

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church  
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## THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-33

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I have two points to my message today.

- Love God with everything was Jesus' mission statement for humanity.
- Jesus set the order. Love God first and love others second.

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

*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."*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Jesus made this statement to two different groups of people, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They had conflicting ideas about the implementation of the Torah (which we call the first five books of the Old Testament) and the role of the Roman government in the lives of Jewish citizens. As you know, during this time, the Jews no longer ruled themselves but were under the oppression of the Roman government.

The Pharisees believed the political oppression was caused by the Jews' disobedience to the Torah. They supported the idea of creating specific laws which would keep the Jews from straying further from the teaching of the Torah and

adopting the lifestyles of the pagan Romans who oppressed them. These additional laws were called Oral Laws. As you know, the Pharisees were prone to be annoying and pompous.

The Sadducees rejected the Oral Laws of the Pharisees. They believed in the written law only and were supportive of the Roman rulers. They thought they could benefit by living in peace with the ruling government. The Sadducees did not believe in the spirit world. Their interaction here was before the resurrection. They later rejected the resurrection.

So, in summary – just so you understand – Jesus spoke to two groups...the Pharisees -- Old Testament Law, additional Oral Law, disdain for government -- and the Sadducees -- Old Testament law only and favorable view of government. As you might guess, they argued a lot. Sounds like a session of Congress!

I assume there were Pharisees and Sadducees who loved God, but the overall character of both groups was self-righteousness by following all the rules.

This was an interesting situation. Two rivals who really couldn't stand each other now teamed up to argue with Jesus. Have you ever seen two enemies come together to fight another enemy? It happens all the time.

## **“LOVE GOD WITH EVERYTHING” WAS JESUS’ MISSION STATEMENT FOR HUMANITY**

I believe we've heard “love God” so many times that it's lost its impact. Children are taught “God is love” and to love God. In the day that Jesus said this however, it had probably never been put that way before.

**ILLUSTRATION:** It's easy to become quickly accustomed to things. When the crew of Apollo 11 circled the moon before they landed, they were in awe as they looked out of the window at the surface of the moon. After they had circled the moon several times, one of them remarked how quickly the brain gets used to things and that now it seemed normal to look out of the window and see the moon.

It's pretty normal for us to think of and relate to God in terms of love. Before Jesus said, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind,*" people were taught "obey the laws." Today if I were to ask you "What's one thing God wants all of us to do?" someone would say "to love him." If, around the year 30 AD (and before), someone had asked this, the answer would have been "to obey the laws."

**ILLUSTRATION:** One way I can illustrate this is with a hypothetical situation in a military basic training setting. In that type of training, people are broken down and rebuilt. They learn rules, rules, and more rules. Let's say the commander of the training base came to visit the people in training. Let's say the young people in training asked him, "Of all the rules we have to follow, which one is the greatest of all?" If such a question were asked, every single person would be listening. What if he said, "Above all else, love your country"?

After 9/11, recruiting offices were full. Out of a sense of patriotism, people joined to defeat an enemy that was unknown at the time. It seems to go without saying that anyone who joins the military would do so out of love for one's country, but it's so easy to get caught up in the rules of basic training that a person would focus more on the rules than what motivated the person to join.

**APPLICATION:** The Pharisees and Sadducees were so caught up in following laws and arguing over them, that they forgot what the laws were for.

So Jesus' statement to love God with everything was a fundamental turning point in the human understanding of how to relate to God.

## **JESUS' COMMAND TO LOVE GOD WITH EVERYTHING REQUIRES PERSONAL INVENTORY**

Let's take a step back and remind ourselves why we are here this morning.

- I hope we are all here because we love God, but it's possible that many of us got up, got ready, drove here, and entered the building out of habit than out of the conscious thought of doing it because we love God.
- I hope we gave this morning because we love God, not because we did an obligatory calculation.
- I hope we all sang and prayed this morning because we love God, not because we were merely caught up in perfunctory movements.

Please understand that loving God with everything is our #1 mission in this life.

According to Jesus nothing is more important in the eyes of God than this truth. We measure success by people's skills, their impact on society, their winsome personalities. We measure failure by people's lack of skills, their lack of impact on society, their lack of winsome personalities. But God's measurement of success or failure is not bound to those things. It's based on loving him with all your heart, soul, and mind.

It's possible to build great buildings and feed all the poor in the world and be a failure in God's eyes due to lack of loving him.

Let the legacy of your life be loving God.

A friend of mine said it this way, "Don't let the disappointments or successes in this life cause you to drift from this one thing. Whether you mess up through sin and disobedience or even make lots of money, if you have drifted from your love for God, push delete right now and start over. Everything is new with God right now because of the blood of Jesus."

## **JESUS SET THE ORDER: LOVE GOD FIRST, OTHERS SECOND**

**EXPLANATION:** Jesus makes it clear that commandment one is the most important. Verse 28 says: *This is the first and greatest commandment.*

Then he classifies the second commandment as indeed "second" – they are not equal. *And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'*

**APPLICATION:** The order makes sense, and there is practical application of this order. If you love others before you love God, you'll get burned out, wounded, disappointed, angry, and you'll never forget when people let you down. In fact, you'll have a great struggle with forgiveness and letting go – all because you elevated your love for people over your love for God.

All too often, people implement Jesus' teaching in the complete opposite order: loving one's self first, loving others second, love God last... if there's any love for God at all. I've often told you that Satan wants everything to work in reverse order – and he's probably more successful with this than anything else – he gets people to love themselves first.

If you intensely love God first, your love will naturally overflow to others and yourself. You'll know how to better react when people let you down. You'll know how to forgive and let go – because your love for God will lead you in how to do it.

Jesus summed it up in verse 40: *<sup>40</sup> All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.*”

This may have been the ultimately reality check in Jesus' ministry. The Pharisees and Sadducees teamed up together to come against Jesus, and he completely triumphed over them. They knew what he said was true, but they didn't want to hear it. They were great at following the rules, they were great at letting others know they followed the rules, they were great at arguing about the rules, but they were not so great at loving God and others.

**CONCLUSION:** At least one person got it! Go to Mark 12 to see how the Gospel of Mark records this story:

**SCRIPTURE:** Mark 12:28-33

*One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”*

<sup>29</sup> “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.’ <sup>30</sup> Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ <sup>31</sup> The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” <sup>32</sup> “Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. <sup>33</sup> To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

One person in the crowd got it! He understood. It was his aha moment. I wonder, was he a Pharisee? Was he a Sadducee or some other teacher? He realized that loving God and others was more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices.

**SCRIPTURE:** Mark 12:34

*When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.*

On this Thanksgiving week, let’s remember: Love God first and foremost, and love people second.

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