

- ***READ Matthew 22:34-40*** In **Matthew 22**, we find Jesus being challenged with supposedly difficult questions on more than one occasion. He is questioned concerning whether or not Caesar is owed taxes, who will be married to who in the resurrection, whose son the Messiah is, and then there is the question that we just read together concerning what was the greatest command within all of the Torah. We are clearly told that this question was asked by an “expert of the Law” who was seeking to test Jesus, and part of the test was from the fact that there are some 613 commands within the Law. Of those 613: 248 were positive in nature and the remaining 365 were negative in thrust.
- Therefore, how could anyone narrow down which of these 613 were the most important? Who could even determine if a positive or negative command carried more weight? Surely this teacher from Nazareth wouldn’t think so much of Himself that He would actually try to answer, right? Well...these people were not dealing with just any old rabbi. Jesus was able to speak to which of these commands was the greatest because they were commands that were given by Him as the God of Israel, and His answer was a summed up answer of, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.”*
- In reality, this answer should not have shocked anyone because this was a quotation from the *shema* of **Deuteronomy 6:4,5** which were recited at least twice a day by good and faithful Jews. However, Jesus isn’t yet finished for He quickly follows this up by stating that there is a second great commandment like the first, *“Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.”* It was one thing for Jesus to speak of the all-importance of loving those around us, but for Him to say that the entirety of the Law and Prophets hung upon both of these commandments would have been attention-grabbing at the very least. These statements of Jesus packed a punch and really hit home the need for a grasping of love being foundation to faith in God.
- Good brethren, I would strongly suggest to you that the heavy weight of Jesus’s words to those gathered around Him as is recorded here in **Matthew 22** continues on into our day of 2019. It is of the utmost importance that we grasp our need to fulfill these two commands within our lives, but more so than that...we ought to be a people are are excelling in our love for God and others. If these are the two commands on which the foundational covenant between God and His people that led us to Christ are established...then we ought to fully embrace these two commandments, as well. Let’s begin by rehashing what is demanded if we are to love God, and then we’ll consider why we don’t always do that well, and we’ll then conclude with how we can be excellent in our love for God & others.

I. Loving God Demands:

A. Total devotion to Him. (Matthew 22:37,38)

1. For Jesus to say that loving God must be done with one’s heart, soul, and mind must mean to us that loving God is not something that can be done just part way. It isn’t just that we acknowledge God’s existence or that we have a warm and fuzzy feeling towards God.
2. No, full devotion to God demands that we acknowledge Him while allowing that love that we have for Him to be imprinting on our very hearts. We are to give whole-hearted, life encompassing devotion and allegiance to God in everything that we do. Our passion must be for God. Our deepest desires must be for God. Everything that we have that makes us who we are must be given to the honor and glory of God. Anything less is falling short of what it means to truly love God as Jesus demands for us to love Him.

B. Obedience to His will. (John 14:15)

1. But lest we think this is just a mental exercise...let me bring in what Jesus says in **John 14:15** when He instructs His Apostles, *“If you love me, you will keep my commands.”* Even in this moment, the minds of the Apostles should have been taken back to what was written with the

Torah and specifically in **Deuteronomy** in such places as...

- a) **5:10**...context of not making idols. *"But sowing faithful love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments."*
- b) **6:1-9**...*Shema* — *"Do this so that you may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life by keeping all His statutes and commands I am giving you, your son, and your grandson, and so that you may have a long life."*
- c) **7:9**... *"Know that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps his gracious covenant loyalty for a thousand generations with those who love him and keep his commands."*
- d) **10:12,13**... *"And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you except to fear the Lord your God by walking in all his ways, to love him, and to worship the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul? Keep the Lord's commands and statutes I am giving you today, for your own good."*
- e) **11:13,22**... *"If you carefully obey my commands I am giving you today, to love the Lord your God and worship him with all your heart and all your soul," "For if you carefully observe every one of these commands I am giving you to follow—to love the Lord your God, walk in all his ways, and remain faithful to him..."*

2. Clearly Jesus wants for us all to understand that love for God, yes must be within our hearts, but it must be manifested in the way that we respond to the commands of God, and those commands would included how we relate to those who are around us.

C. Love neighbors as self. (Matthew 22:39)

1. This followup command by Jesus should not have been anything revolutionary to those hearing Him since six out of the ten original commands were focused on how the Jews were to treat their neighbors. What this command shows us is that God cares greatly for the way that we treat one another, and it also shows us that there is a direct correlation between our relationship to God and the way that we treat one another.
2. The command itself shouldn't be that difficult to understand, and this is easily seen in the fact that we teach our kids this principle from a very young age. Even at the age of three, Olivia has been hearing for a long time that she shouldn't be doing things to other people that she wouldn't want for them to do to her. Tying this in with the commands that these hearers would have been familiar with...they shouldn't steal from others. They shouldn't bear false witness against others. They shouldn't murder others or take the wife of another for themselves.
3. The most common sensical reasoning behind why this shouldn't be done is because we wouldn't want others to do these things to us. Again, this isn't earth shattering, but it is foundational to what it means to love God as He would have for us to love Him. However, we aren't always the best at displaying this type of love within our lives. Why is this the case? What holds us back from excelling in our love for God and others?

II. Why We Fail To Love:

A. Self-Centeredness

1. Often our failure to love others stems from our own self-centered approach to the way that we live life. When our focus is entirely on ourselves, our wants, our desires, and on getting everything done our way...then we leave no room for others to be considered...unless we consider them simply out of a desire for us to be benefitted in some way.
2. Time and again throughout Scripture, we find people who took the focus off of anyone but themselves and made horrible decisions. Eve thought only for herself and disobeyed God. Cain thought only upon his own disappointment and killed his brother. David thought only of his

desires and took another man's wife as if she was his own. The Jewish leadership were condemned by Jesus for only thinking of themselves in the way they carried themselves. Judas thought only about his own wallet when he took the silver in exchange for betraying Jesus. The Christians in Rome, Corinth and elsewhere were only thinking of themselves when they caused great divisions within their local congregations. The list could go on and on.

3. And this is especially true if we wanted to add onto this list examples from our own lives where selfishness lead to a lack of love for God and/or others. I'm surely not the only one who would have to include himself on this list. This simply goes to show that we understand very well how our own selfishness and self-centeredness can lead to love being absent within our own lives.

B. Love Only Connected To Emotions

1. Additionally, we might be missing love within our lives because we think that love is only connected to our emotions. What I mean by this is that we think that we can only love people when we have those warm and fuzzy feelings within ourselves for them. For example: It is really easy to love my spouse when he or she has been nice to me and done everything just as I would like for them to do it. Or...It is really easy to love my neighbor when they have been kind and respectful towards me.
2. Further, we think that I don't have to love others when they are failing to love me first. My feelings of hurt allow me to not show love towards those who have hurt me. I see love as something that must be given to me by others which results in the warm and fuzzies before I am willing to show my love towards them. If the feelings and emotions are not there because I first haven't been shown love well then I don't feel as if I have love that must be given. When I feel this way then the love that I show is fully contingent on what others do towards me first.

C. Misunderstanding Of Love

1. Finally, we fail to love as we ought to because we simply don't understand what love is. This ties in closely with this last point in the fact that we think that love is only emotionally driven. We think that love is not possible if we don't first feel a certain way towards someone based upon what they have done or have failed to do towards us.
2. Further, we might think that love is only achieved towards others when we do that which makes them happy. We see ourselves as being loving because we are totally supportive of anything and everything that makes those around us happy. If we think this is true then would we be willing to carry this out to all of its logical conclusions? As one author wrote, would we be willing to allow a friend to take a big bite out of a rancid piece of uncooked meat because he enjoys doing such a thing? Of course we wouldn't do that, and we wouldn't do so because we recognize that sometimes love demands that we tell people "no" because that is what is best for them.
3. Sometimes loving others demands that we do difficult things and put ourselves through uncomfortable situations. But what can help us to be willing to do such things? What can help us to recognize that love for others ought to be independent of our feelings and emotions? What helps us to get to the point where we are willing to display excellent love within our lives?

III. Loving More Excellently:

A. Loving God most.

1. The absolute best thing we can do in order to help our love to grow, be greater, and be excellent is to focus on loving God the most in everything that we do. If we want to love others the best way possible then we must learn to love God the most. This demands that we first are willing to take the focus off of ourselves and put it on the one who is deserving of our total love and devotion...God. We must embrace the fact that He first loved us through creating us, but also through the ultimate act of love of sending His Son to die for us (**John 3:16**), though we were His enemies through the sins that we had committed against Him. (**Romans 5:6-11**)

2. The fact that God created us to begin with ought to demand our love for Him, but there is so much more to God's love for us that was displayed through Jesus giving His life for us. God being willing to sacrifice for us in such a drastic way ought to ignite within us a burning passionate desire to please Him and bring glory to Him in everything that we do. Once we take that passion off of ourselves, it frees us to put it where it is most deserving and that is without a shadow of a doubt upon God. He is worthy of our loving Him most.
3. But what this allows is for us to then be able to love others the best way possible. When we love self most then we are usually concerned first and foremost with what is best for us, but when we love God most then our focus shifts to His desires for how we love others. We no longer love in a way that fulfills our desires, but we love in a way that shows the importance of others above our own. If we're failing to love in that manner towards others then John is clear that we don't truly love God. **(I John 4:20,21)** To quote another writer, *"If God is not the love of our life, there is no way that we will truly love our neighbor as ourselves. For we will love ourselves supremely."* We must humble ourselves before God in true love and allow that love to guide how we show love to the people who are around us.

B. Seeing the image of God in the people around us.

1. The way that we love the people around us will also be affected by the way that we see those who are around us. If we see ourselves as being more important than others then we are elevating ourselves to a position that God never intended for us to be. Firstly, Paul said that we ought to see others as more important than ourselves. **(Philippians 2:4)**
2. But additionally, we need to recognize that God created all of mankind in His image. We are all image bearers of God meaning that we reflect many of His attributes. We are to reflect His love for us, His holiness, and His righteousness. We are to have dominion over this creation just as He rules over all creations in existence. We all stand on equal ground in these respects, and we are wrong when we seek to elevate ourselves as being higher or more important than others. If we want to be truly excellent in our love then we would do well to embrace the image of God that radiates from those around us and recognize that loving them is a direct evidence of our love for God.

C. Embracing love as a vital part of our character.

1. Finally, if we want to be a people who are going to excel in love for God and others, then we need to embrace love and what it looks like as who we are and not just what we do. The temptation is to fall to either extreme where we either know what is the right thing to do and fail to do it or we do what is right and yet do it without any sort of loving thought and feeling behind it. **(James 4:17 & I Corinthians 13:1-3)**
2. Bringing up **I Corinthians 13** leads us to our concluding thought and application for how we can excel in our love for God and others. As mentioned, we need to be people who don't just love in word but also love in deed. If we want to be a people who love in deed, then are we willing to be a people who are allowing the descriptions of personified love to be true within our own lives? Are we willing to be patient, kind, etc? If we can't truthfully insert our name in place of love then I would suggest that we are not succeeding at excelling in love for God and others.

It must be recognized that these two great commands of God are not easily accomplished within our lives. Satan seeks to suppress the truth of God within our lives so that we don't love Him as we should, and when we don't love Him then we can't truly love our neighbors. We are surrounded by selfishness of every kind, and yet God desires for us to be better than our environment by forsaking self to embrace God and His will for our loving of Himself and others. May He bless us and strengthen us to excel in love in for Him and others in everything that we do. We are to be excellent, so may we all excellently love.