

The Priority of Loving God *Matthew 22:34-40*

As some of you know, woodworking is something of a serious hobby for me. I primarily make Windsor chairs. The upper part of a Windsor chair is made by steam bending a piece of wood. And the best wood to bend is “green wood,” meaning wood that hasn’t been dried in a kiln. All that to say, I begin with a freshly-cut log.

The ideal log is one that is straight, no knots, and no twists. I have a logger, Gary, in Missouri who knows exactly what I need. He finds a tree that looks like it fits that bill, cuts it down. Almost all the logs I’ve gotten from Gary over the years have been amazing. But you never really know how good the log is until you split it open.

In November Gary cut down a white oak log and left it for me at a sawmill in Wathena, KS. I went over with a friend to split it up and haul it back to my house. My friend documented me splitting the log:



You begin by driving a wedge into the end of the log (Photo #1). Notice that the crack is perpendicular to the ground. Then you chase the crack down the length of the log (Photo #2). That’s when I began to get concerned. By the time I got to the other end of the log (Photo #3), the crack was almost parallel with the ground. The last photo (Photo #4) shows me looking at my twisted log thinking, “Working with this log is going to be trouble.”

I’ll spare you the details of how hard it was to split and rive and shape the pieces that needed to be bent. I got the pieces I needed, but that log was about ten times harder than it would have been without that twist. Two salient points: 1) you don’t know what a log is like until you split it open, and 2) whatever you find, that’s what you’ve got to work with.

I tell you this riveting story to introduce our 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting which begins tomorrow. For the next three weeks we are going to seek God concerning our hearts. Just like that log you don’t know what’s inside your heart until you look inside. We will be

asking God to show us if there is anything in our hearts that keeps us from loving Him, from loving each other, and from loving our neighbors. As disciples of Jesus, it's not enough merely doing a bunch of Christian activities. Rather, we are called to love God with our hearts, love one another fervently from the heart, and love our neighbors as ourselves. These are matters of the heart. If we want to love from the heart, we will need to see what's inside our hearts, the good and the bad.

And just like that log, whatever you find in your heart is what you've got to work with. That's your starting point. We all have defects in our hearts because of many factors: the sins we've committed, our response to the sins that have been committed against us, our families of origin, our culture, etc. The temptation is to look at others and think, "If I had all the advantages they have, my life would be so much easier. . ." That may be the case in some ways, but your life is the only one you've got. Your heart is the only one you've got; and it's YOUR heart that God wants to transform so that you can love Him and others more fully and more joyfully.

During this 21 Day experience, the Sunday messages will introduce loving God, loving one another, and loving our neighbors. The daily Scripture readings and meditations will help you evaluate what's in your heart and will help you understand how God wants to transform your heart.

Cultivating hearts that love will be demanding, but so worth it. Today we're going to talk about the priority of loving God from the passage read earlier, Matthew 22:34-40.

The previous paragraph in Matthew 22 records an encounter between Jesus and the Sadducees (a sect within Judaism). The Sadducees had tried to entrap Jesus with a question, but Jesus silenced them by pointing out that they neither understood the Scriptures nor the power of God. We read this in verse 34:

34 But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together.

The Pharisees were another sect within Judaism. They loved the Hebrew Scriptures. But their words and actions suggest that they didn't love the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Pharisees designated a representative to try to entrap Jesus.

35 One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him,

This man would have been a theologian and an expert in the Old Testament law. Here's his question for Jesus:

36 "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?"

This question comes out of a debate in Jesus' day. The rabbis counted up 613 individual commands/statutes in the Law (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible), 365 being negative (one for each day of the year) and 248 being positive. They distinguished

commands which were “great” or “heavy” from those that were “little” or “light.” Given those distinctions, they debated which commandment was the greatest or weightiest.

Jesus Himself made such distinctions between various OT commands. In the next chapter of Matthew Jesus points out that the Pharisees tithe from their herbs (a relative light-weight requirement) while “neglecting the weightier provision of the law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness” (Matthew 23:23). And so Jesus gladly answers the Pharisee’s question.

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.’

Out of everything that’s found in the Law, Jesus points back to **loving God** as the greatest. Jesus had 612 other commands from which to choose, and He chose this one. . . . a relational command, a command that tells us how we should treat God. We’ll come back to this in a few minutes, but first let’s briefly talk about the next three verses.

38 “This is the great and foremost commandment.

It’s “the great and foremost commandment” in the sense that it must take priority over all other commandments. We’ll see in why that’s the case in verse 40. But in verse 39 Jesus mentions the “second” command (even though the Pharisee only asked for one):

39 “The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

Jesus is here quoting from Leviticus 19:18. We’ll discuss loving our neighbor as ourselves in a couple weeks. But it’s significant what Jesus says about **both** of these commandments in verse 40.

40 “On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”

Jesus had been asked about the great commandment in **the Law**, but He answers in relation to the **the Law and the Prophets** which referred to the entire Hebrew Bible. A literal translation would be, “On these two commands **hang** the whole Law and the Prophets.” In other words, if you don’t love God and love your neighbor, the rest of Scripture will fall to the ground. For example, the Pharisees were largely mean people (although there were exceptions) who didn’t love God or other people. Their giving, praying, and sacrificing were an expression of pride, not an expression of love. Therefore God didn’t take pleasure in them; and the people under their leadership felt “weighed down” and burdened by the way they “enforced the Law.”

Let’s spend the rest of our time thinking about what it means to love God as the first and foremost command. Let’s look at the details back in Matthew 22:37.

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.’

Jesus was quoting from Deuteronomy 6. This is part of a prayer known as the *Shema*, a prayer that pious Jews recite every morning and evening. I guess the first thing to notice is that this is a **command** to “love the Lord **your** God.” In what sense is the Lord/YHWH **our** God?

One of the best questions I’ve ever been asked was from a guy who started coming to church for the first time in his life about about ten or twelve years ago. We had sung the song *Give Us Clean Hands* which contains the line, “Oh, God let us be a generation that seeks, Who seeks Your face, Oh God of Jacob.” His question was, “Who is ‘the God of Jacob’?” He was like, “Jacob’s got his own God? and we should seek **His** face? That was such a great question because I had never considered the significance of Scripture speaking of “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Or Moses speaking to the nation of Israel about loving “the Lord **your** God.” (See also Psalm 18:1-3 - David spoke of the Lord as my. . .)

So what’s going on here? Basically if the Lord/YHWH is “your God,” you are **in covenant** with Him. In Genesis 17:7-8, for example, the Lord told Abraham:

7 “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. 8 “I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

God was **their** God because they were bound to Him by covenant. It’s not a matter of possession but of covenant. [In a similar way, Brenda is my wife because we are bound together by the covenant of marriage.] In the same way all who have entered into the new covenant in Jesus’ blood can say, “The Lord is **our** God.” In Jeremiah 31, one of God’s promises to all who enter into this new covenant is stated this way:

33 “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

If by covenant God is our God and we are His people, we can be confident that He will be faithful to us; He will do everything He’s promised. We live with the knowledge that He has already paid the highest price imaginable to remove our sin from us as far as the east is from the west. He is writing His word on our hearts. He indwells us through the promised Holy Spirit. He literally could not love you more fully than He does.

In that context, the command to love the Lord **your** God is a command to **respond** to His love with love. This was true in the old covenant (see Deuteronomy 7:7) and it’s true in the new covenant. In 1 John 4:10, for example, we read:

10 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.

Later in 1 John 4 we read this:

19 We love, because He first loved us.

The more we understand the love that God has shown us in Jesus, the more we will love Him in return. If you perceive the love of God to be something ordinary or mundane or something that God does out of obligation. . . or if you think that God really doesn't love you very well. . . then you won't really see much reason to love Him in return. But if you are absolutely smitten with the love of God as demonstrated through Christ, you'll hear this command, "Love the Lord your God," and say, "Of course I will love my God because of His unfathomable love for me!"

That's why Paul prayed in Ephesians 3 that the believers in Ephesus. . .

18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

He prayed that they'd have the strength necessary to comprehend the enormity of the love of Christ - love that surpasses knowledge. It's a bit counterintuitive until you experience it: comprehending the love of God doesn't make you arrogant; it humbles you and makes you bow the knee in worship. Only when we understand that we are loved greatly by God will we love Him greatly in return.

Let's go back to Matthew 22:37 one more time, to see how comprehensively we are to love God:

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."

All your heart, **all** your soul, and **all** your mind. These terms (heart, soul, and mind) "are not mutually exclusive, but overlapping categories," (Carson, p. 464) which refer to our entire being. God wants us to love Him in a deep, comprehensive way. The alternative would be to love God in a Luke-warm and half-hearted way. William Hendriksen said it well when he wrote:

"The point is that God's whole-hearted love must not be answered in a half-hearted manner." (*Matthew*, p. 809)

If we had the time we could look at numerous Scriptures that make clear that if you love God you will also love Jesus. Why? Because Jesus is God in the flesh. (Some of these Scriptures are listed on in the sermon outline: John 8:42, John 5:42, John 14:9, John 1:14, Hebrews 1:3, Colossians 2:9.)

If you register for the 21 Day of Prayer and Fasting (on our web site, Church center app, online connection card), you will receive an email each day this week that will include a Scripture to read and meditation to view or read. If we let them, the daily Scripture

readings and meditations will help you evaluate whether or not we're loving God wholeheartedly and will help you understand how God wants you to love Him more fully.

Conclusion. Let me give one more perspective on loving God and Jesus. This perspective can help you if you're already a follower of Christ or if you're considering becoming a follower.

When Jesus went around teaching about living in His kingdom, He drew people to the kingdom by talking about the incomparable worth of what He was offering. In Matthew 13 He likened it to a man who found a treasure buried in a field. . . reburied it. . . and with JOY sold everything he had to buy that field. . . Jesus is like that *treasure*. People who understand that Jesus is offering an eternal treasure (Himself!) seek to love Him wholeheartedly.

If we seek to love God, paying attention to how we're treating Him, we will pursue our relationship with Him differently. We'll say:

- * I'm not merely committed to reading the Bible. Out of love for God, I will listen to God's voice and hang on His every word. I will savor it like lion growling over its prey.
- * I'm not merely "going to church" (in person or online). I am going to worship God because He is worthy.
- * I'm not going to view His commandments as burdensome and unreasonable and impossible. I am going to show my love for God by seeking His face and allowing Him to show me that His commands are for my good and His glory.
- * By His grace, I'm not going to be bitter toward God and hold grudges against Him and accuse Him of negligence in the way He's running my life and the world at large. No, I will learn to trust Him because He is faithful.

Our Prayer this week: Psalm 139:24-25:

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;
24 And see if there be any hurtful way in me,
And lead me in the everlasting way.