

The Greatest Commandment Matthew 22:34-46

The Greatest Commandment (Mk 12.28—34; Lk 10.25—28)

³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵ and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷ 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.’ ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

The Question about David’s Son (Mk 12.35—37; Lk 20.41—44)

⁴¹ Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: ⁴² “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” ⁴³ He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, ⁴⁴ ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet” ’? ⁴⁵ If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” ⁴⁶ No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.¹

Have you ever wondered about the basis of our religion? What is really important to God? Do you think of the Bible as a list of countless religious rules, and you don’t know which ones we must follow and which ones are less important? Which rules were for back then and which ones are for today? In our scripture reading today the religious leaders were still on their quest to corner Jesus and make him incriminate himself or at least give them a reason for calling him a heretic! Although they did not believe in an afterlife the Sadducees had asked Jesus a question about the resurrection and Jesus had wisely answered and stopped their questioning. The Pharisees probably enjoyed the embarrassment of their enemies, the Sadducees. One of the Pharisees, who agreed with Jesus’ teaching about the afterlife, asked Jesus a question: “Teacher, which commandment in the Law is the greatest?”

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. Mt 22:34-46

This was not a new question, the scribes had been debating it for centuries. Various commandments were being championed as the greatest. In fact the scribes had documented 613 commandments in the Law, 248 positive and 365 negative. No person could ever hope to know and fully obey all of these commandments. So, to make it easier, the experts divided the commandments into “heavy” or important and “light” or unimportant. According to them a person could major on the “heavy commandments” and not worry about the trivial ones.

The fallacy behind this approach is obvious: If you only break one law, heavy or light, you were guilty before God. According to James 2:10: “For whosoever shall keep the whole Law, and yet offend in one point, is guilty of all.”

To answer the question Jesus quoted the “Shema” (Deut. 6:4), a statement of faith that was recited daily by every orthodox Jew. The word Shema comes from the Hebrew word which means “to hear.” It is the sentence with which every Jewish service still opens, and the first text which every Jewish child commits to memory. The confession of faith begins with, “Hear, O Israel!” The greatest commandment according to Jesus is to love God with all that we are and have: with our heart, our soul, our mind, our strength, our possessions, and our service. To love God is not to “have good feelings about God.” True love involves the will as well as the heart. It is a love which dominates our emotions, a love which directs our thoughts, and a love which is the dynamic of our actions. Where there is this love, there will be service and obedience. This first part of Jesus’ answer summarizes the first table or first five of the Ten Commandments.

But Jesus said that love for God cannot be divorced from love for one’s neighbor; so Jesus also quoted Leviticus 19:18 and put it on the same level as the Shema. But note that love of God comes first and then this makes humans lovable. The Biblical teaching about humans is that the person is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26, 27). It is for that reason that the person is lovable. Take away the

love of God and we can become angry at others the unteachable; we can become pessimistic about others the unimprovable; we can become callous to others the machine-minder. The love of other is firmly grounded in the love of God.

Jesus then said, All of the Law and the Prophets hang on both of these commandments. If a person really loves God, they must also love brother, sister and neighbor (1 John 3:10–18; 4:7–21). So this second part of Jesus’ answer summarizes the second table or the last five of the Ten Commandments. All the Old Testament develops and amplifies these two points: love for God and love for others, who are made in God’s image.

If we have a right relationship with God, we will have no problems with God’s commandments. Love is the basis for obedience. According to Romans 13:8-10 all of the Law is summed up in love. If we love God, we will love our neighbor; and if we love our neighbor, we will not want to do anything to harm him.

We may well say that here Jesus laid down the complete definition of religion. To be truly religious is to love God and to love the people whom God made in his own image; and to love God and humans, not with a nebulous sentimentality, but with that total commitment which issues in devotion to God and practical service of others.

But Jesus had a deeper meaning to convey in this marvelous answer. The Jews were afraid of idolatry. When Jesus claimed to be God in word and deed, the religious leaders opposed Jesus because they could not believe it was right to worship him because they did not accept his claims. Jesus received worship and did not rebuke those who honored Him. They thought Jesus was asking them to commit idolatry. But Jesus is God! So if the Law commands us to love God and our neighbor, then it would not be wrong for the Jews to love Jesus. He had said to

them one day, “If God were your Father, you would love Me” (John 8:42). They accepted the authority of the Law, but they refused to obey it in their lives.²

Jesus had now answered three difficult questions. He had dealt with the relationship between religion and government, between this life and the next life, and between God and our neighbors. These are fundamental relationships, and we cannot ignore Jesus’ teachings. But there was and is a question more fundamental than these, and Jesus asked an indirect question of His enemies. He made this sound like another theological question, when in reality it was the most important personal question they would ever face. “Whose Son is the Messiah?” He asked them. As trained experts in the Law, they knew the answer: “He is the Son of David.” Had they been asked, they could have referred to numbers of Old Testament Scriptures, including 2 Samuel 7:12–13; Psalm 78:68–72; and Micah 5:2. Once they had given this answer, Jesus asked a second question, this time quoting from Psalm 110:1—“The LORD [Yahweh] said unto my Lord [Hebrew “Adonai”], ““Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.””

Every orthodox Jewish scholar interpreted this to refer to the Messiah. Only the Messiah could sit at the right hand of God. Jesus’ reply (vv. 43-45) demonstrated that the Messiah had to be more than simply a human son of David, as many in that time were thinking. “If Messiah is David’s Son,” Jesus asked, “then how could Messiah also be David’s Lord?” There is only one answer to this question. As God, Messiah is David’s Lord; as man, He is David’s Son. He is both “the root and the offspring of David” (Rev. 22:16). Psalm 110:1). This teaches the deity and the humanity of Messiah. He is David’s Lord and He is David’s Son.

²Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Mt 22:34

vv. verses

When He was ministering on earth, Jesus accepted the messianic title “Son of David” (see Matt. 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30–31; 21:9, 15). The rulers had heard the multitudes proclaim Him as “Son of David” when He rode into Jerusalem. The fact that He accepted this title is evidence that Jesus knew Himself to be the Messiah, the Son of God. As God, He was David’s Lord; but as man, He was David’s Son, for He was born into the family of David (Matt. 1:1, 20).

The scholars in that day were confused about the Messiah. They saw two pictures of Messiah in the Old Testament and could not reconcile them. One picture showed a Suffering Servant, the other a conquering and reigning Monarch. Were there two Messiahs? How could God’s servant suffer and die? (see 1 Peter 1:10–12)

However, had they listened to what Jesus said, they would have learned that there was only one Messiah, but that He would be both human and divine. He would suffer and die as a sacrifice for sins. He would then rise from the dead in triumph, and return in the future to those who accepted him into the Kingdom of God. If they had accepted His teaching, then they would also have to accept Him as the Messiah; and this they were unwilling to do.

Making a decision about Jesus Christ is a matter of life or death. The evidence is there for all to examine. We can examine it defensively and miss the truth. Or we can examine it honestly and humbly, and discover the truth, believe, and be saved. The religious leaders were so blinded by tradition, position, and selfish pride that they could not—and would not—see the truth and receive it.

Just this morning we read a story about a man who was telling about an influential teacher in his life. He told about his kindness and his willingness to spend extra time with his students. However the main thing that this teacher shared was his faith by inviting his students to Bible study and church. It is not

enough for us to just be nice. We need to be role models of what it means to follow Jesus and make him Lord of your life.

So what is the greatest commandment? To love God with all that we are, love our neighbor as we love ourselves; and accept Jesus as source of our salvation. The religious leader of Jesus' day would not receive these teaching, but we dare not make the same mistake today.^{3 4}

³Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:73

⁴ Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Gospel of Matthew : Volume 2*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible, Rev. Ed), S. 277