love for God. The love that one has for God is at times an emotional love, it is a love that can cause one to shout out loud in songs of praise, to shed tears in remembrance of the great sacrifice of Christ and even cause one to drop to their knees in prayer at the thought of the awesome nature of God.

The soul with which we serve God is our immortal, eternal, and spiritual being. Our soul is often looked at as our inner self and free will as well. It is with the deepest parts of our being/our soul that we serve God. The source of our volition is often our soul. It is our power of willing and determining. Jesus is teaching that our personal inner will and sense of purpose and being is to love God completely.

Jesus also makes mention of loving God with all of our “mind”. These three categories in which love is supposed to be expressed are distinctly different yet overlapping in nature. We cannot offer God true love unless all three of these parts are involved. The “mind” that Jesus is referring to is our intellect and understanding, it is our rational thinking and understanding that shows forth our love for God along with the feelings of our a heart and determination of the soul.

Jesus, however, does not just mention these three parts of our being in passing. He emphasizes that it is with “all” of these various faculties that God is loved. In the Getwell lectures on the Gospel of Matthew, Terry Varner writes: “Note the emphasis on ‘all’ (whole) suggesting the whole of man. God calls for pure love (Rom. 12:9). Love is a fundamental commandment underlying the whole of God’s law. It involves our total being and loyalty. As God loved man totally in saving Him, man is to love God totally in serving Him”⁶. The point here is God’s wholehearted love should not be answered in a halfhearted manner. Lenski writes: “The

word 'whole' in the three phrases receives great emphasis because of its very repetition. God will have no mere part, allow no division or subtraction. Not even the smallest corner is to be closed against God. The whole heart, the seat of our personality; the whole soul, our sentient being itself; and our whole mind, the entire activity of this our being is to turn to God in love..."⁷.

This commandment is called the great one because it epitomizes what a true response to the greatest love ever shown should be. "God so loved the world..." (John 3:16) and the world should so love God.

The second commandment is similar to the first as well, for both require true, unrelenting love. One must show love toward his neighbor, because his neighbor is made in the image of God who is the epitome of love. When you truly love God, you will truly love people. The Pharisees didn't love people. They bound heavy burdens on them (Matthew 23:4), and mistreated them. Their ancestors killed the prophets and they were attempting to have Christ Himself killed.

To love your neighbor as yourself means to love all people with your whole heart, soul and mind. The love spoken of here is the same as the first commandment. It is the love of the will, intention, and action. This is to be regarded as the highest form of love as well. The second commandment means to take care of someone else the same way you would take care of yourself⁸.

After stating that these two commands are the first and second greatest commands of the Law, Jesus states, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:40). These two commandments are the peg on which the entire Old Testament hangs.

"Remove that peg, and all is lost, for the entire Old Testament, with its commandments and covenants, prophecies and promises, types and testimonies, invitations and exhortations, points to the love of God which demands the answer of love in return"⁹. Clarke elaborates upon it this

way, “They are like the first and last links of a chain, all the intermediate ones depend on them. True religion begins and ends in love to God and man. These are the two grand links that unite God to man, man to his fellows, and men again to God”¹⁰. These two commands are the support on which all other Scripture rests. These two commands are the hook on which true discipleship hangs. J.W. McGarvey explains:

As the hook supports all, so to keep these two commandments is to do all that is required by the Scriptures. He who loves God as required will keep all of God’s commandments, and he who loves his neighbor will fulfill every obligation to his neighbor. The lawyer went away with the idea not that one specific commandment of God is more important than another, but that the ‘great’ thing is to have a heart for doing ‘all’ that God commands.¹¹

The Result

Jesus continues the discourse with the Pharisees, by asking them “What think ye of the Christ? Whose son is He?” (Matthew 22:42). The Pharisees answer that He is the “Son of David”. Jesus then goes on to prove from the words of David that He is something more. After answering questions from the Herodians, Sadducees, and Pharisees as well as directing questions of His own toward the Pharisees, the crowds finally have nothing more to say. The text reads: “And no man was able to answer him a word, neither durst any man from that day forth ask him any more questions” (Matthew 22:46). They tried their best to test Jesus and to make Him stumble, but yet they failed. William Barclay sums up this entire discourse by saying: “There would be few that day who caught anything like all that Jesus meant; but when Jesus spoke these words, even the densest of them felt a shiver in the presence of the eternal mystery. They had the

awed and the uncomfortable feeling that they had heard the voice of God, and for a moment, in this man Jesus, they glimpsed God's very face¹².

The Application

A reader of this grand text can glean many great truths to aid him or her in serving all mighty God. As mentioned previously, Jesus' answer to the lawyer can be summed up in one word; love. First and foremost, one must love God. When observing the state of the Lord's church in many places, one will find that a lack of love for the Creator is quite evident. Jesus said "the law and the prophets" hang upon the command to love God with all of our "heart, soul and mind". This author believes that true obedience and commitment hang upon this command as well.

When one truly loves God, he or she will have no issue submitting to God and obeying His commandments. In fact, the Lord once said "If you love me you will keep my commandments" (John 15:15). True love for the Creator is more than just believing in Christ and verbalizing your love for Him, it is a complete and utter commitment with ever part of your being. The distinguishing mark of any believer is that he loves God with all his heart and therefore obeys Him. God commands His followers to love Him as much as they possibly can and this love is manifested through obedience. Regardless of one's religious activity, no one is ever right with God until his heart, soul, mind, and strength manifest a love for God. An individual may attend worship, give on the first day of the week and read their Bible often, but without true love manifested through complete submission and obedience, their activities are in vain. A person does not prove he or she is a Christian simply because he or she believes in God. In fact, believing in God has never been enough, he has always wanted us to obey Him. James 2:19 says, "Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and

tremble.." Why then aren't they saved? Because even though they believe in God, they do not love or obey Him. One demonstrates the legitimacy of their faith by displaying an all consuming and encompassing love for God.

There are many people in the church that go through the motions of true religion but yet lack true love for God. Hypocrisy was a problem during the time of Christ and it is a problem today as well. When observing the Pharisees, one finds quite quickly that they are often labeled by our Lord as hypocrites. Jesus called them hypocrites seven separate times in Matthew 23 (vv. 13-15, 23, 25, 27, 29). A hypocrite is someone who pretends to be something they are not. The Pharisees did not love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. They were only pretending. They went through the religious motions, all the while boasting and trying to appear as if they were righteous.

The answer given by the Lord to the lawyer of the Pharisees, demands the reader to do some self-examination. The text demands the reader to ask himself, "am I fulfilling the greatest command?". God demands true love from His followers and there are many ways a disciple's life may exemplify the love God wants from His children.

The Love God Wants

1. Love for His Law: "Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them" (Psalm 119:165). When one truly loves God they will love the totality of His law.
2. Love that seeks first the kingdom: "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33). The kingdom is always first and always sought after by the child that completely loves his Heavenly Father.

3. Love for the lost: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you...” (Matthew 28:19-20a). God loves mankind. He sent His Son to die for the world. Through that sacrifice and care for the lost He demonstrated His love. If one loves God with all of their heart, soul and mind, evangelism will be a marked characteristic of their life.
4. Love that hates sin: “Ye that love the LORD, hate evil: he preserveth the souls of his saints; he delivereth them out of the hand of the wicked” (Psalm 97:10). Our Heavenly Father hates evil. When one loves God, they will hate the things that God hates.
5. A love that obeys: “He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him.” (John 14:21). A true Christian is a lover of God and a keeper of His commandments. This is not grievous task to those who love God. On the other hand, those who love God, love obeying Him. “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous” (1 John 5:2-3). Anyone who doesn't desire to keep God's commandments is someone who doesn't love Him or know Him.

One may claim to have a relationship with God, but unless they love Him with all of their heart and manifest their love in these ways and many others, they do not know God. There are many who do know God because they do not love God and their lack of love for God is shown through their unwillingness to obey His Word. Jesus declared with power:

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity” (Matthew 7:21-23).

We cannot know God unless we love God. “Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love” (1 John 4:7-8).

The second great command that Jesus quotes is fulfilled in the same way as the first. Jesus said “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself”(Matthew 22:39). The love a Christian is to have for his or her neighbor must be with all of ones heart, soul and mind. The love that we have for others is an acting and working love. The command is to take care of another in the way that one would take care of himself. One works for self, cares for self and watches out for the spiritual and physical well-being of self. This is the kind of love that we are to have for our neighbors.

Jesus sacrificed all for mankind; His neighbors. God demands that we sacrifice all for Him and be willing to sacrifice for others as well. True love demands sacrifice, sometimes true love demands the ultimate sacrifice. There is a story regarding true love that goes this way: The doctor looked down at the little girl in the hospital bed. He knew that her only hope was to receive blood from someone who had recovered from the same disease. Quickly the doctor found the anxious family, and knelt beside a small boy. "Johnny," he said, "your sister needs your kind of blood to make her well. Would you be willing to give your blood so that she can live?"

Johnny's eyes grew big. The doctor watched them well with fear, but the little boy hesitated only long enough to swallow the lump in his throat. "Sure, Doctor, I will do it," he replied. After the needed amount of blood was taken from Johnny's small arm, he remained quiet for a few minutes as he had been instructed. Then he stood up, and asked softly: "Well, Doctor, when do I die?" Only then did the doctor realize the extent of the child's sacrifice. Johnny had offered his life to save his sister, Jesus declared that there is no greater love¹³.

These two commands enumerated by our Lord are simple in nature and easy to understand. When these two commands are followed, Christianity is displayed. Love for God and Love for neighbor is the key to a successful Christian life. John MacArthur in his work on Matthew chapter 22 writes:

Christianity is not complicated. You simply love God and men with your entire being. If you love God, you'll do what He commands, and if you love men, you'll meet their needs. Verse 40 explains that these two commandments are behind all the other commandments in the Old Testament. If you love God with all your being and love everyone as you love yourself, you don't need any more rules. All the other commandments are simply an extension or practical application of those two commandments¹⁴.

Conclusion

During a final test from those who would desire to see Him err, Jesus is asked by a lawyer, "Master, which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus responds with this grand quotation from the words of Moses, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second

is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:34-40).

What is Jesus demanding in these verses? Jesus is demanding our love which is synonymous with our obedience, and to always love our neighbor as ourselves. Not only does all the law and the prophets hang on these two commands, our salvation hangs upon them as well. For us to enter into the beautiful bliss of an eternal heavenly abode we must love! We must love with our heart, soul and mind. God who is love has given all a perfect example of what true love looks like. True love, serves others and obeys God. True love for God is more than words, it consists of every faculty and ounce of one’s being. This is the love that God wants, this is the love that God deserves, for it is the “great command in the Law”.

¹ All Scripture references are from the King James Version unless otherwise noted.

² Arndt, William F. and F. Wilber Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. (Chicago: University Press, 1952) 543.

³ MacArthur, John. *Jesus Silences His Critics: The Great Commandment*. (<http://www.biblebb.com/files/mac/sg2358.htm>)

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Coffman, James Burton. *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*. (Austin: Firm Foundation, 1968) 355.

⁶ Varner, Terry *The Book of Matthew: The Getwell church of Christ Lectures*. (Pulaski Tn: Sain Publicaitons, 1988) 573.

⁷ Lenski, R.C.H. *The Interpretation of Saint Matthew’s Gospel*. (Columbus Ohio: Lutheran Book Concern, 1938) 883.

⁸ MacArthur, John. *Jesus Silences His Critics: The Great Commandment*. (<http://www.biblebb.com/files/mac/sg2358.htm>)

⁹ Hendrickson, William. *New Testament Commentary on Matthew*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2002) 810.

¹⁰ Clarke, Adam. *Adam Clarke’s Commentary Vol. 5*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1824) 215.

¹¹ McGarvey, J.W. *The New Testament Commentar- Vol.1 Matthew and Mark*. (Des Moines: Eugene S. Smith, 1875) 193.

¹² Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Matthew : Volume 2*. (The Daily Study Bible, Rev. Ed) (Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000) 280.

¹³ *2001 Bible Illustrations* (E-Sword Electronic Reference Library)

¹⁴ MacArthur, John. *Jesus Silences His Critics: The Great Commandment*. (<http://www.biblebb.com/files/mac/sg2358.htm>)