

“Our Two Greatest Needs”
Matthew 22:34-46
September 15, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

What would you say are your two greatest needs right now? Undoubtedly, since we are sitting in church today, if you were actually to give an answer to that question, your answer would tend toward the spiritual. So perhaps it would be better to ask the question in a different way, in order to get at the real answer. What are you anxious about? Our anxieties often reveal what we really think we need. What do you daydream about? Our daydreams reveal our deep desires. Or how about this one: if you somehow came into millions of dollars, what would you do with the money? Jesus taught that our use of money reveals what is really on our heart.

If we are going to do more than give lip service to Jesus, we need to agree with him about our two greatest needs. In today’s passage, someone asks Jesus what the greatest commandment is. If you think about it, that’s really just another way of asking what our greatest need is. Our greatest need is to obey God’s greatest commandment. God’s commandments express his will for us, a will that describes what leads to human flourishing. The biggest need we all have is the same. Your biggest need is not to have financial security. The perfect man, Jesus, never did in this life. He lived as a poor man, at times even hungry and homeless. Your need isn’t to be happily married. Jesus never married. Your biggest need isn’t to be well-regarded by others. Jesus was often reviled and hated. Yet Jesus was the happiest man who ever lived. He was happy because he knew what our two greatest needs are as humans, and he successfully pursued these two great needs. In today’s passage, he tells us what these needs are: to love God and neighbor. Any other answer puts us at odds with Jesus. Let’s explore this further as we see Jesus’ two roles as teacher and Lord.

I. Christ as Teacher of the Law (v. 34-40)

Jesus tells us what our two greatest needs are in answer to a question from a lawyer. Don’t think of a modern day lawyer when you read that term. Remember that in Jesus’ day, the law was what was found in the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. So a lawyer in this day was really a Bible scholar, an expert in knowing how the laws in the Bible were to be applied in society. Matthew tells us that his approach to Jesus was not friendly. He came to test Jesus. The Pharisees had already tried and failed in this when they asked Jesus their question about paying taxes. Then the Sadducees had their chance, and they asked him that question about marriage in the resurrection

that they were sure would trip him up. Both efforts failed completely. Some people are slow learners, and it would seem that this lawyer was one. He was a Pharisee, and after the Pharisees had gathered together with Jesus, he asked his question. **“Which is the great commandment in the Law?”** There was widespread debate in Israel at the time concerning the answer to this question. Some taught that all of God’s commandments were great, and it was wrong to raise any one above the others. Others believed that some commandments had greater importance, but offered different answers to which ones were greatest. So any answer Jesus might give would bring him into disagreement with someone. That was undoubtedly this lawyer’s purpose, to reduce Jesus to simply another rabbi with a particular view that some would agree with and others would write off as misguided.

In spite of this danger, Jesus doesn’t hesitate to give an answer. **“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.”** Let’s start, then, with the command to love God. The complete demands of this command are striking, indicated first by the word “all.” We are to love God with all that we are. And then Jesus emphasizes the comprehensive nature of this by specifying the three parts of our being that are to love God: the heart, soul and mind. The Bible uses the word “heart” differently than we do. When we speak of the heart, we usually mean one’s emotions as distinct from one’s mind. In the Bible, the heart refers to our whole selves: the intellect, the emotions, and our desires and motives. The soul refers to our deepest parts. We would call this our instinct. Jesus commands that our instinct be that of loving God. And then he says that we are to love God with all our minds. There is an intellectual, cognitive component to loving God. Basically, Jesus is saying that the most important command is to be as captivated by God as the alcoholic is to his booze, the greedy man to his money and the narcissist to his image. In short, it means to be besotted with God, to think about him, desire him and include him in all your calculations and plans.

Jesus had not been asked about the two greatest commandments, only the one greatest. But he gives a second anyway, and that is significant. He introduces this second command with the words, **“And a second is like it.”** In other words, the second is just as important as the first. These two commands can never be separated. You can’t say you love God at the same time as you don’t love your neighbor. **“If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen”** (1 John 4:20). How much destruction has been wrought in the world by those claiming to love God, but who lack neighbor love? We commemorated 9-11 again this past week. After that tragedy, investigators found the papers and writings of the terrorists who perpetrated it. Their writings were filled with frequent references to Allah, and

their religious piety was unquestionably great. But it was obviously completely disconnected from love of neighbor. In my decades of pastoring, I have encountered similar cases—men and women who speak loudly and clearly of their love for God on Sunday, and then go home and beat wives and children. Jesus holds together what we want to separate, saying that you either have both love for God and neighbor, or you have neither.

It is significant that Jesus says to love your neighbor, not neighbors. Jesus doesn't say to love the whole world, and the reason is clear. It's an easy thing to say sentimentally that you love everyone, but quite another actually to love the person that comes across your path. According to his biographer, Karl Marx loved the working class but could barely stand individual workers. When Mother Teresa won the Nobel Peace Prize, someone asked her what a person could do to promote world peace. She replied, "Go home and love your family."

Jesus says that you are to love your neighbor **"as yourself."** This is not a third command of self-love, as some have misunderstood it. Rather, it assumes that we all have an instinct for self-concern and self-preservation, and the same effort devoted to that should be devoted to the needs of others. When I start to get hungry, I think and plan for my next meal. If I have a toothache, I take appropriate and speedy steps to address the problem. Jesus is directing us to have hearts of empathy and to be just as diligent in meeting the needs of those he brings across our path as we are our own needs. This is what Jesus taught elsewhere in what we call the "Golden Rule": **"So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets"** (Matthew 7:12).

The conclusion offered by Jesus to these commands closes the door to the two ways we tend to try to escape their force. **"On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."** The verb "depend" is translated elsewhere as "hang" or "dangle." The idea is that the rest of God's law comes under these two points, as sub-points in an outline come under more major points. So there is complete harmony between all the commands of the Bible and these two greatest commands.

So there are two ways this harmony is denied in order to escape the force of this command. The first is to put love over law. A person does that by ignoring the lesser commands while convincing himself that he is still being faithful to the great command to love. For example, you can't tell someone that you love them and then ask them to have sex with you outside of marriage. If you really love someone, you will keep the biblical command to limit sex to a covenant marriage. Love is more than sentimental well-wishing. It requires that we keep God's commandments, all of them.

The second way we violate this harmony between these great commandments and the rest of the Bible is through law without love. Those

who do this focus on the external details of the law while having a loveless heart. They may say things like, “Just do your duty. That’s all you can do,” while all the time the heart is lacking in any real love for God or others.

So do you obey this command? Do you love God and neighbor with everything you have? Do you throw yourself into this love project with complete abandon every single day? Don’t be too quick to claim that you do. The lawyer who asked this question of Jesus knew quite well the verse Jesus was drawing on to answer his question. Deuteronomy 6:5 says, **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”** Judaism refers to this as the *Shema*, after the first word of the previous verse, **“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.”** Judaism had already elevated these two verses. They were said as the opening sentence of every synagogue worship service. In addition, pious Jews repeated these verses every morning and evening. The verses were also written down and placed in little boxes called *phylacteries* that were worn on the forehead and the wrist. Godly households also hung the *Shema* on their doors in a small round box called a *Muzuzah*. So Jesus was not breaking new ground here with his answer, and this Bible scholar had almost certainly been one of those who had repeated this verse twice daily for most of his life. He undoubtedly would have affirmed his love for God. Yet, the true God is standing right before him, and his heart is opposed to him. He is trying to test Jesus because he wants to get rid of him.

II. Christ as Lord of the Law (v. 41-46)

The Church has long read the previous passage with this last one of the chapter, joining the two together as one unit. Question 2 of the Heidelberg Catechism asks, “How do you come to know your misery?” It answers, “The law of God tells me.” It then asks next, “What does God’s law require of us?” and answers with a quote from the greatest commandment verses we just read. Then it asks, “Can you live up to all this perfectly?” and answers, “No. I have a natural tendency to hate God and my neighbor.” That prepares us for the gospel words of verses 41-46, where Jesus is presented as Lord.

This passage comes as a question from Jesus. Three questions have been asked of him, and now he asks a question to those who are against him. Jesus’ question penetrates to the heart of the matter. It’s a question of how a specific verse in the Bible should be interpreted. Psalm 110:1 says, **“The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.”** Jesus attributes that to David and wants to know how David could refer to his descendent as Lord. Judaism in that day longed for a Messiah, but their Messiah was not typically thought to be the Son of God. So they have no answer to Jesus’ question. There is no room in their thinking for a divine Messiah. Jesus has touched here on the heart of the Bible’s message. “Christ is

Lord.” That is the central message of the Holy Spirit and of the Bible. And it is the central message we need.

We need to know that Jesus is Lord because we have failed to keep God’s greatest commandment. There are 614 commands in the first five books of the Bible. It gets complicated. A simpler summary of God’s commands can be found in the Ten Commandments. Quite honestly, we can’t keep those either. So Jesus narrows it to only two, calling these the greatest commandments. But we fail here too. Jesus can make it as simple as possible, and we still fail. But our failure here is particularly problematic, because we have failed at the most important level. I went to seminary in Philadelphia, and made quite a few car trips between Philadelphia and Memphis, where my parents lived at the time. On one trip, someone riding with me and sharing the driving didn’t know how to drive my manual speed car. Since we were driving late at night along mostly interstate roads, I told him that he was going to have to drive. He managed to get the car up to speed, and I gave him just one piece of advice: “Just keep it between the lines.” If he messed up other things, it would just be an inconvenience. But if he veered off the road, it would be a catastrophe. Jesus comes to us and says, “Just do this one thing: love God and neighbor.” Our failure to do so is catastrophic. But there is every reason for hope in Jesus. Christianity isn’t a religion that is mainly about a moral code to keep. It is about a God who saves people who don’t keep the moral code.

At the end of this story, Jesus stands alone. Matthew tells us that from that day on, no one dared question him. He is standing alone as victor and as Lord. And he alone is able to save a people. Is he your Lord? Let me take you back to a word in the great command. Jesus says that the greatest commandment is to “love the Lord *your* God.” God’s love comes first in making us his people and calling himself our Lord. You can’t love him until he is your God, and this comes through faith in his Son, Jesus.

CONCLUSION:

The greatest command is not to believe in Jesus. Rather, the only way to keep the greatest command is to believe in Jesus. The first purpose of the Law is to show us our need of a Savior. It is like a mirror in which to see our need. If you look in a mirror and see some food stuck between your teeth, you would be wise not to attempt its removal with the mirror. The law is the mirror, showing us our need. Jesus alone can meet that need. He saves us by forgiving us of our lack of love, but also by sending his Spirit and beginning to change our hearts so that we actually begin to love. So humble yourself, and give up trying to save yourself. Christ alone is Lord!

Small Group Discussion Questions
Matthew 22:34-46

1. If the commandments to love God and neighbor are the two greatest commandments in the Bible, that means that we have no greater need than these two things. Do you believe that? What other needs might you be tempted to put above these two?
2. What are some everyday examples of a person who loves God with all his or her heart, soul and mind? Try to take this out of the theoretical level and put it in practical language.
3. Do the same for neighbor love. Practically speaking, what does it look like to love your neighbor as yourself?
4. Jesus was asked for the greatest commandment, but he answered with two commandments of love for God and neighbor. Why must these two go together? Describe any experience you may have with someone who tried to separate them. Think of someone who claimed to love God but who had no love for people. Similarly, think of someone who made love of neighbor a priority, but perhaps didn't even believe in God. What are some of the problems with this kind of divorce between love for God and love for neighbor?
5. Do you think evangelicalism has elevated the command to believe in Jesus as the greatest commandment over the one Jesus said was the greatest? What is the relationship between believing in Jesus and loving God and neighbor? Can a person believe in Jesus and have no love for God or neighbor?
6. How does faith in Jesus give us love in our hearts?
7. Is there some specific step God might be calling you to take in loving God or neighbor?