

“Love God and what’s his name”
Matthew 22:37-40

Introduction

- 1. Talk about a vicious, polarized political mess.** Liberals and conservatives. Moderates and extremists. Everyone has an opinion and is convinced with unwavering certainty about being right. There is the pay-the-taxes and move-on group. There is the patriotic-purist group. There are the strict constructionists and the progressive interpreters. There are the extremists who would rather fight to the death than give an inch to the opposition. And, there are those who don’t want anything to do with all the controversy and just stay home.
You would hope that all these groups could find some common ground, some sense of what is most important and then make all their politics subservient to the highest priority. In the middle of the mess we wonder what Jesus would say. What would Jesus tell us to do?
- 2. The answer is in Matthew 22:37-40.** It was the last week of Jesus’ life, between Palm Sunday when he triumphantly entered the capital city of Jerusalem and Friday when he was crucified.
The Sadducees were the strict constructionists. They were the conservatives. They insisted in going back to the founding documents of Judaism called the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. They rejected the authority of the rest of the Old Testament or any newfangled additions to the Law. The Sadducees were the party of the rich and powerful, including most of the priests at the temple.
The Pharisees were the liberals. They were always looking for new ways to interpret and add to the Pentateuch and came up with hundreds of rules and regulations that became so numerous and complicated that they were virtually impossible to live out.
The Herodians were the pro-tax party. Not that they liked taxes or wanted to pay their money to the government but they recognized the reality of Roman rule and decided to go along for the good of the people and the peace of the Empire.
The Zealots were the extremists. They were patriots who were willing to die for their country. Many carried weapons. They caucused with one-another with a no-compromise conviction.
The Essenes were the only ones who didn’t show up to debate with Jesus about all the political issues. Most of them lived in isolation out in the desert at places like Qumran where they had withdrawn from national politics. Just leave it all to God.
- 3. Group by group, question by question, Jesus talked to the conflicting parties.** He was brilliant. He was articulate. He was amazing. But, he didn’t convince them. Actually, he temporarily united some of them. Arch enemies who never agreed on much of anything came together to plot the crucifixion of the Son of God.
- 4. So, what did Jesus tell them about how to act in those troubled times?** Jesus had just astonished these political and religious leaders with his words when a lawyer stepped up to ask a gotcha question—you know, the kind of question you hear on TV or people post on their partisan blogs to trick and embarrass the opposition.

Matthew 22:34-40

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

5. **Jesus invited them all to cut through their entrenched positions and go to the first and highest principle.** It wasn’t just theory but action. Jesus wasn’t so much telling them what to think but what to do. All their arguments, all their laws, all their teachings go back to how they are supposed to act in the first place—get this right and everything else can fall into place. *“All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”*
6. **Jesus’ words may have been ignored by most of his listeners that day but as Christians we must listen.** Their entrenched positions were stronger than Jesus’ truth. But, for us as Christians, we want to listen and obey Jesus. Being a Christian is about *who we are* as followers of Jesus but also being a Christian is about *what we do* as followers of Jesus.
7. **Jesus gave one big truth tied up in two connected commandments:**
 - ① Love God—all the way
 - ② Love neighbor—as yourself

Love God—all the way

1. **Jesus was teaching them nothing new when he invited them to love God all the way.** His words are quoted from Deuteronomy 6:5 and are part of the *Shema of Israel*—words that are the creed of Judaism, the opening statement of Jewish services and the first scripture to be memorized by a Jewish child.¹

2. **Deuteronomy 6:1-9**

These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. Hear, O Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your fathers, promised you.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

3. **In other words, get this right and everything else will be okay. Get this wrong and nothing else will be okay.**
4. **To love God with all of our heart, soul and mind is not a three stage process.**
Jesus called us to love God fully, completely, wholeheartedly.
When I say to Charleen that “I love you with all my heart” there is no implied limitation that I don’t love her with my soul or mind.
We are to love God 100%.
5. **This is not primarily talking about how we feel or think but what we do.** Live love! Think and behave in ways that show God how much we love him. Show him on good days and bad days. Short-term and long-term. When we get what we want and when we are deeply disappointed. When we celebrate and when we grieve. *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”*
6. **Moses taught ancient Jews to bind these words on their hands and foreheads.**
Perhaps you have seen Jews with little black boxes that are called Tefillin or phylacteries that contain (among other Old Testament quotations) the words to love God completely.
Perhaps you’ve been to a Jewish home and seen a little container attached to the doorpost. It is called a Mezuzah (Hebrew for “doorpost”) and contains a small scroll with the words, *“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”*
We may think such ancient customs to be strange but I admire all who take these words of the Bible so seriously.
7. **Most important is that we are to constantly think and talk and live our love for God.** Tell your children to love God. Talk about loving God when sitting around the house. Talk about loving God when getting up in the morning. Talk about God when going for a walk. Talk about God when going to bed at night.
8. **We’ve all been around those who are in love and talk endlessly about him or her, a job, house, car, boat or garden.** In-love people are so full of whoever/whatever they love that they can’t shut up. That’s the way we are to love God.
9. **Let me be candid about this.** It is not to lay guilt on any of us but to make the point that Jesus taught.
How often do we talk about the weather? How often do we talk about politics? How often do we talk about sports? Someone could get the impression that we love the weather, politics and sports more than we love God.
So let’s come up with an action plan.
 - ① Tell God “I love you.” At least once a day, say the words. Out loud. “God, I love you!”
 - ② Tell others you love God. Simply say, “I’ve been thinking about what’s most important in life and how important God is to me. I really love God.”
 - ③ Speak God’s name with love. When a group of children was asked what love

means 4-year-old Billy said, *“When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know that your name is safe in their mouth.”*² God’s name is always safe in the mouth of those who fully love him.

④ Think of specific ways to show God that you love him. If you love a child you buy a toy. If you love a spouse you write a note or give some flowers. If you love God you do things that will make him happy.

⑤ Avoid behavior that hurts the God we love. Just as unfaithfulness in a marriage breaks the heart of a husband or wife, unfaithfulness to God breaks his heart. We act out our love for God by avoiding sin that we know offends and hurts him.

⑥ Make everything in life flow out of an all-consuming love for God. Take a class. Play a game. Drive a car. Go to church. Work a job. Make everything in life an expression of the love-of-your-life . . . the Lord your God.

Love neighbor—as yourself

1. Talking to the Sadducees, Pharisees, Zealots, Herodians and others, Jesus did not stop with his high and holy call to love God all the way. Jesus said, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”*

2. Jesus became powerfully practical when he linked our love for others to our love for God. Some may see this as a burden but God-lovers see this as a wonderful opportunity. After all, it can seem distant and abstract to passionately love God but it is close and personal to love our neighbors.

3. The call to love our neighbors originates in Leviticus 19:18 (“Love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.”) but most Jews in Jesus’ day thought that applied only to people like themselves. Jesus gave us a whole new perspective on the neighbor we are to love in the story of the Good Samaritan.

Luke 10:25-37

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

He answered: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver

coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

*The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”
Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”*

4. This story reveals so much of the heart of Jesus, what it means to love God and neighbor and how we are to live.

Jesus doesn’t condemn the man who was robbed and beaten although he probably should have known better than to travel such an infamously dangerous route alone—some would say this was his own fault.

Jesus doesn’t criticize the priest and Levite who didn’t help. Perhaps they were busy. Perhaps their religion or politics kept them from helping.

Jesus names a Samaritan. Samaritans were marginalized, discriminated against and usually hated by the establishment. The Samaritan didn’t have to help. He didn’t have to give his money. He left an open tab that the innkeeper could abuse. This Samaritan was just someone who loved a neighbor he didn’t even know.

Jesus calls us to action—to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

5. It’s really quite simple. If your baby was starving today because of the famine and politics of Somalia, what would you want a Christian to do? If you were sick and didn’t have insurance, what would you want your Christian neighbor to do? If you were mugged and left to die along the roadside, what would you want a follower of Jesus to do for you? Jesus said, Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

6. When I hear the heart and head of Jesus I think about all the needs and my limited ability to help. It’s true, I can’t feed the thousands starving in Somalia. I can’t get jobs for everyone unemployed in America. I can’t save everybody who is beat up and left to die. What I can do is something. What I can do is care. What I can do is love like Jesus.

7. Let us have tender and compassionate hearts for everyone with needs. Let us pray for those we don’t even know. Let us be generous rather than be greedy. Let us sacrifice rather than be selfish.

8. Jesus tied together love of God and love of neighbor in one of his most sobering sermons. In Matthew 25 he tells about King Jesus sitting on the throne of heaven to judge humankind. He says,

Matthew 25:34-40

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came

to visit me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

“The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’”

Conclusion

Hear and do the words of Jesus: *“‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”*

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¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Volume 2, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, page 278.

² Mark Buchanan, *“The Greatest of These”* (Sermon: PreachingToday.com; posted October 4, 2010).