

## Chapter 93: The Great Commandment

*Matthew 22:34–40*

Although the world hates God’s Word, the world talks endlessly about something close to the heart of the Bible: “love.” Many urge us to reject all the rules in the Bible in favor for the deeper message of “love” held out in the Bible’s pages. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day had a different value system. They loved the rules of the Bible and often forgot about the urgency of love. Can we have law without love? Or, can we have love without law? Against both views, Jesus insists that true love is characterized by obedience to the commands of the Bible. The law and love are not in opposition, but two sides of the same coin: *love is the fulfilling of the law* (Rom. 13:10).

### Ranking the Commandments (Matt. 22:34–36)

After Jesus had dispatched the question of the Pharisees and the Herodians, the Sadducees had brought their own challenge to Jesus on the same day (Matt. 22:23). Seemingly still on the same day, the Pharisees regroup after Jesus had rejected the logic of the Sadducees by affirming the necessity of the resurrection, a doctrine which the Pharisees personally believed and taught (Acts 23:8).<sup>1</sup> Even so, the Pharisees do not approach Jesus as a possible ally to be gained, but they continue to regard Jesus as an enemy who now has dispatched some of the most difficult challenges from the major players in Jerusalem at the time.<sup>2</sup> By the word “test” (or “tempt”) in v. 35, Matthew particularly makes clear the adversarial intentions of the Pharisees as they approach him.<sup>3</sup> Rather than sending disciples to do their bidding, the Pharisees send a “lawyer,” that is, an expert in their doctrines rather than an apprentice.<sup>4</sup>

On the surface, the question that this lawyer poses to Jesus seems simple enough: “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” (v. 36). This question, however, “reflects and intra-Jewish debate on how to rank and/or summarize all of the scriptural commandments and on whether such ranking is in fact possible at all (cf., e.g., *m. Hag.* 1:8. *b. Ber.* 63A; *Mek.* 6).”<sup>5</sup> Morris explains the situation well:

The rabbis divided the commandments in the law into the light and the weighty. They did not mean that some commandments were so slight that they could be neglected. All the commandments were God’s, and therefore all were to be treated with full seriousness. But

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<sup>1</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 877.

<sup>2</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 807–08.

<sup>3</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 562.

<sup>4</sup> Carson, “Matthew,” 522.

<sup>5</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 334.

obviously some commandments were more important than others; the command to do no murder is more important than that which prohibits boiling a kid in its mother's milk (Deut. 14:21). That opened up the way for speculation as to which of all the 613 commandments that the rabbis found in the law was to be regarded as the greatest of them all. This is another question that must have looked to the questioner as though it should give matter for argument and controversy no matter what answer Jesus gave. There is no objective yardstick for measuring one commandment against another, so that whatever commandment Jesus selected for the first place would certainly have been placed lower by others. The lawyer was initiating a discussion that might lead anywhere and that in his view would certainly provide a strong possibility of damaging Jesus' reputation.<sup>6</sup>

The reason for appointing a lawyer to pose this question to Jesus was to create a no-win situation for him. Whatever Jesus said, the lawyer should have been able to humiliate Jesus by playing devil's advocate.

Indeed, this question did not care in the least about holiness or obedience to God's law. This question was, instead, an exercise in legalism, since legalism thrives on creating a false system that elevates one legal principle in order to diminish the importance of another. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus points this out from a number of perspectives. The Pharisees diminished the evil of anger and anger, so long as no physical murder or adultery was committed (Matt. 5:21–30). Then, they diminished the cruelty of divorce, so long as the right paperwork was filed (Matt. 5:31–32). Further, they diminished the wickedness of bearing false witness, so long as the right formulas were used (Matt. 5:33–37). Finally, they diminished the requirements of personal ethics by extending the *lex talionis* principle from judicial settings to personal vendettas, and by permitting hatred against an enemy (Matt. 5:38–47). In each of these cases, they sought to defend their magisterial interpretation of the Scriptures, by which they created a system that justified their loveless sin by appealing to supposedly higher legal principles that trumped other concerns.

The Sadducees, by contrast, embraced a minimalistic view of the law because they “rejected all the Pharisaic commandments that were not plainly written in the law, all those that were only the tradition of the fathers. This was one form of their skepticism.”<sup>7</sup> They limited the Scriptures that they considered fully authoritative to the Torah alone, and then they dismissed any commandments that were not clearly articulated in Scripture. We should notice, though, that the legalism of the Pharisees ended up in the same place: downplaying the significance of the weighty *implications* of the law. The Sadducees did this by a skeptical interpretive process that refused to acknowledge the full authority of the Scriptures. The Pharisees, however, did this by a clever theological method that allowed them to assign varying weight to the differing commands, according to their preferences.

## Reunifying the Commandments (Matt. 22:37–39)

In previous interactions with the Pharisees, Jesus has responded to the questions of the religious leaders in various ways. When the chief priests and elders of the people asked him by what authority he did the things he was doing, he posed his own question to them, and then, when they declined to

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<sup>6</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 562–63.

<sup>7</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 879.

answer his question, he too declined to answer their question (Matt. 21:23–27). When the Pharisees asked him whether it was lawful for Jews to pay the Roman tax, Jesus admonished their hypocrisy and then offered an innovative solution that neither affirmed nor rejected the lawfulness of paying the tax (Matt. 22:15–22). Then, when the Sadducees had asked him a thorny question about the resurrection marital status of a woman married multiple times over by levirate marriage, Jesus rebuked them for knowing neither the Scriptures nor the power of God (Matt. 22:23–33). In each of these cases, Jesus acknowledges and rebukes (in one way or another) their antagonism to him as he answers (or works his way out of answering) their question.

This situation, however, is notably different. Although they meant “to test him” (v. 35), Jesus answers their question directly and straightforwardly, without any kind of rebuke at all. This suggests that, while the intent behind the question may not have been good, the question itself was something Jesus was pleased to address. Whereas the legal wrangling of the Pharisees interacted with the question in order to diminish the implications of the law, Jesus shows that the binding principle that supports the entirety of the law requires perfect love toward God and toward other people.

So, first Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:5: “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” (vv. 37–38). The fact that Jesus uses the word “mind” rather than the original word, “strength,” has generated significant discussion among the commentators. This is not an error or a misquotation, but simply a synonym that allows Jesus to *apply* the commandment to the current situation. The lawyer was prepared to use his mind to argue for a diminished requirement of the law, whereas Jesus says that the great and first commandment requires us to use the entirety of the strength of our minds toward wrestling with how to love God better. The primary emphasis is on the repeated word “whole,” which the ESV translates as “all”: “The word ‘whole’ in the three phrases receives great emphasis because of its very repetition. God will have no mere part, allow no division or subtraction. Not even the smallest corner is to be closed against God. The whole heart, the seat of our personality; the whole soul, our sentient being itself; and the whole mind, the entire activity of this our being is to turn to God in love.”<sup>8</sup>

Then, Jesus quotes Leviticus 19:18: “And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (v. 39). In each of the legal issues that Jesus had addressed in Matthew 5, the Pharisees had diminished the legal requirement by downplaying the necessity of love in order to justify mere external conformity to the law. This second commandment, however, sets the true requirements of the law in sharp relief with such a reductionistic approach. Just as we do not love ourselves only in external ways, but from the depths of our souls, so also we must not love others externally, but in the same way that we love ourselves. This legal principle raises the bar significantly.

## Reconciling the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 22:40)

Matthew records the fact that Jesus does not merely assert these commands as of the highest significance, but that he uses them to orient the entirety of the Old Testament: “On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (v. 40). The idea of “depend” here communicates the image that these two commandments “is the peg on which the whole ‘law and the

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<sup>8</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 880–81.

prophets' hang. Remove that peg, and all is lost, for the entire Old Testament, with its commandments and covenants, prophecies and promises, types and testimonies, invitations and exhortations, points to the love of God which demands the answer of love in return."<sup>9</sup>

On the legal level, we may see that these two commandments give a proper summary of the two tables of the enduring moral law, as given in the Ten Commandments.<sup>10</sup> The Ten Commandments offer a comprehensive summary of the full scope of God's moral law, and these two commandments give those Ten Commandments in a nutshell.<sup>11</sup> As we study these two principles, they help us to bring the fullness of the demands of the law into focus.

We should note, however, that Jesus does not only tell us that these two commands summarize the Law, but also "the Prophets. It is hard to translate into English, but the way Jesus says this puts a primary emphasis on the Law, with a secondary and auxiliary emphasis on the Prophets: "On these two commandments depends the whole Law...and the Prophets" (my translation). Note specifically that I have translated this as "depends" (singular) rather than "depend" (plural). In the grammar of the passage, "the whole Law" is treated as the singular subject of the verb, not "the whole Law and the Prophets" as a plural subject. As Nolland notes, Matthew has already brought out the way in which Jesus connected the Law and Prophets closely together (Matt. 5:17).<sup>12</sup> It is not only, therefore, that Jesus shows the Pharisees that their legalistic system of interpretation was broken. Additionally, he shows that the Sadducees were wrong to reject the Prophets in favor of the exclusive dependence on the Law.

## Discussion Questions

1. How did the Pharisees react to Jesus' silencing of the Sadducees (v. 34)? Why did the Pharisees send a lawyer to engage with Jesus in this confrontation (v. 35)? What deeper debate among Jewish rabbis does the lawyer open up with his question in v. 36? Why did the Pharisees try to rank the commandments? How does this fit in with their larger project of legalism? Why did this question put Jesus in a very difficult position?
2. How had Jesus answered the various groups of religious leaders who had challenged him in the past? What do you think we should make of the fact that Jesus does not rebuke this lawyer, and that Jesus also gives a very straightforward answer to the question? In what way do the commands that Jesus cites here function as the first and second great commandments (vv. 37–39)? How do these commandments stress internal and external love for God and for neighbor?
3. In what sense does the whole Law depend on these two commandments (v. 40)? How does this idea of dependence contrast with the Pharisees idea of a hierarchy of laws? Why does Jesus add that the Prophets also depend on these commandments? How does this idea contrast with the biblical minimalism of the Sadducees? How does Jesus reunify and reconcile the whole Bible under a single ethical principle of love?

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<sup>9</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 810.

<sup>10</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 843.

<sup>11</sup> See *Westminster Larger Catechism*, #98.

<sup>12</sup> Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 913.

4. How does the gospel clarify that we love because God first loved us (1 John 4:19)? Where is the love of God seen most clearly (1 John 4:10)? How does the world define “love”? How do God’s commandments define “love”? What person do you need to pray for God to transform your heart to love him or her? What action do you need to take to serve someone with the love of God? What are you justifying as “love” right now that is really some form of pride or selfishness?