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Matthew 22:34 - 22:40



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg discusses the encounter between Jesus and a lawyer who sought to test him by asking which was the greatest commandment in the Law. Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6 verse 5 saying, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind," adding that loving God and loving one's neighbor were the two greatest commandments. Steve emphasizes that love is the one commandment we should prioritize in our lives and that it is important to help those in need to demonstrate love for both God and fellow human beings. Ultimately, he stresses that love for God and others is an all-encompassing principle that guides the actions and decisions of a true follower of Christ.

Transcript

In Matthew chapter 22, Jesus finds himself confronted on several occasions by people seeking to find fault with him. All of them are members of the religious establishment, though some of them are not necessarily friendly with each other either. The Pharisees and the Herodians approach Jesus about whether it's lawful to pay tribute to Caesar or not.

And they're not really asking him for ethical guidance. They're simply trying to trap him. Because whether he says yes or no, he will offend some faction of the Jewish population.

And likewise, the Sadducees come to him because they do not believe in the resurrection and they know that he does believe in it. He teaches it. And therefore, they come to try to ridicule the resurrection.

And he points out to them that they are the ones who are missing the point and they don't understand the scriptures correctly and he corrects them. Now we have one other case where Jesus is confronted by a religious leader. It says in verse 34, But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, then one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, testing him and saying, Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law? Now it's not entirely clear how this was intended to be a test of Jesus.

He was being tested. Earlier, when they asked about the lawfulness of paying tribute to

Caesar, we're specifically told that these people went out to try to entangle him in his talk. And now Jesus was being tested, perhaps in a similar way.

Maybe they were hoping he'd given a very unacceptable answer. I'm not really sure what they hoped he might say or what they hoped to catch him on. Perhaps it was that whatever command that Jesus would mention would be, you know, one that someone else thought there was a better one than that.

I mean, no doubt each of the rabbis had his own favorite command of the law, which he thought was the most important one. And if Jesus would choose any one, he would alienate all those who felt the others were more important. Perhaps this is what lay behind their question.

But a lawyer was sent to Jesus with this question. And Jesus said to him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment.

And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commands hang all the law and the prophets.

In other words, I can't really pick one commandment and say, you know, this has more importance than all the rest. I can tell you two very important commandments. And in these two, all the commandments are summarized.

All of them hang on these two. Now, interestingly, Jesus did not reduce it to one. It sounded like he was going to.

He quoted, and the quotation he gave is from Deuteronomy 6 and verse 5. He says, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. He says that's the first and great commandment. That sounds like the answer to their question.

The question is, what's the great commandment, the greatest commandment? Well, he said, this is the first and great commandment. But it doesn't stop. He said, there's a second to it, and it's like it.

Now, when he says it's like it, how is it like it? The second commandment comes from Leviticus chapter 19 and verse 18. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. So he draws two commands from two different places in the law and says these two are very much alike.

Now, he might mean to say that they are alike in importance. Because, after all, they only asked him for one important commandment. He says, well, I've got to give you two.

There's this one, that's the first and great commandment. But then there's this one's like

it, and therefore I cannot omit it. He may be saying that these two are alike in their importance, so that I can't tell you one without both of them.

That could be his meaning when he says this other one is like it. However, it is also the case that both commandments have one command in them. And that's maybe what makes them alike.

And that is the command to love. The first one says you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. The other says you shall love your neighbors yourself.

In both cases, you are commanded to love. And therefore the commandments are like each other. However, the objects of your love are not the same in both places.

God is the object of one, and your neighbor is the object in another. And there's a great difference between God and your neighbor. Many people think it's easier to love God than to love your neighbor.

Some people would say they love God, even though they don't love their neighbor. However, John, in 1 John chapter 4, thinks the opposite is true. He says, if a man says, I love God, and hates his neighbor, he's a liar.

And here's how John reasons. He says, for he that does not love his neighbor whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? In other words, John assumes it's easier to love the person you've seen than to love the one you have not seen. Well, you might think, well, John, I disagree with your reasoning because I think it's a little easier to love God.

Since I don't see him, he rarely does anything to offend me. Whereas the person I can see on a daily basis is continually doing things that bug me. And therefore, it's easier to love God than to love that person.

But John must be assuming that love is something more than just good feelings. Because it would be quite easy to love a God whom you haven't seen, while not loving a neighbor who you have seen. If love simply means being unperturbed and having generous thoughts towards somebody.

It seems clear from the scripture that love is more than what you feel about somebody. It has a lot to do with how you act toward them and service you perform to them. In the same epistle, John says, if any of you have this world's goods, and you see your brother has need, and you shut up the bowels of compassion from him and you don't help him, how does the love of God dwell in you? He's saying there that if you actually see somebody in need and don't help them, then you lack love.

So love is what? It is doing something for someone. It's performing practical service. It's

much easier to see the needs of people and to fulfill them than to see God's needs, who is invisible to us.

And therefore, John considers that love, since it is a matter of practical service and aid and assistance shown to actual need, love is more readily and easily rendered to people, whom you can see, than to God, whom you cannot see. Well, anyway, John makes it very clear, and so do other places in scripture, that love for God and love for people go together. And while John may think it easier to love people than to love God, or some may think the opposite, you cannot really love God properly if you don't love his children.

And you can't love people properly without loving God. If you don't love God, but you try to love people, what you'll find is that your love for people is self-serving. The reason is, if you don't love God, then the person you love most is yourself.

There are two rivals for your heart, you and God. If you give your heart to God, then you won't be concerned about yourself and you can love other people disinterestedly. But if you don't love God, then you, by definition, love yourself.

You are your own idol. And any attempt to love other people will simply be a way of serving your own selfish interests. You may be pretending to love them, but who you love is yourself.

Most men, who are not lovers of God, when they tell a woman, I love you, they would be more honest if they would say, I love me and I want you for me. You are necessary to my happiness. You see, that's not really love.

To love people as they should be loved, one has to stop loving oneself first and put God there first. I love God, and because I love God, I will love those that he loves. Not because they make me happy or they're necessary to my happiness, but because it is necessary to God's happiness that I love his children.

He is unhappy if I do not. And therefore, my love for people can only truly be disinterested and unselfish if I first love God. I've, you know, I lived in Santa Cruz for 10 years, California, where there's a lot of hippies, and at least there were when I lived there, a lot of hippies and New Agers and stuff.

And one of the things I heard very frequently from them is that their ethic was just to love people and that they felt like that's just what Jesus said. Jesus said, love your neighbors yourself, and they said, that's what we do. How can we not be saved if we're doing what Jesus said to do? And they very often wanted to quote this, you shall love your neighbors yourself.

And it's true. That is very important. That's something God wants everyone to do.

But they missed the point. Jesus said that's the second thing. They're missing the first thing.

The first and great commandment is you shall love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. And the scripture says if you love God, you'll keep his commandments. So there's more to it than just having warm, fuzzy feelings toward people.

You have to first love God. And when you love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, only then do you love yourself too little to exploit people for yourself. That is to say, you need to get to a place where you don't love yourself, but you love God.

And then you can love people without exploiting them. You can love people in a disinterested way that benefits them rather than seeking to benefit yourself. This goes against nature, of course, but that's just the point.

The Christian life is not something that can be done naturally. It is supernatural. You need the Holy Spirit.

You need the nature of Christ given to you. And then you can do this. It is his Holy Spirit given to you that produces this love.

So you can't really love God or people properly until you are walking in the Holy Spirit, which requires submission to Jesus Christ because he is the one who gives his Holy Spirit to those who ask him. Now, having said that, what did Jesus say here to this man? He said, there are two great commandments. The first and great one is love the Lord, your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

And that's the first. The second is you shall love your neighbors yourself. And the second is like it.

It's enough like it that I can't limit it to one. This other one is too closely related to it. You have to do both.

It is one commandment with two branches. The one commandment is you shall love. The two branches are you shall love the Lord and you shall love your neighbor.

Okay, Jesus said on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. Oh, is that an important thing for us to get a grasp of? That there are so many things that God wants from man. So many things he has commanded.

So many things he requires. If you read the Old Testament, you could get the impression that you'd have to be a legal expert to have memorized all the things that God wants. Because there are hundreds of commands, many hundreds of commands that God gave to Israel.

And some people actually did take it on themselves to become legal experts. Some Jews,

some rabbis, so that they could, you know, try to keep all the things God said to do. Now on a few occasions, even in the Old Testament, all of God's commands were reduced to a few simple things.

For example, in Micah 6.8, Micah the prophet says, He has shown you, O man, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you? But, and now he reduces it to three things, he says, To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. Those are the things that God really requires of you. There may be thousands of commandments, but there's really only three things it all boils down to.

Being just, being merciful. See, that has to do with what? That's loving your neighbor, isn't it? If you love your neighbor, you will act justly toward him and mercifully toward him. So, to do justice, and to love mercy, and then to walk humbly with your God.

This is the part about loving God with all your heart. You walk humbly before him and let him be your Lord. And you do what he says because you recognize and revere him and his authority.

Now, that's what the Old Testament did in trying to reduce a lot of commandments into a short summary. Here's what it is. He's shown you, O man, what is good, what does the Lord require of you? To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

That's Micah 6.8. But Jesus reduces it even further, down to two things. He says, here it is, love God, love your neighbor. All the law, all the prophets, all the commands God ever gave, all the concerns God has, and the things he requires of us, reduced to these two things.

Love is one thing, but there are two directions for our love. To love God, and to love our neighbor as ourself. And if we do that, everything God requires will take care of itself.

All these things hang together. You know, I saw a commercial once on a television. I don't have a television.

I was somewhere else. There was a TV on. I was watching this commercial.

And it was a product that, it was for clothing, hanging clothing in a closet. And it was a hanger that had several other hangers attached to it. And when you would spread them out on your clothing rack or whatever, you'd have all these garments hanging separately.

But if you would pick up the one hanger at the far end and carry it off, the others were all attached, and all the clothes would fall down flat along each other. And, you know, if you had a closet full of clothing, and the house was on fire, and you had to grab them all and take them out, it might look like you've got so many hangers to carry. But if you just know which right one to carry, all the others come with it.

And that's how Jesus said all the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments. If you just know which commandments to be careful about, the others will take care of themselves. If you love God with all your heart, and if you love your neighbor the way you love yourself, all other things God requires will pretty much take care of themselves.

And that tells us, of course, that the only laws that God is concerned about for us are the ones that reduce to this kind of an ethic. Is this loving toward God? Is this loving toward man? Remember Jesus said something that has perplexed a lot of people in Matthew 5. Jesus said in Matthew 5, verse 18, Now he said this, Now, Jesus is talking about the need to keep the law, every little bit of the law. However, what law does he have in mind? Well, he tells us a few chapters later in the same sermon.

That's, of course, the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 7 and 12, he says, Okay, Jesus said, That's the whole law and the prophets, he said. Now, of course, when Jesus said, And so, in another way here, he's saying the same thing.

The whole law comes down to this. Loving my neighbor as I love myself. After, of course, I've already been totally devoted to God.

Well, that's what Jesus said. And he said, there's a parallel to this account in Mark, chapter 12. And after he said that, he said, But more importantly, he said, What I find amazing today is how many religious groups and churches and so forth try to impose a great deal of ritual on their members as necessary.

Even rituals that don't in any way reflect the need or do not reflect the practice of loving God or loving people. So many religious rituals have nothing to do with love. And those that have nothing to do with love have nothing to do with Christianity.

Because Jesus indicated that loving God and loving your neighbor is really all that it all boils down to. Now, this guy, this lawyer who came to Jesus with this question in the first place, it would appear that he was put up to it by the Pharisees. In one way or another, they were testing Jesus or trying to trap Jesus by asking him the question.

And they had selected this lawyer among them to be the guy who would go and ask the question. But do you know what happened to him? It doesn't tell us here in Matthew, but over in Mark, we get sort of the sequel to this. In Mark chapter 12, we have the same story.

And in verse 31, we have Jesus saying, And then the scribe who actually raised the question in the first place speaks again. In Mark 12, 32, And to love him with all the heart and all the understanding, with all the soul and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. So when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, Now that's interesting.

You are not far from the kingdom of God. The man had come with a question for Jesus actually as one who was sent to trap Jesus. But he was so smitten in conscience.

He was so impressed with what Jesus said by the truthfulness of it that he couldn't avoid acknowledging it. He said, you know, you're right, Jesus. Well said, Master.

You've spoken the truth. And he repeats it. Only he says it a little differently than Jesus did.

Jesus said all the law and the prophets hang on these two things. This scribe actually was pretty sharp. He said, you know, to love God with all your soul and all your strength and to love your neighbor as yourself, he said, that's more important than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.

In other words, that's more important than all the rituals of the Old Testament. You know, the Old Testament had laws that were ritualistic merely, just ceremonial. It had to do with the way you cut the throat of the animal when you're sacrificing it and that kind of stuff.

And then there were laws of morality that told you how to live with your neighbor and so forth. Well, all the prophets in the Old Testament seemed to recognize that these laws were not all equal, that the laws that were moral in nature that told you how to live with your neighbor and how to love your neighbor, that those laws were more important than were the ritual laws about sacrifices and things like that. In fact, Hosea made it very clear.

In Hosea 6.6, God was speaking through him and said, I have desired mercy rather than sacrifice. And the knowledge of God more than fatted wolves or whatever. He was saying more important than the sacrifices that God wants, Hosea said, God wants people to have mercy.

Isn't that sort of the same thing? Love your neighbor. It's more important than the sacrifices. Well, this scribe recognized that, although many of his contemporary religious friends didn't.

And so the man, you know, suddenly after asking Jesus this question, the man was convinced that Jesus was right. And because of that, Jesus said to him, you are not far from the kingdom of God. Not far, but not in either.

The man was beginning to acknowledge the truth of what Jesus said. But would he accept Jesus? That's the question. There are many people who love the Sermon on the Mount.

There are many people who love what Jesus said. But do they accept him as their Messiah, as their Lord? The man was getting dangerously close to getting saved.

Dangerously close from the perspective of his friends.

They had put him in that position to bring Jesus down. And here Jesus was about to bring him in to the kingdom of God. But the man wasn't quite taking that step.

It's hard to know whether he ever really did. But by acknowledging that what Jesus said was true, as I say, he was getting dangerously close to becoming part of Jesus' movement. And yet there was one step more he would need to take.

And that is to not only acknowledge that what Jesus said is true, but to acknowledge that Jesus himself is the truth. That Jesus is the one that God has sent to be our Savior and our Lord. And to make the whole committal of his life to Jesus Christ and become a follower of his.

This man may not have done that. It's his mistake if he did not. You don't have to repeat that mistake.