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Sermon Notes

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The Greatest Commandment, Part 1

Matthew 22:34-40

It was the final week of Jesus' life... He was about to die; He went to visit the home of Martha and Mary and Lazarus... the man he had raised from the dead... they were among the dearest friends of His life

After dinner, this shocking event took place:

John 12:3-5 Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, ⁵ "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages."

Nard came from a rare plant which grew in the northern parts of India; the best nard was imported from India in closed alabaster boxes; John tells us it was PURE nard, of the highest quality; it was an extravagant luxury; and she poured the WHOLE THING on Jesus; Judas, ever careful about money and the value of things, commented on the value of this lavish luxury as been worth A YEAR'S WAGES

Jesus defended this lavish gift as an appropriate expression of devotion to Him

I believe this is a symbol of the greatest treasure any of us have to give... the uppermost AFFECTION of our HEARTS... simply put, the love of our lives

And GOD WANTS IT FOR HIMSELF!!!

As we enter a New Year, the single greatest issue in your life this morning is simply this: do you love God more than you did a year ago? Do you love Him with all of your heart? Does your heart yearn for God and do you delight in the things of God? And is this love for God growing stronger year by year... or is it growing weaker?

I. What is the Greatest Commandment?

A. Context: A Week of Bitter Testing

Isaiah 53:3 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

John 1:11 He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

1. Matthew 22: The Three Trials: Jesus' enemies conspiring to trap him and cause Him to stumble
 - a. Taxation: The Pharisees send their disciples and the Herodians
 - b. Marriage at the resurrection: the Sadducees
 - c. Now this one: the question about the Law

B. An Expert in the Law

1. Jesus had MUZZLED the Sadducees

Matthew 22:34 Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together.

The word literally means to muzzle... like would be done to an ox or donkey, or what Jesus did to a demon when He commanded it to be silent

Jesus had shut them down effectively

2. The gathering of the Pharisees for round two... fulfills Psalm 2

Psalm 2

Acts 4:25-27 "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? ²⁶ The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.' ²⁷ Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.

3. Their next attempt: an expert in the Law
 - a. Literally a lawyer
 - b. Indications are this man was more than just one who studied the Law of Moses
 - c. As it turned out, however, he had a more sensitive heart than those who sent him
 - i) In Mark 12:28, this expert in the Law noticed that Jesus had given a good answer
 - ii) At the end of the encounter, when Jesus gave His answer, the man replied

Mark 12:32-34 *"Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. ³³ To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." ³⁴ When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."*

C. The Testing Question

Matthew 22:36 *"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"*

1. "The Law" = the Law of Moses
2. Moses: the most revered man in Judaism
3. Jesus, it seemed, was challenging Moses' supremacy

"You have heard it said, 'You shall not murder...' But I say ..."

"Do not suppose I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets... I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."

4. Centuries of scribes' traditions had encrusted the Jewish reading of the Law
 - a. Over the centuries, rabbis had determined that, since there were 613 Hebrew letters in the Ten Commandments, there were also 613 separate laws in the Law of Moses generally
 - b. The rabbis then divided those 613 laws into two categories: 248 affirmative laws, one for each part of the human body as they supposed... and 365 negative laws—one for each day of the year
 - c. They also divided the laws of Moses into "light" and "heavy"... heavy meant absolutely binding, light meant not so significant... BUT THEY NEVER AGREED on what was light and what was heavy
 - d. This question was a typical rabbinic question... but it also had a hidden barb; they expected that Jesus would incriminate Himself by challenging Moses' authority and speaking some blasphemy for which they could execute Him
 - e. So they asked Him which of all the Laws of Moses was the greatest commandment

II. Love God With Everything You Are

A. Jesus Very Orthodox Answer

Matthew 22:37 Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

Fuller account:

Mark 12:29-30 "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'

1. Jesus started with the “shema”... the most significant statement in the Bible to the Jews

Deuteronomy 6:4 “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one...”

- a. So significant was this one statement that the Jews used to write it on small pieces of parchment and put them in tiny boxes called phylacteries and wear them on their arms and their foreheads
 - b. They also put them in small boxes called mezuzahs and nailed them to their doorposts
2. He then gave the commandment that was the centerpiece of all God commanded Israel... also from Deuteronomy 6

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength

3. This was recited by pious Jews every day personally and every Sabbath at the synagogue
 - a. Jesus was no innovator here
 - b. This was no shocking answer, nothing of blasphemy
 - c. In effect, Jesus was saying the answer has been in front of you every day of your lives... but to know the answer and to obey the commandment are two different things

B. What the Words Mean

1. I will delve more into the concept of loving God in a few minutes
2. Hebrew word for love is “ahav”... it carries the connotation of a multifaceted thing
3. The first two times it is mentioned, Isaac is the central person
 - a. The love of a father for a son

Genesis 22:2 Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."

b. The love of a husband for his wife

Genesis 24:67 Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he married Rebekah. So she became his wife, and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

c. The third example also from Isaac's life

Genesis 27:4 Prepare me the kind of tasty food I like and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my blessing before I die.

d. Summary: love means an internal attraction to something... an affinity for it, a desire for it... I will speak more of what I learned from Jonathan Edwards concerning "Religious Affections" in two weeks... suffice it to say love is a heart attraction TOWARD something, an allure, a drawing, a yearning TOWARD that thing

C. Love the Lord your God with everything you are

1. "with all your heart"

a. Heart = the central part of you... the part that loves and hates, the part that thinks and chooses... in Scripture, the heart does MANY THINGS

i) Thinking

Psalm 139:23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.

ii) Feeling

Romans 9:2 I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.

Zephaniah 3:14 Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem!

iii) Deciding

ESV 2 Corinthians 9:7 Each one must give as he has decided in his heart

iv) Planning

Proverbs 16:1 To man belong the plans of the heart

v) Desiring

Psalm 37:4 Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.

It seems there is NO internal thing not ascribed to the heart

And yet the Lord has two more internal words

We are to love the Lord our God with all our souls and with all our minds

2. With all your soul

- a. Since the heart does SO MUCH internal stuff, it seems there is very little left for the soul to do
- b. Actually, in many verses, the heart and soul are interchangeable or one is used to strengthen the other

The phrase “with all your heart and soul” is used nine times in Deuteronomy alone

Jonathan’s armor bearer said to Jonathan as he contemplated attacking the Philistines alone:

1 Samuel 14:7 "Do all that you have in mind," his armor-bearer said. "Go ahead; I am with you heart and soul."

- c. The soul could be said to be that immaterial part of you that relates to God... but remember that we are commanded to love God with all our HEARTS as well as souls...
- d. God created the “nephesh”... the principle of LIFE in every living creature

Genesis 1:21 And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth

The Hebrew word for creature is “nephesh”...

^{ESV} Genesis 2:7 then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.

Usually throughout the Scriptures, however, the “nephesh” refers to the human soul...

- e. So what is the difference between the heart and the soul? I can discern almost no difference
- f. BUT we could take “nephesh” to refer to the principle of LIFE
- g. As if to say “with every fiber of your being” love God
- h. Or “as you live and breathe, so you must love God”

3. With all your mind

- a. Same thing with the mind
- b. The mind is that part of you that thinks... that reasons... that meditates...
- c. Christ is commanding that all your thought life be pleasing to God, in every way
- d. Your intellect given fully to loving God... to delighting in the depths of His mind
- e. Your imagination in full services to the worship and admiration of God
- f. Your mental powers, your science, your philosophy, your logic, your deductive skills, your powers of observation and argumentation, your MIND given over fully to love for God
- g. Inventing new ways to express your love for God
 - i) Sinners “invent ways of doing evil” (Romans 1:30); that is, they contrive new ways of rebelling against God
 - ii) Therefore the opposite is to invent ways of LOVING GOD

Charles Wesley:

O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise, the glories of my God and King, the triumphs of his grace!

4. With all your STRENGTH

- a. The focus here is on the BODY
- b. That you would present your body to God every moment as a living sacrifice
- c. That you would present to God every power available to you, that you would POUR OUT your strength and energy completely at the foot of God's throne in devotion to Him
- d. That you would be spent, used up, poured out, given over completely to God... even to death if need be

2 Timothy 4:6 For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure.

D. With ALL Your Heart, and ALL Your Soul, and ALL Your Mind and ALL Your Strength

1. The concept is to HOLD NOTHING BACK
2. To love God completely, with everything you have
3. To be WHOLEHEARTED in your devotion

Psalm 9:1 I will praise you, O LORD, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonders.

ESV Psalm 119:2 Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart

- a. We all have a tendency to SPARE ourselves, to hold ourselves back from total commitment
- b. Athletes perhaps come the closest to this level of TOTAL DEVOTION

Illus. Iron-man triathlon several years ago... held in Hawaii... 2.4 mile swim, 112 mile bike race, and a 26.2 mile marathon!! Contestant leading with a mile or so to go, had nothing physically left to give... crawled on bloody hands and knees to finish the race

4. The standard of love is COMPLETE AND TOTAL DEVOTION... holding nothing back

III. A Second Commandment is Like It

- A. Jesus Went Beyond their Request... Adding a Second One
- B. The Second Commandment is Like the First One

Matthew 22:39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

- C. The Second Commandment Depends on the First One
 1. We CANNOT love our neighbor properly unless we first love God properly
 2. There is no true love for neighbor that is not an expression of love to the true God
 3. Until we have loved God by faith in Christ, our love for our neighbor will be nothing more than a hypocritical show... selfishness in disguise
- D. The Second Commandment Displays the First One
 1. BUT we cannot only love God and reject our neighbor
 2. We cannot become reclusive monks in some Tibetan monastery, having nothing to do with the human race, and call it love for God
 3. John puts it very plainly

1 John 4:20-21 If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar.

4. I will have more to say on this in another sermon
- E. Everything Depends on these Two Commands
 1. Jesus neatly organizes all 613 commands in the Law of Moses... indeed, all the commands in the Bible, in these two headings

Matthew 22:40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

2. If you truly LOVE GOD as God commands, and truly LOVE NEIGHBOR in the same way, Jesus said, you will be perfectly obeying all the commands of God
3. The Ten Commandments is one brief summary of the Laws of God... these two Great Commandments are an even briefer one
4. This is the summation of everything God wants us to do in life
5. Everything comes down to this one word: LOVE

^{NAU} ***1 Timothy 1:5 But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.***

6. If you don't love, you are NOTHING

IV. God Actually Requires This... But You Can't Do It!

1. When we stand before God on Judgment Day, this two commandments will be the criteria of our assessment
2. Those whose names are not written in the Lamb's Book of Life will be judged on the basis of their obedience to the Law of God
 - a. O LOST PERSON... how perilous is this command for you
 - b. God will look at the full record of your words and deeds, and at the motives of your heart
 - c. He will say something like this:

"I created you... I knit you together in your mother's womb... I sustained you every day of your life with food, clothing and shelter; I gave you rich experiences filled with joy and pleasure; I feasted your eyes with the delights of nature—of mountain grandeur, of gentle spring scenery, of rugged cliffs and of tiny wildflowers, of grizzly bears and timid chipmunks, of roaring hurricanes and gentle zephyrs; I surrounded you with the love of family and friends; I gave you a loving wife and three children, and through them came thousands of gifts of love; I fed your mind with education and gave you opportunities to

grow and learn; I provided labor for you to do, and a sense of satisfaction at a job well done; and I paid you wages, money with which you were fully supplied and sustained; I healed you when you were wounded or sick; I renewed your strength when you were weary; I fed your stomach with nourishing foods while delighting your tongues with flavors rich, delicious, pleasurable, exotic, varied; I entertained you with sports and movies and books and music; every good and pleasant moment you enjoyed in the world was a direct gift from me...

Beyond that, I surrounded you with Scriptural influences; you drove by countless churches almost every day of your life; I put Christians in your life who loved you and who lived out their imperfect faith before your eyes as a witness; though you do not know the total number, I sent evangelists 173 times over the 69 years of your life specifically to proclaim to you personally the good news of Christ's birth, life, death on the cross, and resurrection from the dead and to appeal to you to repent of your sins and trust Christ; those evangelists used many different approaches to win you—some were sweet and tender, others were fiery and powerful; some reasoned with your mind, others appealed to your heart and emotions; you read 21 different tracts on Christ and the gospel; 1377 times you heard some Christian radio or TV programming and changed the channel. Each of those were efforts I was making to reach out to you directly and personally with the gospel of Jesus Christ. And after every time that you rejected the gospel command to repent and believe in Christ, I graciously sustained your life more, healing your diseases and feeding your stomach.

That's how I loved you... all 69 years of your life.

But I commanded you to love me... did you love me with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength? Did you pour yourself out day after day in worship and adoration in your prayer closet? Did you thank me and praise me for each of those blessings with which I blessed you? Did you make sacrifices for me—did you give money sacrificially to the poor and needy? Did you sacrifice time and bodily effort to serve me and to obey my commands? Did you CHERISH ME in your heart... loving Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Did your heart leap for joy again and again at the greatness of what I did for the world in Christ? Did you delight to hear of sinners converted, of marriages restored, of orphans cared for, of drug addicts rescued? Did your heart melt in singing songs to me or speaking words of praise to me? Did you LOVE ME... with every fiber of your being every moment of your life?

Dear friends, I dare not put words in the mouth of God as He stands in Christ over your soul on Judgment Day... but these concepts are consistent with the fact that it is the LAW that will assess us on that great and dreadful day

DID YOU OBEY IT?

B. Saving Yourself is Impossible

ESV Romans 3:20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

This is the perfect Law that Paul means: LOVE GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART SOUL MIND AND STRENGTH

Charles Spurgeon: Is there someone here so profoundly brainless as to reply, "I intend to keep it, and I believe I can perfectly obey it, and I think I can get to heaven by obedience to it?" Man, you are either a fool, or else willfully ignorant; for sure, if you truly understand this commandment, you will at once hang down your hands, and say, "Obedience to that is quite impossible; thorough and perfect obedience to that no man can hope to reach to!" Some of you think you will go to heaven by your good works, do you? This is the first stone that you are to step upon—I am sure it is too high for your reach. You might as well try to climb to heaven by the mountains of earth, and take the Himalayas to be your first step; ... for to obey this must ever be an impossibility. But remember, you cannot be saved by your works, if you can not obey this entirely, perfectly, constantly, forever.

"Well," someone replies, "I dare say if I try and obey it as well as I can, that will do." No, sir, it will not. God demands that you **perfectly** obey this, and if you do not perfectly obey it he will condemn you. "Oh!" someone cries out, "who then can be saved?" Ah! that is the point to which I wish to bring you. Who, then can be saved by this law? Why, no one in the world. Salvation by the works of the law is proved to be a clean impossibility. None of you, therefore, will say you will try to obey it, and so hope to be saved. I hear the best Christian in the world groan out his thoughts—"O God," he says, "I am guilty; and should you cast me into hell I dare not say otherwise. I have broken this command from my youth up, even since my conversion; I have violated it every day; I know that if you should lay justice to the line, and righteousness to the plummet, I must be swept away forever. Lord, I renounce my trust in the law; for by it I know I can never see your face and be accepted.

1. We **MUST HAVE** a Savior... and that Savior is Christ
2. Christ **HAS** kept this Law perfectly!!!
3. His perfect obedience of this Law of love is His gift to us by our faith in Him
4. God sees us as having obeyed this Law perfectly in Christ

V. How to Develop a Love Relationship with God

A. Start with Christ! Imputed Righteousness is His Perfect Obedience to these Commandments

1. Christ **DID** love God with **ALL** of His heart, soul, mind, and strength
2. He would rather die than disobey His Father

3. He lived every moment of His life loving His Father

John 14:31 the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me.

John 8:29 I always do what pleases him.

4. Our salvation in Christ is BASED on this love... it was for love of the Father that Jesus died for us

5. And it is the very fabric of the garment of perfect righteousness Christ wove for us with His thirty plus years of perfect obedience to the Father: Christ saying I LOVE YOU, FATHER

6. This is the righteousness given to us as a gift

1 Corinthians 1:30 Christ Jesus... has become for us ... our righteousness

Romans 3:22 This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

Say to yourself: "I can never perfectly love God with all my heart... but Jesus did. And by simple faith in Christ God will see me as loving Him perfectly in Christ."

BUT... don't end there

The essence of salvation is to conform us to Christ so that we are LIKE HIM... so that we actually DO love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength

Much of sanctification is grieving at our own hardness of heart, and idolatry and proneness to wander from loving God

B. James: Steps to Recovering our Love for God

We all tend to have adulterous hearts that stray into worldliness... that is, into idolatry which is spiritual adultery:

James 4:4-10 You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? ⁶ But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." ⁷ Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

1. Call the wandering of your heart spiritual ADULTERY

2. Identify worldliness: the idols that had taken Christ's place in your heart
 - a. Worldly pleasures
 - b. Sexual sins
 - c. Materialism
 - d. Workaholism
 - e. Worldly entertainments
 - f. Food
3. Recognize that to live for these things is the ESSENCE of worldliness... and that it makes you an enemy of God
4. Understand the JEALOUSY of the Spirit within you... He ENVIES INTENSELY (NIV)... means He is very jealous for your affections
5. Rejoice in the promise that God will give you "MORE GRACE"... we need "MORE GRACE"
 - a. Not merely grace for initial salvation
 - b. But MORE GRACE... the grace to keep you loving Jesus day after day and year after year in this tempting world filled with idols
6. James points to the Scripture as the avenue of this additional grace

James 4:5 Or do you think Scripture says...

James 4:6 But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

- a. Scripture is the primary avenue for the recovery of a heart of affection for Christ
 - b. Saturate your hearts with Scripture for the goal of recovering your love for Jesus
7. Meditate on the statement James gives you

James 4:6 "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

8. Identify PRIDE in your heart... it is always pride that causes us to stray from loving God... we think too highly of ourselves and think we know better than God how to be happy and fulfilled

9. Submit humbly to God... come back to Him as to your KING, and put yourself under His authority
10. Resist the devil... understand the devil was the one feeding you temptations to get your heart to wander from Christ; the devil is the pimp who gets the prostitute of the world so alluring; the devil dresses up the world and makes the world very attractive, painting her eyes, choosing the glittery and skimpy costume that makes the world overpoweringly tempting... it is the DEVIL who set the whole thing up; RESIST THE DEVIL and he will FLEE.... He will RUN FOR HIS LIFE, because the powerful Holy Spirit will cause him to flee
11. Come near to God: draw close to Him with prayer and words of love and worship... say "I love you Lord; I am so sorry I strayed; I am sorry I allowed my heart's precious affections to be poured out on an idol rather than on you
12. God will then come near to you!!!
13. Wash your hands, you sinners
 - a. Get rid of the practices that you are confessing
 - b. Change your life... stop doing the things
14. Purify your hearts, you double-minded
 - a. Fight the battle of the mind
 - b. Think of your Lord, and set your affections on Him
15. Be willing to grieve emotionally over the straying of your heart... be emotional over it... the Spirit was grieved when you strayed... so you should be also

James 4:9 Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.

16. Humble yourselves... however painfully, and let the Lord restore your heart

James 4:10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.