

Matthew 22:34-36

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-22/matthew-2234-36/>

A lawyer from the Pharisees asks Jesus which commandment is the greatest.

The parallel gospel account of this event is found in Mark 12:28.

But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus's response had silenced the Sadducees over their gimmicky question, framed against the resurrection, they gathered themselves together. The likely reason the Pharisees huddled together after the Sadducees failed to trap Jesus was to frame Him with their own snare.

The Pharisees and Sadducees were both religious authorities in Israel. But they were rivals. The Sadducees controlled and operated the Temple and oversaw the sacrifices. The Pharisees were dispersed throughout the nation and taught their interpretations of God's law in the local meeting houses called synagogues.

Even though *the Pharisees and Sadducees* both wanted to destroy *Jesus*, *the Pharisees* may not have been entirely disappointed to have *heard* how *Jesus* rebuked *the Sadducees* and refuted their denial of the resurrection, when He explained that it was real.

For one thing, *the Pharisees* believed in the resurrection (*the Sadducees* did not—Matthew 22:23). And *Jesus* had emphatically defended their belief in the resurrection in dramatic fashion. The hyperbolic scenario *the Sadducees* described to frame their question (Matthew 22:24-28) has the hallmarks of a being a stock “gotcha-question,” and had possibly been used to stump *the Pharisees* for some time. *Jesus* had expertly flicked aside their framing and reframed it according to what was true, and *the Sadducees were silenced* (Matthew 22:29-33).

A second reason why *the Pharisees* may have felt a degree of satisfaction when *Jesus* took down *the Sadducees* was because they were rivals competing for political power, and the esteem of the admiration of their fellow Jews. According to their “Me-First” mentality, anything that hurt their rivals in the competition for power was seen as a benefit to themselves.

Jesus's kingdom message was the exact opposite of the worldly “Me-First/You Last” political contests waged by *the Pharisees, Sadducees, Romans*, and other political dominions of this world. *Jesus's* kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36). *He* taught His followers to love and serve everyone (Matthew 20:25-28), including the least of these (Matthew 10:42), and even one's enemies (Matthew 5:44-45). The core ethos of His message brightly shines in His response to *the Pharisees' question* about *the great commandment*.

“And 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.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments, depend the whole

Law and the Prophets.”
(Matthew 22:36-40)

If it was in fact the case that *the Pharisees* delighted in *Jesus*'s takedown of their rival because it made themselves look comparably better in the eyes of the people, then *Jesus*'s response to their question which was to “love God” (Matthew 22:37) and to “love your neighbor” (Matthew 22:39) is an ironic and sharp contrast to *the Pharisees*' perspective.

Matthew reports that after *Jesus* rebuked *the Sadducees* that *the Pharisees gathered together*, likely to plot their next move to take *Jesus* down. It seems improbable that the next action taken by the *lawyer* asking about *the greatest commandment* was a result of a plot hatched in this huddle of *Pharisees*. Instead the *lawyer* who will ask the question seems to have been acting on his own. In fact, in Mark's gospel it appears that *Jesus* complimented him after their interaction.

Then *one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him*. The nature of his *testing* could be a number of things, as will be discussed momentarily.

This *lawyer* was a legal expert on *the Pharisees*' interpretation of God's law. Mark explained that he was “one of the scribes” and that this scribe had listened to *Jesus* debating *the Sadducees* and had recognized that *Jesus* had answered them well. (Mark 12:28). That *Jesus* “had answered them well” could simply mean that the *lawyer* agreed with *Jesus*'s answer.

The *lawyer* addressed *Jesus* as *Teacher*, likely “Rabbi” in the Hebrew language. Mark's account of this exchange provides more detail and appears to describe a warm, perhaps an even friendly conversation. Matthew's details are sparse and focuses on *Jesus*'s answer. When reading Mark's account, it appears as though the title of *Teacher* may have been spoken genuinely and with respect. There is nothing in Mark's account that obviously suggests that it was said in a sarcastic tone or that it was dripping with derision or deceit, as was the case when *the Pharisees* mockingly called *Jesus*, “*Teacher*,” in Matthew 22:16.

The *lawyer*'s question was: “*which is the great commandment in the Law?*” *Jesus* will answer that *the great commandment* is “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). (This will be commented on in the next section.)

The expression “*the great commandment*” was a way of saying “the most important *commandment*.” Mark makes this explicit when he wrote that *the lawyer asked*, “What commandment is the foremost of all?” (Mark 12:28). *Jesus* also underscored His answer by telling the *lawyer*, “This is the great and foremost commandment” (Matthew 22:38).

The Law was shorthand for the Pentateuch—the Five Books of Moses. Moses delivered *God*'s *Law* to Israel. Moses taught Israel *God*'s commands. He delivered hundreds of laws, including the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments were somewhat like title headings, or articles under which the other laws were organized. Apparently this *lawyer* correctly believed that *the great commandment* was given by Moses and was stated in *the Law*.

It is interesting that Matthew wrote that this *lawyer* was **testing** *Jesus*. The Greek word Matthew used for *testing* in this verse is “peirazown.” “Peirazown” is a participle that means *testing* or “tempting.” It describes **how** *the lawyer* asked the question.

Testing, in this context, could suggest at least three connotations.

1. Antagonistic Temptation
2. Hopeful Verification
3. A Symbolic Fulfillment of the Examination of *Jesus* as the Passover Lamb

Antagonistic Temptation

It is possible that this *lawyer* may have been trying to antagonistically take **Jesus** down. Peirazown is the same root word as that which Matthew used when “Jesus was led up by the Spirit to be **tempted** (“peirasthōnai”) by the devil” (Matthew 4:1). And it was the exact word Matthew used to describe the devil when he wrote “And the **tempter** (“peirazown”) came and said to Him...” (Matthew 4:3). Matthew’s use of *testing* (“peirazown”) here may indicate an association of *the Pharisees* as working on behalf of the devil (wittingly or unwittingly). The devil and *the Pharisees* (as a whole) both wanted to destroy *Jesus*.

Moreover, Matthew’s use of “peirazown,” (*testing*) is in the form of a continuous participle. This could indicate that the way *this lawyer* went about *testing* *Jesus* was by constantly asking Him the question over and over again—perhaps as a heckler in the crowd might harass a speaker.

If this image is accurate, the query would not have been a logical *testing*, but a social or emotional one. The *lawyer*’s *question* about *the great commandment in the Law* was easy for a Jewish Rabbi. Practically any Jewish boy would have cited the same scriptures from *the Law* if *the question* were directed at him.

If it was intended as an antagonistic *testing*, perhaps it was intended as an attempt to irritate *Jesus* and get under His skin so that when He answered to love God (and possibly to *love* others), *testing* Him to see if He would be insulted by such an elementary question. Perhaps the test was to see if *He* would say it with a frustrated or an angry tone that His demeanor would contradict His words and break the commandment. *The Pharisees* would be ready to pounce if *Jesus*’s manners did not align with His answer.

The interpretation seems unlikely, given the additional information we receive about this encounter.

Hopeful Verification

On the other hand, this *lawyer* may not have been trying to humiliate *Jesus* at all. Based on what the lawyer had seen and heard from *Jesus*, he may have had an impulse toward belief that *Jesus* might actually be the Messiah. That he is called *a lawyer* apart from the description of *the Pharisees* might indicate he was acting apart from them, perhaps while *the Pharisees* were huddling. His question about *the great commandment* may have been a way of verifying or

testing to see if *Jesus* was the Messiah. Given *Jesus*'s miracles and teachings, this would have been a responsible thing for a religious authority to investigate.

If that was the case, then, the *lawyer* was not antagonistically against *Jesus* as so many of *the* other *Pharisees* were; rather he was hopeful that *He* was the Christ. We know that at least some religious leaders and *Pharisees* believed in *Jesus* (John 12:42, 19:38-39). This *lawyer* may have been among those who did, or who was at least open to believing in *Him*.

Again, if this was the case, then *lawyer*'s authenticity and hopeful *testing* of *Jesus* would have been an outlier in the series of traps *the Sadducees* and *Pharisees* had been laying for *Jesus* during His time teaching and healing in the Temple (Matthew 21:15-16; 21:23-27; 21:28-46; 22:15-22; 22:23-33; 22:41-46). And Mark's telling of this exchange seems to depict a conversation of mutual respect. It would be an indication that even in the midst of rejection, God always calls a remnant to Himself (Romans 11:4).

A Symbolic Fulfillment of the Examination of *Jesus* as the Passover Lamb

A third aspect of the *lawyer*'s *testing* ("peirazown") that Matthew may have had in mind when he used this word to describe the exchange was not in the *lawyer*'s attitude at all, but rather, had to do with the Passover.

The annual Passover holiday recalled the night before Israel's exodus from Egypt. On that terrible night, God struck down the firstborn sons of Egypt, but He passed-over every house that had the blood of an unblemished lamb painted on its doorpost (Exodus 12:1-32). The Jews commemorated this founding holy day every year by sacrificing Passover lambs.

Part of the process of the Passover celebration was an inspection of the Passover lamb to ensure that it was spotless (Exodus 12:3, 5). *Jesus* was and is our unblemished Passover Lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7). His confrontations with the religious authorities in the temple during Passover week served as a sort of inspection or *testing* of *Jesus*'s spotless character.

During His *testing*, *He* was found without fault, and no one was able to answer *Him* (Matthew 22:46). After hearing *Jesus*'s response to this very question, this *lawyer* even commends *Jesus* for His answer (Mark 12:32-33).

Of course, these religious authorities and this *lawyer* (whether he was antagonistic or hopeful toward *Jesus*) had no notion that they were evaluating *Jesus* as the ultimate Passover Lamb at this time. They were obsessed with trying to trap *Him* into saying or doing something that would discredit *Him* in the eyes of the people, or find something they could accuse or arrest *Him* for and bring *Him* before the Romans.

Jesus passed all their *testing*.

Biblical Text

³⁴ But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together. ³⁵ One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, ³⁶ “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”