

## The Greatest Commandment

Matthew 22:34-39

Introduction:

Matthew 22 places us in the final days of Jesus' earthly ministry. The Tension in Jerusalem is rising and the religious leaders are attempting to discredit Him through a series of questions. They approach Jesus with a series of carefully constructed questions as they tried to trap Him publicly. The Pharisees ask about taxes to Caesar, the Sadducees ask about the resurrection, and now a lawyer asks a question about the Law.

Matthew 22:36 records the question: *“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?”*

To understand why this question mattered, we must remember that Jewish teachers identified 613 commandments within the Mosaic Law. Rabbis frequently debated generation after generation which commandments were greater and which were lesser. Some categorized them as “heavy” commands and “light” commands. These debates could be incredibly complex.

But Jesus cuts through the debate and gives a clear answer.

He quotes Deuteronomy 6:5, a verse that every faithful Jew knew well:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.”

Jesus was not merely selecting one command from the Law. He was revealing the foundation of the entire Law. He was not simplifying the law, but rather revealing the heart behind it. Love for God is the principle that gives meaning to every other command.

Jesus then adds the second command from Leviticus 19:18—to love one’s neighbor as oneself. In verse 40 Jesus explains that all the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commands.

In other words, if we truly understand love for God, we understand the heart of everything God requires.

Before we dive into how to love God with our heart, soul, and mind, we must understand what love is:

### **What is love?**

The word translated “love” in Matthew 22:37 is the Greek word *agape*. This is one of the most important terms in the New Testament the across the Bible because it describes the kind of love that originates and comes from God Himself.

Greek word *agape* means: Christian love, especially as distinct from erotic love or emotional affection. This word describes the highest and most selfless form of love. Unlike other forms of love, *agapē* is not primarily an emotion. It is a commitment of the will that seeks the good of another regardless of personal cost.

Thomas McCall said that to truly love God is to desire His well being and to promote His true flourishing as much as you can.”

Our culture today will often describe love as a feeling. People say they “fall in love” or “fall out of love”. This way, it’s a view that love is treated as something unstable and that is solely dependent on circumstances, emotions, and feelings. These constantly change, but God’s love never changes!

The Bible teaches that this love originates with God Himself. It's rooted in commitment rather than a feeling.

1 John 4:10 says:

“In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

God's love is not reactive—it is initiating. Notice the order here...love begins with God. He didn't wait for humanity to become worthy of His affection, but rather He loved us while we were still sinners.

Romans 5:8 reinforces this truth:

“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Think about how unusual this is. In our day to day relationships, people often love others because those people they love are loveable. They are kind, helpful, favorable, or beneficial in some way.

But God loved humanity when humanity was rebellious and sinful. This means that biblical love is sacrificial.

The clearest picture of *agapē* love is the cross. Christ gave Himself completely for the salvation of sinners. The cross is the ultimate expression of love. Jesus willingly sacrificed Himself to redeem the world, so sinners could be forgiven, and our relationship with God could be restored.

Jesus describes this love again in John 15:13: “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.”

When Jesus commands us to love God, He is not speaking about sentimental feelings. He is describing a deliberate devotion that shapes every part of life. True love for God produces obedience. It's having a total devotion.

Jesus said in John 14:15: "If you love Me, keep My commandments."

Love is therefore the motivation for obedience.

The apostle Paul describes the nature of this love in 1 Corinthians 13:4–7, where he explains that love is patient, kind, humble, and enduring. Understanding *agapē* is crucial because it defines everything that follows. When Jesus calls us to love God with heart, soul, and mind, He is calling us to a complete, total, and sacrificial devotion to God in every area of our life.

So what are we supposed to do with this love?

Jesus gives 3 ways of how we are to love God.

### **Here are 3 ways to love God:**

#### **1. We must love God with all our heart.**

In Scripture, the heart refers to the center of a person's inner life. It includes emotions, desires, affections, and motives.

Proverbs 4:23 warns: "Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life."

Everything we do flows from what we love most. Our actions reflect our hearts.

If someone loves sports, they may wake up early to watch games, spend hours studying statistics, and plan their schedule around events.

For me, I love golf! I grew up playing golf since I was little. I would go out to the course with my Dad and my brother. I spent a lot of time, effort, studying and hard work out on the golf course to be the best golfer I could be. I did some math and over the 8 years I played competitive golf (from middle school team up until my college golf team) I played in around 150 tournaments. To prepare for these tournaments I would practice 5-6 days a week, for 4-5 hours each day, for 8 years which is around 10,000 hours of practice! That's not even including the time for tournaments I've played in. I even work at Golfballs.com in a management position for our sales team. All of this to say I love golf. I love the history, the competition, the tradition, and the hard work it takes to be great! Let me make something clear...my treasure is not golf. My treasure is Christ. There's a difference here and don't misunderstand me when I say this. God has given each of us desires, talents, and abilities to be used for building His kingdom and showing His glory. I do enjoy golf a lot and the Lord has blessed me with the opportunity to work in the golf industry. God has called me and you to build His kingdom and to love Him, and one way I'm able to accomplish this is with the skill and passion for golf that He has given me. I can use golf to make Him known by sharing the gospel in conversations with competitors, by having a good attitude on good and bad rounds, by how I carry myself, and by how I lead my coworkers. Are you stewarding your gifts, talents, interests, and passions for your own gain, or are you surrendering them to the Lord and using them to glorify, honor and love Him with all your heart? Jesus Himself taught this in Matthew 6:21: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Our hearts will always follow what we value most...

If our treasure is wealth, our heart will pursue wealth.

If our treasure is pleasure, our heart will pursue pleasure.

If their treasure is power, their heart will pursue power and influence.

But the greatest commandment calls us to treasure God above everything else. Loving God with all of our heart means that God comes before that one object that steals our affection and sits in the place He rightfully deserves. Our deepest desire should be directed toward Him.

The Psalms frequently describe this kind of love.

Psalm 42:1–2 says: “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.”

This imagery describes deep spiritual longing. The psalmist desires God as desperately as a thirsty deer desires water.

Similarly, Psalm 73:25 declares: “Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You.”

That is the language of a heart fully devoted to God.

The Pharisees had lost this kind of devotion. Their religion had become external. They focused on rules, traditions, and appearances while their hearts remained distant from God.

Jesus rebuked this problem in Matthew 15:8:

“These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me.”

This warning still applies today. It is possible to attend church, sing worship songs, and participate in ministry while the heart remains cold toward God.

True love for God involves affection and delight in Him.

Psalm 37:4 says: “Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart.”

It says delight yourself in the Lord. When the heart loves God, obedience becomes joyful rather than burdensome. Think about something you enjoy doing. It could be spending time with family, gardening, projects, or sports. You don’t force yourself to do the things you love. Because you delight in doing those things and love it. This is what your love for God should look like.

When we truly love God, time with Him is something we deeply desire and enjoy!

## **2. We must love God with all our Soul.**

The soul refers to the essence of our life—our being, identity, and existence.

Loving God with the soul means that our entire life belongs to Him.

Deuteronomy 10:12 describes this kind of devotion: “And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.”

This love involves commitment and loyalty.

Joshua later challenged Israel with a similar call in Joshua 24:15: “Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve... But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

Loving God with the soul means making a decisive commitment to live for Him. Every person will eventually choose what will control their life. Choosing to love God with our soul means making a commitment that God will be the center of our life. This influences our priorities, relationships, and our values.

The Psalms frequently describe the soul's devotion to God.

Psalm 103:1 says: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name."

Here the psalmist calls upon the deepest part of his being to praise God.

Loving God with the soul also means remaining faithful in hardship.

Consider the example of Job. This is a beautiful picture of how Job, after losing everything declared in Job 13:15: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him."

That statement reveals a soul devoted to God regardless of circumstances.

Jesus demonstrated perfect love for the Father with His soul.

In Luke 22:42, He prayed in Gethsemane: "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done."

That prayer reveals the essence of loving God with the soul—complete surrender to God's will.

### **3. We must love God with all our mind.**

Jesus also commands us to love God with our mind.

The mind refers to our thoughts, understanding, reasoning, and intellectual life.

Jesus includes the mind because loving God is not merely emotional—it is also intellectual.

This reminds us that loving God means having thoughts that glorify Him and that think deeply about truth. God created the human mind so we could know Him and understand His truth.

Jesus emphasized the importance of truth in John 17:17: “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.”

Loving God with the mind means pursuing knowledge of God through His Word.

Psalm 1:2 describes the righteous person as one whose: “Delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night.”

Meditation means thoughtful reflection. Meditation involves thoughtful reflection on Scripture so that it shapes our thinking. When we love God with our minds we have a true understanding of His words and commands that continually encourage and fill us. His word is good for our minds and thoughts so that we are focused on Christ. It’s part of our daily nourishment as a Christ follower. This verse never mentions a point as to which we are not to meditate on His word. It says day and night which means it is all day and everyday.

The apostle Paul emphasizes the same principle in Romans 12:2: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

Our minds must be reshaped by biblical truth rather than worldly philosophies. We must intentionally fill our minds with the truth.

Paul also explains in 2 Corinthians 10:5 that believers must take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.

Loving God with the mind also involves defending the truth of the gospel.

1 Peter 3:15 instructs believers to: “Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you.”

This requires careful study and thoughtful understanding of the faith. This could happen when a coworker asks you about why you believe in God or when a friend questions your values. I promise you if you haven't been asked this, you will and you need to be ready. Growing up in school, we had to take a home ec class and a part of that class was cooking. We were put into groups for the semester that would get assigned to each kitchen and we would learn cooking methods, culinary history, and preparing foods. I enjoyed it because we got to eat haha! One day a guy in my group right before the bell rang for our next class had asked me, “Caleb, why are you so different? What makes you different from everyone else and why do you act the way you do?” And my response was silence....to which I followed up with it's just who I am. The bell rang right after that and we left without having a gospel conversation. I felt awful and I didn't share the truth with him. I didn't share with Him what the Lord had given me and I knew the truth. I wasn't prepared like I should've been and that was the first time I had been asked that question. I made it my goal to never allow this to happen again. The best way to practice and prepare for apologetics is to study God's word and owning your faith in the Lord.

Christianity invites believers to love God through deeply engaging our minds to fully pursue His truth.

### 3 Tips to Grow in the Love of God:

#### 1. Grow in Your Knowledge of God Through Scripture

**Psalm 119:97:**

*"Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day."*

**The more we know God, the more we come to love Him.** Just like in our relationships, the more we learn about someone, their character, and their heart, the deeper our love and appreciation for them becomes. I think about when Carter and I first met. The first few months we were friends we learned the basics about each other over ping pong, facetime, and meeting up at BCM. But as we started dating, got engaged, and are now married we learn the deeper things like our character, our values, our struggles, and how best love one another. The deeper we know one another, the deeper our love grows for each other.

**The same principle applies with our relationship with God.** When we dive into scripture, we're not just reading words on a page, but this is the word of God. We are learning more about the character of God. We can see His holiness in creation. His mercy and patience with sinners, and His grace displayed on the cross. Every page of scripture reveals something about who God is. The more we read, the more clearly we see Him, and our love for Him grows naturally.

**Many Christians struggle in fully loving God, because their knowledge of Him is so small.** Imagine trying to deeply love someone you barely know. That would be very difficult. It takes time, dedication, and a desire to grow. You need to have a quiet time! Mine is every day in my truck on my lunch break. When we spend time His word, take notes, highlight verses about sin, his character, truths in the Bible, we can see the beauty

of God's character. We then have an awakening in our hearts and it fuels our love for Him.

## **2. Communication through Prayer and Worship.**

Psalm 63:1: "O God, You are my God; early will I seek You; my soul thirsts for You; my flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water."

Relationships grow through communication. Prayer is conversation with God and making our prayers and requests known to Him. If there's no communication, this leads to the relationship being distant and crumbling. Praying allows us to be honest with God about our praise and adoration for Him, our thanksgiving, and also our fears and struggles.

Worshiping Him expresses our love and commitment to Him. It helps nurture our relationship and express our love for Him. A believer who regularly seeks God in prayer and develops a daily quiet time will be able to see how the Lord cares for them and are aware.

## **3. Obedience and Service to God.**

Jesus made this clear when He said in John 14:15: "If you love Me, keep My commandments."

Love is shown and proven by action. Just as love for family is shown through sacrifice and care, our love for God is demonstrated through obedience to Him. Obedience is one of the clearest demonstrations of love.

Imagine a child who says to their parents I love you, but constantly ignores their instructions and refuses to listen. Eventually the parents might say, "If you truly loved us, you would listen to what we are asking."

Love naturally produces obedience.

But there is another important truth here: obedience not only demonstrates love, it also deepens love.

When believers choose to follow God's commands, they begin to see the wisdom of His ways. Over time, obedience reveals the goodness of God's design for life. And as believers experience that goodness, their love for God grows stronger. Service also plays an important role in deepening love for God. When believers serve others in God's name—helping the needy, encouraging the discouraged, caring for those who are hurting—they begin to reflect the heart of God. And in those moments, they often discover something remarkable: serving others draws them closer to God.

Love grows stronger when it is expressed through action.

### **Invitation:**

Imagine someone wearing an expensive watch that has stopped working. The watch may look impressive. It may shine and sparkle. But if it no longer keeps time, it has lost its purpose.

A relationship with God without love is like that broken watch.

It may look impressive on the outside. There may be rituals, traditions, and outward appearances of spirituality. But if love for God is missing, the entire system loses its purpose.

Jesus did not come to create another religious system. He came to restore a relationship between God and humanity.

That relationship is built on love.

Jesus' answer in Matthew 22 reveals the essence of true devotion to God.

We are called to love God with:

**Our heart** – our deepest affections.

**Our soul** – our entire life and identity.

**Our mind** – our thoughts and understanding.

This love begins with understanding the nature of *agapē*—a sacrificial, committed devotion rooted in God's own character.

When believers truly love God in this way, obedience flows naturally.

The greatest commandment therefore invites us to examine our lives.

God loved so much that He became humble to the point of death! John 3:16 says, "For God loved the world in this way:<sup>[a]</sup> He gave<sup>[b]</sup> his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." Romans 3:23-24 says, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,<sup>24</sup> and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." The cross represents the love, forgiveness, and sacrifice that Jesus showed us. Our lives should represent Him and reflect the love of the one who was first loved us! Romans 10:13 says, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Sin leads to death and God wanted to provide us a way out! He wanted a restored relationship with us and the opportunity to spend eternal life with Him! It cost God something...His one and only Son Jesus! He did this for our good! Now, we and God both can have joy forever for those who put their faith and trust in Him! I invite you this morning to put your faith and trust in Jesus, see the Lord's love, and begin to live a life for Him.

If you're a Christian, this morning I ask you...*Who has God placed in my life whose needs I am uniquely positioned to meet to meet with love? What does my love reveal about my heart? Is my love genuine? Is my love flowing from gratitude for the gospel?*