

THE WHOLE LAW IN ONE WORD

MATTHEW 22:34-40

If you have ever read the first five books of the Old Testament—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—it is likely that you have been struck by the sizeable number of laws and rules that were given to God’s people. (2) There are precisely 613 laws and rules, and it was these 613 laws and rules to which the Psalmist was referring when he said, (3) *“I cling to your testimonies” (119:31).*

“I long for your precepts” (119:40)

“My hope is in your rules” (119:43).

“I find my delight in your commandments, which I love” (119:42).

“When I think of your rules..., I take comfort, O LORD” (119:53).

“Your statutes have been my songs in the house of my sojourning (119:54).

“More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb” (19:10).

What do you think? Do you experience the same thrill as the Psalmist when you read the laws and rules and commandments in the Pentateuch? If some of us were honest we would admit that when we read all those laws, we feel overwhelmed. They can seem more than a little daunting. Some of them seem so random; some of them seem so rigid; some of them seem picayune; some of them seem like they don’t make much sense.

So (4) how do we make sense of these laws and commandments? (5) How do we understand them in

light of the God who gave them, and his plans and purposes for his people? (6) Do all of them have equal importance, or do some take precedence over others? (7) Is there a there a common thread that runs through all of them, and if so, is it possible to make a general statement that summarizes their meaning and purpose?

These are questions that have been asked by serious students of God's word ever since these laws and commandments were written. And over the years many attempts have been made to accurately and succinctly summarize the Law. Naturally, these attempts have been met with mixed reviews, and those summaries were hotly debated, especially among Bible scholars. So, it was natural for the religious leaders in Jesus' day to ask him to weigh in on this matter. We read in (8) **Matthew 22:34-40**.

³⁴ But 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 is the great commandment in the Law?" ³⁷ 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. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

This is Tuesday or Wednesday of Holy Week. Jesus and his disciples, along with thousands of other Jewish pilgrims, have converged upon Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. However, Jesus knew that he was there for more than just a two-week festival. He had told his disciples several months earlier that (9) he must go to Jerusalem, suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and

on the third day be raised (Matt. 16:21).

The intense suffering that would lead to his death would begin within the next 48 hours. (10) Meanwhile, Jesus was hanging out in the temple teaching, performing miracles, interacting with children, and having conversations with some of the prominent religious leaders of Judaism. Actually, they were more like altercations than conversations, because these so called “Bible experts” were trying to trap Jesus. They plied him with questions about some of the controversial issues of the day, hoping to trip him up and make him say something offensive or divisive, and thus, erode his popularity or undermine his credibility.

But Jesus never took the bait. He always answered in a way that marveled the crowds and silenced his opponents. Here, he had just finished silencing the Sadducees when their rivals, the Pharisees, approached him with yet another trap. After putting their heads together, they appointed one of their own, a lawyer, to ask Jesus, (11) ³⁶ “*Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?*”

This may seem like a simple, straightforward question, but there was definitely an attitude and an assumption behind it. The questioner is (12) a lawyer, not a professional lawyer trained in civil or criminal law, but an expert on the Law of Moses. I told you earlier that lawyers in Judaism spent a good deal of time contemplating the Pentateuch’s 613 laws and trying to determine whether they could be ranked, prioritized, or summarized. Since the Old Testament itself does not rank or prioritize its laws and commandments, one’s conclusions must come from (13) *theological reasoning*.

Theological reasoning is (14) the activity of carefully analyzing what all of Scripture says about a

particular subject, and then forming specific theological conclusions based on that content. Accurate conclusions come from careful, thorough, precise theological reasoning, (15) which requires keen insight, discernment, and perception.

I would submit to you that the lawyer asked this question because he was testing Jesus' level of intelligence. "Okay Jesus from Nazareth (that backwater village from which nothing good or important could possibly come), so you've silenced the Sadducees and the Herodians. You must think you're pretty smart? Hah! They were merely lobbing theological softballs with those questions. So you hit them out of the park? Big deal! Let's play hardball. Here, let's see if you can hit my best pitch."

For whatever reason, the lawyer and his cronies did not expect Jesus to pass the test. Perhaps they expected him to take the easy route by citing (16) one of the ten commandments as the greatest, since those commandments were written by the very finger of God on two stone tablets that were preserved in the Ark of the Covenant. Perhaps they expected him to say that all of the commandments were equally important since they were all inspired by God, an answer they would have considered to be a theological copout. "C'mon Jesus, show us what you've got upstairs!"

(17) And Jesus replies. But unlike the previous questions that were asked of him, when he hears this one, he does not call this man out for his hypocrisy or impudence. Instead, he answers him directly, which suggests that he thought this was a legitimate question that deserved a direct answer.

Verse 37-38. ³⁷ *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.* ³⁸ *This is the great*

and first commandment.

Jesus responds (18) by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, known to the Jews as “the Shema”, which was undoubtedly the most familiar passage to his audience since most Jews recited it every day. Jesus (19) replaces *might* with *mind*, but we should not make too much of this difference, for both expressions are making the point that love for God should be wholehearted, involving all that we are (Morris, PNTC).

(20) Why would Jesus identify this as the greatest commandment? Why not one of the Ten Commandments? Why not the command to “Trust the LORD” or “Fear the LORD” or “Obey the LORD?” all of which are repeated numerous times in the Old Testament.

I’m going to do a little theological reasoning myself. According to Colossians 1 and Hebrews 1 Jesus, the Son of God, was God’s agent of creation and, therefore, was the very One who created mankind. Although he was pleased with all creation, the creation of mankind was unique in that (21) he created Adam and Eve in his own image, with a mind (the capacity to reason), emotions (the capacity to feel), and a will (the capacity to choose). And the reason he did this is so that he could have a *relationship* with us that is based on love. Love, real love, can only be expressed and experienced when all three of these capacities exist.

Think about it: a free will (the capacity to choose) is the basis for real love. You can force someone to obey you, or fear you, or do what you want them to do, but you cannot force someone to love you. Love exists only when someone chooses, without coercion, to give their affection, devotion, attention, and adoration to someone. That is what makes love

so delightful and pleasurable.

God wants to be loved by us. Not because he has a deficiency that we can meet or a void that we can fill, but because it gives him joy and pleasure to have a reciprocal relationship with his creatures that are made in his image. Paul said it this way when he was addressing the Athenian philosophers: (22) God made us so that we *“would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us”* (Acts 17:27).

So, it brings God pleasure when we choose, voluntarily, to draw near to him in order to discover who he is, in order to know him, find him, be with him, listen to him, communicate with him, spend time with him, seek his counsel or his guidance or his comfort or his protection. This is why he created us.

Let me illustrate: Six years ago, our son and daughter-in-law came home from Cambodia where they were then living and brought with them a virtual stranger to us—their (23) 11-month-old son, True—our one and only grandchild at the time.

Though I was more than a little excited about this visit, I was (24) not prepared for what that little boy would do to my heart and my soul—how quickly he would capture my heart, how deeply I would fall in love with him, how much pleasure he would give me. Every day of the seven weeks they were with us I could not wait to get out of bed each morning. I found that no matter how late I had stayed up the night before, whenever I heard True wake up, which was always between 4:30 and 5:00, I would literally jump out of bed and run to his crib, (25) so I could be the first one to hold him and spend time with him. I would play with him, read to him, try to make him laugh, try to get him to imitate the sound of the cat meowing, the dog barking,

and the birds chirping. At night when I put him to bed, I would sing to him. I made up songs about him—about how much I loved him; about how much he meant to me. And sometimes I would sit in the room after he fell asleep and pray for him so intently that tears would stream down my face.

But what blew me away, what surprised me, what exponentially magnified my joy and pleasure is that this less-than-a-year-old boy reciprocated my love. (26) *He absolutely adored me!* Every time I walked into the room and True saw me, he would break into a big smile and stretch his arms out toward me so I could hold him. And when he was in my arms, he seemed so content, so calm, so happy. Often, in fact, when someone took him from my arms he would fuss—(27) he would reach back for *me* as though I was the only one who could satisfy him.

I would submit to you that this is why the first and greatest commandment is that we love God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind. God made us to bring him joy and pleasure as we choose to reach out for him and reciprocate his attention and affection simply because we *want* to be with him, we *want* to connect with him, we *want* to enjoy him.

(28) So how do we love God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind? It's not rocket science. It's actually quite simple. Delightfully simple. (29) Ask him to reveal his love for you. Ask him to show you how much he loves you.

During that summer six years ago, there was quite a bit of conjecture on both sides of the family about why True was so attached to me, specifically, because it was so obvious. Someone said it was because I looked like his dad. Someone said it was because I was taller than everyone else and he wanted

to be held high. Someone suggested that my voice was soothing. (30) Most people said it because I would not *let* anyone else hold him.

I have a theory that no one contemplated in those conversations, but I think I'm right. (31) True adored me because he knew how much I adored him. It was as simple as that. True was drawn to me, attracted to me, attached to me because he knew his grandpa was head over heels over him.

The best way—maybe the only way—to develop (32) a wholehearted love for God is to discover his wholehearted love for you. The songwriter said it so well. “Jesus I am resting, resting, in the joy of what Thou art. For I am finding out the greatness of Thy loving heart.” That was Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians. (33) That being rooted and established in love they might have the power to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know that love that surpasses knowledge, that they might be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God (Eph. 3:17-19).

Thirty or forty years after Paul wrote these words, Jesus addressed this same church. It’s a new generation of believers and followers of Jesus. He begins by commending them for their hard work, their faithfulness, their discernment and intolerance of false teaching, and their perseverance during hardships. These are all good things, important things, necessary things. But they are not the very best things.

He says, “I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love” (Revelation 2:4). For some reason, their love for Jesus and the Father had waned, and it was so grievous to Jesus that he told them if they did not repent, he would extinguish their light in the city. And that is eventually what happened. The

church at Ephesus ceased to exist.

Love for God is the first thing, the best thing, and the greatest thing. It is what brings him the most joy and pleasure.

The Whole Law in One Word **Matthew 22:34-40**

Main Idea: *Loving God and others summarizes the entire Law*

The Question about the Law (34-36)

The Pharisees and their spokesman (34-35)

The test of Jesus' theological reasoning skill (36)

The Summation of the Law (37-40)

Jesus' uncharacteristic direct answer

Jesus' recitation of "The Shema" (37)

The familiarity of this passage

A wholehearted love for God

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Jesus' recitation of Lev. 19:18, 34 (38-39)

"Love your neighbor as yourself"

What about self-love?

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Pastor Stan Myers
Who is my neighbor?

Jesus' analysis of the entire Law and Prophets (40)

Application