

Love God

SCOTT HOEZEE

Many of us use the word love pretty broadly in our lives. In one moment, we may say we love our children, and then a little while later, we may tell someone how much we love cheeseburgers; but how can the same word apply equally to family members as it does to something you buy at a McDonald's drive-thru window? And what about when we casually say to someone how much we love God? What does it really mean to love God and how is it both like and unlike other loves in our lives? Well, today on Groundwork, we dig into what Jesus meant when He said the first and greatest commandment is to love God with everything we have. What might that mean? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we are doing just a short, little, two-part set of programs here on the first and the greatest commandment; and of course, we know the first part of the great commandment, Jesus said, is to love God with everything you have, and we are going to be thinking about that in this program; and then in our next program, airing next week, we will think about the second half of what it means to love our neighbor as our selves.

DAVE BAST

I think it would be appropriate to begin right off the bat with the scripture passage – the classic passage – where Jesus says this; and it occurs, of course, elsewhere in the Bible, but in Matthew 22, just a few verses – verses 34 through 40 – this is what we read:

³⁴Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵One of them, an expert in the Law, tested him with this question, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” ³⁷Jesus 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. ³⁸The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is a very famous passage; very well known; and maybe, Dave, in this first segment before we dig really more specifically into what does it mean to love God, let's just remind ourselves a little bit of the dynamics of this passage. This is Matthew 22, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which we celebrate on Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday. That was in Matthew 21; so, we are in the last week of Jesus' life, and the pressure on Jesus is ratcheting up. His enemies, who have been opposing him all along, it is really all coming to a head, and we see that throughout Matthew 22.

DAVE BAST

Early in the week, Jesus went to the Temple; he probably went there more than once; he probably went every day to teach and to give his last messages to the crowds there; and in that context, a number of these groups that had proved themselves to be rather habitually opposed to Jesus jump up and take their last shots at him. So, there are the Sadducees, and then there are the Pharisees, and without spending too much time on

background, just to say that the Sadducees and Pharisees did not have a whole lot in common, but these two different groups were united in their animosity toward Jesus and it came out in the questions that they asked him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; the old saying: The enemy of my enemy is my friend. So, the Sadducees and Pharisees have a common enemy: Jesus. So, they become friends together in opposing Him. This is kind of a “gotcha” chapter, and the commentator, Frederick Dale Bruner says that this is a bookend on Jesus’ ministry. In Matthew 4, Jesus had three temptations in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry, and now we are at the end – Matthew 22 – three tricky questions. So, they are asking him questions like: Well, are you allowed to pay taxes to Caesar as a believer in God, or no? What about the resurrection? The Sadducees denied the resurrection, and so they said: Here is a guy who had seven wives; they all died. Who is going to be his wife in heaven if we get raised up again? And then, this question about the greatest commandment. So, one of the things we sometimes forget about Matthew 22 is that this is where we get the greatest commandment to love God and love neighbor, but the context is not very loving at all. These people are being mean.

DAVE BAST

Right; and it is almost funny. The Sadducees had just grilled Jesus on the resurrection, and they tried to use ridicule – kind of a *reductio ad absurdum* of this example of the woman whose seven husbands died – and Jesus brought them up short by saying: he is not the God of the dead; he is the God of the living. And the Pharisees loved that because they believe in the resurrection, but now they take their turn. So, we read in verse 34 that the Sadducees were shut up, but now the Pharisees get together, and one of them, who is describes as “an expert in the Law,” and the word that is used more traditionally in the older translation is a *scribe*; so, he is a theologian. He is probably a religious teacher. He is a rabbi himself, and he comes to Jesus with this question about what is the most important commandment? Well, the Pharisees, by the time of Jesus, had identified 613 individual commandments in Torah or in the Law. So, he is asking Jesus: Look, there is a whole forest here of rules; which one is the most important?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And of course, the gotcha part of this – right? The gotcha part is that they are tempting him to pick one; and if Jesus had picked one commandment and elevated it above all the others, they would have accused him of heresy. They instantly would have said to him: Aha! You are now downplaying all the other ones. You cannot treat any commandment as second class; and so, they are baiting Jesus. They are trying to trip him up by making him choose one, and as soon as he does, they are going to say: Well, now you have dissed the other 612, and so, woe to you, Jesus. So, Jesus cleverly sidesteps it instead.

DAVE BAST

Right; instead of getting into that labyrinth of rules and laws – and by the way, you can kind of understand where the Pharisees were coming from. They undertook a practice that came to be called fencing or hedging the command. You certainly did not want to break one of God’s commandments; so God said, for example – probably the prime example – remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. That is one of the Ten Commandments. Well, okay, we want to do that, but how much work can you do? Can you cook on the Sabbath? Can you take a journey on the Sabbath? Can you carry a load somewhere on the Sabbath? And so, they multiplied these lesser restrictions to keep you from – they fenced it in the sense that before you get close enough to break the commandment, here is the tripwire that you do not want to do.

SCOTT HOEZEE

If you keep all these other ones, then the main ones will be protected.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, it ended up being this very complex, very legalistic code...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Very uptight.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and Jesus does not want to get caught in that thicket; so, he, rather, points them to the bigger command that underlies all the rest.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so, Jesus is basically saying: Look, if you do not love God above all with heart, soul, mind and strength, then you are not going to be motivated to keep any commandment. So, Jesus does not pick one from the list, which is what they were trying to get him to do; then he would get in theological trouble – he does not pick one from the list – he picks the one that undergirds and supports and surrounds the list. It is like the frame around the painting is love for God, because if you do not love God, then you are not going to be motivated to follow him...

DAVE BAST

Care about his day or his name or any of the other, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And if you do not love God, you are not going to be terribly loving toward other people – and oh, by the way – you Pharisees and Sadducees are not being very loving to Jesus right now. So, there is a sense in which Jesus both slips out of their trap, right? He does not get trapped – and he kind of criticizes them at the same time by saying: It is all about love – what is with you guys?

DAVE BAST

Yes, but here is the big question: How does one love God? And all the things that love means; all the ways we use that word; let's wonder a little bit more about that next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are doing a two-part program here; this program on the greatest commandment to love God with everything we have: Heart, soul, mind; and then our next program, next week, on loving our neighbor as ourselves. Dave, we were just looking at Matthew 22, which is the famous place where the Pharisees – we were just saying – were trying to trip up Jesus; trying to make him choose a commandment and elevate it above the others, and that would be a bad thing to do. Jesus does an end-run and says the love of God undergirds all the commandments, and if you do not have that, you are not going to keep any anyway; but, what is interesting about Jesus' answer is that he was actually quoting to them a very famous passage in Jewish circles known as the *Shema*.

DAVE BAST

Right; actually, I noticed when I was reading Matthew 22:34 and following earlier in the program – and maybe you could check this if you have a Bible open or a Bible handy – the punctuation indicated that. If you pay a little bit of attention while you are reading the Bible to what you are reading, there are single quotes inside those verses indicating that Jesus himself is quoting when he says this, quoting the Old Testament; and both parts of the Great Commandment are quotes from the Old Testament. As you said, Scott, the first part: Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, is the *Shema*. It is from Deuteronomy 6; it is the greatest confession of Israel's faith: Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is one God, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we should mention, too, that *shema* is the Hebrew word for hear; hear or listen, O Israel – that is why it is called the *Shema* – listen, O Israel. So, what is interesting for a Jewish context as well was that the *Shema* was as familiar to Jewish children as, “Now I lay me down to sleep,” is to us. It was said regularly every day; every Jewish man, woman and child had it memorized. So, what is funny – in a way, ironic, I guess – in a way about Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees here – they are trying to trip him up and get him into trouble, and so they say: What is the greatest commandment? And Jesus throws back at them something that is as familiar to them as *Jesus Loves Me* is to us. So, Jesus is saying: Why don’t you know the answer to this? This is basic. You memorized this as a kid. What is the most important thing in life? Loving God, don’t you know? This is not rocket science!

DAVE BAST

Yes; an expert in the Law – a scribe – of course, he should know that – a theologian – in fact. This reminds me of a story I read years ago about the great theologian, Karl Barth; probably the greatest theologian of the 20th Century. We would describe him in terms of our story today as an expert in the Law; and he was actually lecturing at the University of Chicago; he was on an American lecture tour, and during the question and answer period, a student asked him: Dr. Barth, tell us; what is the most important principle in your theology? What is the groundwork of it all? What is the foundation of your theological vision? And, you know, waiting, sitting back, expecting some long, complex, Germanic, full of big words – and Barth looked at him with a twinkle in his eye, looked at the audience and said, “This is the most important part of my theology: Jesus loves me, this I know; for the Bible tells me so.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes. That is a wonderful, disarming line. The greatest truth, Barth was saying, and the greatest truth Jesus was saying to the Pharisees in Matthew 22 – the greatest truth is the one you already know. We said, too, at the end of the last segment, Dave, what does that mean to love God, and we can talk pretty casually about that; but, to love God; we have never really had dinner with God; we do not have face-to-face conversations the way we do with people; we cannot hug or kiss God literally. We can use the same word, love, and there are a lot of connections to all of the other loves that we have, but there has to be something different, too; and maybe we can just reflect for a few minutes on what are some of the things we need to think about first when it comes to: What does it mean to love God?

DAVE BAST

Well, I think the first thing is where the Bible begins, and that is with God’s love for us. There is a famous verse in the first epistle of John that says: We love because God first loved us. Herein is love; not that we love God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the savior. So, our love can only ever be responsive to God’s prior love to us; and yes, it is hard to explain, and especially to an unbeliever. I mean, there are plenty of people who scoff and say, “There is no God. God is a fantasy. God is a figment of your imagination. You have invented this father figure in the sky and you are just projecting your feelings on him,” but, to a believer, the knowledge that God has loved us in Christ; that he came and took up our flesh – the whole story of the Gospel – it just draws forth in those who receive this, a kind of corresponding love in response.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is so important, Dave, because of course there is a huge difference between God and us, and if you did not feel invited, you would not throw yourself at God, or you would hardly dare. I mean, sometimes for a man or a woman, if you are attracted to somebody else it can take a lot of courage to ask that person out for that first date: Boy, how do I approach her? How do I approach him? What am I going to say? Well, we can feel that a little bit in human relationships, how much more is that magnified when it comes to God? You would never dare presume that God would welcome your love unless you knew that God first loved us; and that is, indeed, where we begin; but then, we go on from there. What is another thing that loving God would mean? We have been invited into this relationship by God’s prior love for us; but then I think, unlike sometimes in human relationships, one of the first things it means to love God is to engage in obedience.

DAVE BAST

Well, yes; and clearly, that is an important point that the Bible makes. If we are going to love him, we need to do what he tells us to do; we need to practice obedience; and in a sense, that sounds a little bit odd, too, doesn't it? I mean, what does obedience have to do with love? Isn't love really about our feelings? Isn't love about following our heart? Isn't love about that warm, fuzzy, how we choke up when we sing an old hymn for love of God, or tears come to our eyes as we think of the cross; but there is a very practical, down-to-earth side about loving God. If our love is only sentiment, if it is only feeling or emotion, there is no reality to it then either. It is not grounded in our lives; and in a sense, this is parallel to human love. It is not what you *say* that proves love; it is what you *do* that proves love. One of the great verses in the book of Romans: God demonstrated his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. He did not just say something, but he did something; and that is what our obedience is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And one of the things that, even though again, we can sometimes be pretty casual about talking about how, "Oh, I love God, oh, how I love God, oh, how I love Jesus," and that is all important to say, but we do have to begin by recognizing the difference between God and us; and one of the things that makes it different is that the one we love when it is God is the creator of the universe. This is God's world, and when we say obedience is a big part of what it means to love God, in human relationships that would not go so well, probably. If you are going to get married to somebody and say, "Well, once we are married, the number one thing you have to do is obey me," I think most people would be a little put off by that; but with God, it makes sense because we recognize that this is his world and he has given us the owner's manual – the instruction manual for creation. It is called his Law. It is not a series of arbitrary hoops to jump through. It is how to flourish in God's world. So, if we love him, we want to treat the world the way God, who made it, wants it to be treated.

DAVE BAST

And as Christians, we also believe that God has, as I said earlier, become one of us, Scott; and so, the incarnation of Jesus and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit – the Triune God – that is going to have an impact on how we love God; and we are going to talk about that in just a moment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork, where today we are digging into the greatest commandment: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength. We were talking, Dave, in the previous segment about how loving God is going to be different than loving anybody else we know because God is different from anybody else we know. He is sovereign; he is almighty; he created the universe; and therefore, we would not dare to throw our love at God if he had not first loved us and invited us into relationship; and once we are in that relationship, one of the first things we recognize is that God is the creator of the world, and so we should treat it the way he wants it treated, which means we obey his rules and keep his world the way he wants it to be kept.

DAVE BAST

Right; and we also touched on the fact that we are commanded to love God. In the context of the question that Jesus was asked, the passage that we are looking at today from Matthew 22: What is the greatest commandment? And Jesus replied, quoting the *Shema* – the great Old Testament commandment – You shall love the Lord your God. In a sense, that raises a bit of a difficulty – a question – how can you command somebody to love you? Isn't that sort of egotistical on the part of God? It would not work in human relationships; certainly, you see a beautiful woman and you decide she could be the one for you, so you walk up to her and say, "I command you to love me." No, I do not think that would lead to a long-lasting relationship.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I have heard people sometimes say: You know, I am not steak. You cannot order me. And indeed, there is nothing more pathetic than seeing somebody either begging: Please love me; or trying to – I think there is even a scene in Shakespeare's *King Lear* where King Lear is basically commanding his daughters to love him, and it is pathetic, because you cannot command love.

DAVE BAST

But this underscores the vast difference between God and us – the infinite chasm between God as the creator of all and us as his sinful creatures – not just creatures, but sinful creatures. It is right for God to command us to love Him because that is what he made us for. He made us for himself – for having a relationship with him – and he knows that it will be our deepest joy and delight...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And if it were not for sin, we would not need the command. It would come up naturally.

DAVE BAST

Good point; but because of sin, the command is actually an invitation...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

It is actually a blessing, because God says: I do not just want your obedience – I do want that; that is part of what it means to love me – but I do not just want you to be my servants. You know that verse in the Upper Room where Jesus says, “No longer do I call you my servants; I call you my friends.” God wants to be friends with us; and so, his command for us to love him is this incredible, staggering door opening into a personal relationship with the creator of the universe; which is just mind-blowing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And of course...

DAVE BAST

But that is what he wants!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and just a couple days after the incident in Matthew 22, where the Pharisees ask for the greatest commandment and Jesus tells them about this love, what is going to happen? Well, Jesus is going to die on the cross, and then three days later rise again; and then 50 days after that, what is going to happen? The Holy Spirit is going to get poured out on Pentecost; and so, now – now that we are on the other side of Easter – we have actually even in a sense moved beyond the commandment; because now God has moved into us, and the Holy Spirit lives in our hearts, and Jesus has invited us to call the God of the galaxies Father; and so, there is an intimacy there now, which is also very different than probably any other human relationship, because we really believe God lives in us by the Holy Spirit. Now we are temples of the Spirit, and so, our love for God has moved to a very new level post Pentecost than was true even in the Old Testament or in Matthew 22 yet.

DAVE BAST

Right; and another way of describing this new reality – this new relationship – is to do what the New Testament does when it speaks about union with Christ. As a bride is united with her bridegroom – Christ is the Bridegroom – we are the Bride – in the deepest mystery, perhaps, of all with respect to our salvation and our humanity, we are bound to God in a much deeper, more intimate union than we can conceive. It is not like a marriage. That is putting it the wrong way around. Marriage is like union with Christ. Marriage is the

analogy – union with Christ is the reality; and so, our love for God will ultimately be expressed in and through this profound mystery.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and for us as Christians, that love bubbles up when we sing to God in church; when we sing these songs and these hymns and the psalms, and we feel ourselves totally caught up in it, because we are caught up in God. It is like a kiss in the marriage. You do not command it, it just comes out naturally; and so, we sing, we pray, we take the Lord's Supper; where again we take God into ourselves in a very literal, spiritual way. All of these are part and parcel of what it means to be baptized and full of the Spirit.

DAVE BAST

Yes. So, how do you love God? Let me just summarize, if you have been listening to us through this program; if you made it this far. You love God by emotionally responding to his love. We love God by obeying him; by keeping his commandments. We love God by worshipping, by experiencing union with him in Jesus Christ; and one last thing: We love God by loving our neighbor as ourselves; the second of the great commandments. We are going to look at that in the next program. I hope you will tune in.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast. We would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into the scriptures. So, visit groundworkonline.com, and tell us topics and passages you would like us to dig into next on Groundwork.

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