

Matthew 22:39-40

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Jesus tells the Pharisees' lawyer that the second greatest commandment is to 'love your neighbor as your love yourself'. He tells him that this commandment along with the first, are what the entire moral code of Jewish ethics are based upon.

The parallel gospel accounts of this event are found in Mark 12:31-34.

When the lawyer from the Pharisees asked Jesus “Which is the great commandment in the Law?” (Matthew 22:36), Jesus responded with what Moses said in Deuteronomy 6:5.

Jesus said, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” before telling the lawyer, “This is the great and foremost commandment” (Matthew 22:37-38). Even though Jesus had fully answered the Pharisees’ question while He was teaching in the temple, He expounded upon His response.

The second is like it. According to Jesus, *the second* most important commandment from the Law is: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* This commandment also came through Moses.

“But you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord.”

(Leviticus 19:18b)

It is interesting that Jesus here answers a question that was not asked, answering also “What is the second greatest command?” This is likely because Jesus is filling out the full context of Deuteronomy 6:4. In Deuteronomy 5:1-26:19 Moses is preparing the people to cross over the Jordan and take the Promised Land. He is reviewing the law, God’s covenant with Israel. In citing both the greatest commandment as well as the second greatest, Jesus is summarizing the essence of the entire covenant.

Much of Deuteronomy 5:1 through 26:19 explores laws that flesh out how to keep the Ten Commandments, which serve like primary articles of a constitution. The first and greatest commandment to love God summarizes the first five commandments, which establishes God as the lone authority over all (with the fifth commandment deputizing parents to sit in for God with respect to children). The last five commandments are summarized by Jesus as “love your neighbor as yourself.”

In adding this second commandment, Jesus expounds the entire covenant God had with Israel. Jesus reinstated and modified this covenant as a new covenant in His blood, writing it on the hearts of His people by giving them His Spirit. Jesus asks us to love Him by keeping His commands, and His primary command is to love one another, and even to love our enemies.

It has been noted that Jesus asked over three hundred questions, and only directly answered a few, without including questions or parables. For example, in the episode where the Sadducees asked Jesus about the resurrection in Deuteronomy 22:23-33, Jesus included a question in His answer, asking “But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God...?” (Matthew 22:31).

However, in answering this question about the greatest commandment, Jesus answers plainly, without question and without parable. It seems likely this is because of the fundamental importance of this foundational truth. It is in these two commands that the true meaning of life can be sought and found.

The first commandment is about loving God our Creator, Redeemer, and Judge. The *second* commandment is about loving other people who are made in His image. We cannot follow the first commandment without following *the second*. And we cannot consistently follow *the second* without the first above it.

The summaries of the *two* greatest *commandments* are: to *love* God; and to *love* others.

The Greek verb translated as *love* in both of these commandments is “agapo.” “Agapo,” and its noun form “agape” reflect a choice to *love* based on values. They are used often throughout the New Testament to describe an unconditional, even sacrificial, *love* that highly seeks and values the good of someone else.

In the first and foremost commandment we are to choose to *love* God with **all** our being. In *the second* commandment we are to choose to give our *neighbor* the same unconditional acceptance and care for their welfare as we want for ourselves.

The underlying assumption of this commandment is *self-love*. Self-interest, or *self-love* is natural and good. God hardwired within His image bearers for us to seek our *self-interest*. Every person, by God’s design is attentive to their own needs and desires and naturally seeks to have them fulfilled. God designed us to *love*”agape” ourselves. *Self-love* (self-interest) was and is part of God’s very good creation (Genesis 1:3). This assumption is apparent because Jesus appealed to our inner desire for our own welfare as the standard by which we should measure our love for our neighbor.

Because of sin and the Fall we are prone to adopt a twisted view of our true self-interest. This is the abuse of *self-love*. The abuse of *self-love* is the sin of only seeking our self-interest. Adam and Eve’s true self-interest was in trusting God and following His ways, ruling the earth in harmony with God, themselves, and nature. Satan convinced them that their self-interest was to seek knowledge apart from God, and apart from harmony with God. This has been a basic conflict since that time.

New Testament believers experience an ongoing struggle between the flesh and Spirit (Galatians 5:17). The flesh tries to convince us falsely that to walk apart from God, to be self-referencing and self-seeking is the path to our greatest self-interest. The flesh tells us that our real self-interest lies in exploiting others to fulfill our appetites. But the Spirit tells us, truly, that to walk

in full obedience to God is the path to our actual self-interest, the way to fulfill our deepest desires for purpose and harmony. The Spirit tells us that laying aside appetites and choosing love is the actual path to our self-interest.

The Spirit leads us into our true self-interest, and following these *two* great *commandments* harmonizes our natural seeking of self-interest into its proper alignment with God and others.

God created us with an instinct to care about and to take care of our own *self*-needs. God's command to *love* our *neighbor* with the quality and manner of care and devotion we desire for ourselves is an actual means to our own greatest self-interest.

We are to *love* our neighbors *as*, or to the same degree or intensity of care, we *love* ourselves. The quality of *love* this commandment describes is personal, keen, and active. We are fiercely aware of our feelings, needs, and desires. We are constantly acting to fulfill our wants and needs. This is what it means to *love* our neighbors. We should become aware of the true needs of others and be vigilant to serve them.

The way we *love* our selves and the way we care for ourselves is the way we should *love* our *neighbor*. Inferred in this command is seeking the best interest of our *neighbor*. To do this also requires that we set aside worry about what they think of us as a priority. To worry about what they think of us is self-seeking. Sometimes to *love* others by telling them what is true is to risk rejection. Jesus was doing this very thing throughout His interactions with the religious leaders here in Matthew 22. Jesus loved these Pharisees by telling them what is true. But instead of thanking Him, they hated and rejected Him for it.

The apostle Paul describes the characteristics of *the second* commandment's *love* this way:

“Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

(1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

Love is listed first in Paul's description of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). We are usually quite patient with ourselves and ready to make excuses for our mistakes. We do not complain when we receive the benefit of favorable circumstances. And we tend to believe the best about ourselves. We tend to judge ourselves by our strengths, and give ourselves leeway to grow and mature. This is how we should *love* our *neighbor*. Of course we don't have the strength to accomplish this command on our own. But we can do all things through the resurrection power of Jesus flowing through us (Philippians 4:13).

Another important term in *the second* commandment is *neighbor*. Who exactly is it that we are to choose to give this sacrificial *love* to?

A different lawyer once asked Jesus this very question as it pertained to the commandment to *love your neighbor as you love yourself* (Luke 10:25-29). Jesus answered his question by way of the parable known as “The Good Samaritan” (Luke 10:30-37). Jesus’s point was that our *neighbor* is anyone we encounter who is in need. In Jesus’s example, it was the person in need laying right in our immediate pathway.

The reason that lawyer asked Jesus, “Who is my *neighbor*?” was because he wished to justify himself to not have to care for some. He was, in effect, asking Jesus, “Who do I not have to *love*?” He was hoping that Jesus would endorse a narrow and legalistic—but widespread (Matthew 5:43)—interpretation of the *second* commandment from Leviticus 19:18. This was not altogether unjustifiable, since the immediate context of the second commandment in Leviticus 19 is “your fellow countrymen” and “the sons of your people”:

“You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people, and you are not to act against the life of your neighbor; I am the LORD. ‘You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but **you shall love your neighbor as yourself**; I am the LORD.”

(Leviticus 19:16-18)

However, the Mosaic law is also consistent in including the stranger and alien, the widow and orphan as being those to whom care and justice was to be given (Deuteronomy 1:16; 10:18-19; 24:14,17,19-21; 27:19; 31:12). Jesus followed this principle and expanded Leviticus 19:18 to include anyone in need, including a despised alien (like the Samaritans in the first century).

According to Jesus’s interpretation, *your neighbor* is not limited to someone who belongs to *your* group. *Your neighbor* includes even *your* enemy (Matthew 5:43-44). We are to *love* every person as we *love* ourselves regardless of their class, station, political affiliation, nationality, race or any other form of self-identity because every person is an image bearer of our Creator. Every person is precious. Everyone has divine value. Every person we encounter in our pathway, each person we have to “step over” is our *neighbor*.

Loving our *neighbor as we love* ourselves is to be done as God loves. God accepts people unconditionally. But God only approves behavior that is beneficial. We are therefore not to affirm everything others believe or do. Indeed, just before stating the *second* commandment in Leviticus, Moses wrote, “you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him” (Leviticus 19:17). The Bible presents correction and reproof as being precious and valuable, like gold or pearls (Matthew 7:6; 2 Timothy 3:16).

Logically, this follows as well. We often get upset with ourselves for failing to live out our values. The Bible is full of examples of people who suffer regret and remorse over their own choices: Cain (Genesis 4:13); Esau (Hebrews 12:16-17); Moses (Numbers 20:11-12, Deuteronomy 3:25-26); Saul (1 Samuel 15:24-28); David (2 Samuel 12:9-13, Psalm 51); Peter (Matthew 26:69-75); Paul (Romans 7:19).

If people can sometimes “disagree” with themselves, and we are to *love* our *neighbor* as we *love* ourselves, then it follows that loving our *neighbor* is not the same thing as agreeing with him. Sometimes it is loving to disagree. And Jesus instructed how to lovingly disagree with our *neighbor* and reprove him, by first acknowledging and dealing with the issue in our own life (Matthew 7:5).

Throughout His ministry Jesus constantly emphasized the principle of *the second* commandment to *love* our *neighbor as we love* ourselves.

- We are to *love* our *neighbor* by showing mercy in the way we wish to receive mercy and forgiveness (Matthew 5:7; 7:1-2; 6:14-15; 18:25).
- “In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12).
- The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37).
- In teaching His disciples how to become “Great” (Matthew 20:26-27).
- By the example of washing His disciples’ feet (John 13:5).
- “This is My commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:12-13).

Paul cited Jesus as the ultimate example about what loving *your neighbor* looks like.

“Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.”

(Philippians 2:3-5)

The first and foremost commandment is the summary of loving God above all else. *The second* commandment is a summary of how we are to view and treat other people. Following this *second* commandment is counterintuitive and paradoxical. But it is in loving and serving others that we find our own best interest.

Matthew recorded that Jesus concluded His response to the lawyer’s question by stating *on these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets*. The phrase *the whole Law and the Prophets* is an expression describing the entirety of the Jewish scriptures, which was the full extent of the Bible existing at that time.

The Apostle Paul expressed something similar to this idea when he told the Galatians: “For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, “You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself” (Galatians 5:14). And Paul elaborates on this thought in Romans.

“Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For this, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”

(Romans 13:8-10)

Together, these *two commandments* to love God and love others form the founding principles of God’s vision for humanity.

The *two great commandments* together are all encompassing. They are the ethical axioms upon which every other commandment and religious teaching was grounded. This means that any religious edict that does not advance these two commandments is not consistent with Jesus’s plan for humanity. Jesus spoke of this specifically when He told the Pharisees they had turned the Sabbath into a burden rather than a blessing, saying “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). This statement again reflects God’s benevolence toward humanity, in that God gave humans the great gift of being made in His image and making moral choices, but was diligent to provide numerous kinds of instruction to direct us how to make the best choices that provide the maximum benefit.

These two great commandments capture the heart of every commandment. Without the principles of these *commandments* all other moral teachings are out of balance and off kilter. These *two commandments* are essential. They are the summary of Jewish ethics. And together they are both the fountainhead and final aim of all moral teaching.

Mark’s Extended Record of Jesus’s interaction with the Lawyer

Mark provides an extended record of Jesus’s conversation with this scribe (Mark 12:28-24).

Highlights of Mark’s account include Jesus prefacing His answer with a declaration from “The Shema” which begins with Deuteronomy 6:4. Mark includes both “mind” and “strength” as part of the great commandment; and a short, but fascinating, follow-up exchange between the lawyer and Jesus after His initial answer.

Jesus began His answer about the great commandment to the Pharisees’ lawyer: “The foremost is ‘Hear O Israel! The LORD our God is One LORD’” (Mark 12:29). This statement is a direct quote of Deuteronomy 6:4, which immediately precedes the great commandment to love God with all your heart, soul, and might. It is an essential declaration of the Jewish faith. It is part of “The Shema.” “Shema” is the English transliteration of the first Hebrew word in Deuteronomy 6:4. It means “listen” or “hear.”

The Shema is a prayer composed of selected phrases from Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21; and Numbers 15:37-41. This prayer was to be offered every day, regardless of where the Jewish people were and what they were doing. It is often the first section of Scripture that a Jewish child learns.

The declaration, “The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!” not only emphasizes *God’s* uniqueness but also describes His covenant relationship with Israel. Though other nations and people groups served and worshiped other gods, the children of Israel were to recognize the LORD alone as their *God*. He was their Suzerain Ruler, who had entered into a covenant (or treaty) with Israel, in order to clearly spell out how they could be greatly blessed (Deuteronomy 30:19).

Jesus repeated the link between this essential declaration (that the Lord our God is one) and the great and foremost commandment to *love* the Lord.

After Jesus answered the scribe’s question about which commandment was the greatest, by stating the Shema and saying it was to *love* God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and that *the second* greatest commandment was to *love your neighbor* (Leviticus 19:18), Mark offers the scribe’s response.

“The scribe said to Him, “Right, Teacher; You have truly stated that HE IS ONE, AND THERE IS NO ONE ELSE BESIDES HIM; AND TO LOVE HIM WITH ALL THE HEART AND WITH ALL THE UNDERSTANDING AND WITH ALL THE STRENGTH, AND TO LOVE ONE’S NEIGHBOR AS HIMSELF, is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

(Mark 12:32-33)

This lawyer agreed with Jesus and was apparently impressed with His answer. In his affirmation, the scribe alluded to several Old Testament scriptures when he said that these are “much more than all burnt offerings” (1 Samuel 15:22; Psalm 51:15; Hosea 6:6; Micah 6:6-8).

Jesus, too, used these same allusions at times during His rebukes of the unloving Pharisees.

“But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire compassion, and not sacrifice,’ for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

(Matthew 9:13)

“But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent.”

(Matthew 12:7)

Perhaps that is why when Jesus saw that this remarkable Pharisee had answered intelligently, He said “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:24).

Biblical Text

³⁹ The second is like it, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’ ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”