

“But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together. One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, ‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?’ 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.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, “‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’” On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.’”
—*Matthew 22:34–40*

An in-depth study of the Christian mind must begin with the most fundamental truth of all: *the right use of the mind is the Christian’s most essential expression of love to God*. As stated by Os Guinness, “Thinking Christianly is first and foremost a matter of love—of minds in love with God and the truth of his world” (*Fit Bodies, Fat Minds*, 19). This reality not only justifies dedicating so much attention to this topic, it also demands it. There is no better biblical text to turn to for instruction on this truth than **Matthew 22:34–40**.

The Ultimate Question (Matt 22:34–36)

Our text is set within the context of a series of hostile questions aimed at Jesus by Jewish leaders intent on trapping him in an act of blasphemy—or at the very least, in an act of legal inconsistency. They first ask him a question about taxation (22:15–22), then a question about the resurrection (vv. 23–33), and finally a question about man’s greatest duty (vv. 34–40). In the first two exchanges, Jesus’ response is so irrefutable that the crowds are left “amazed” (v. 22) and “astonished” (v. 33). His command of the Mosaic Law and of logic is so exact that he leaves his interrogators embarrassed. This pressures the Jewish leaders to make one more attempt.

After Jesus had “silenced”—literally, “muzzled” (v. 34)—the Sadducees over their question about the resurrection (a doctrine the Sadducees flatly rejected), the Pharisees take their turn in posing what would be the ultimate question. In language that echoes Psalm 2:2 (“the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against His Anointed”), the Pharisees “gathered themselves together” (v. 34) and sent forth their representative—a “lawyer” or “legal expert” trained in the minutest details of the Mosaic Law (v. 35).

Although his inquiry is a bad-faith effort to “test” Jesus (v. 35), this lawyer asks a question that is nonetheless of utmost importance: **“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”** (v. 36). The context indicates that the adjective he uses—“great”—is to be understood in the superlative—“greatest.” The rabbis taught that the Mosaic Law consisted of 613 commandments (365 prohibitions and 248 exhortations), and they focused their energies on debating which laws among them were “weightiest” and which ones were “lesser.” The lawyer wished to seize the opportunity to reveal a weakness in Jesus’ prioritization of the Law. But rather than allowing the discussion to descend into a debate over a hierarchy of 613 commandments, Jesus uses the question to address man’s chief duty before his Creator.

The Supreme Answer (22:37–40)

Jesus’ answer to the question is the most direct of his interactions with the Jewish leadership as recorded in Matthew 22. That he poses no question in response and invites no dialogue indicates that the issue was indeed of supreme importance. It required a simple and straightforward answer. There was no room for debate, limitations, qualifications, or exceptions. His answer to the question concerning the “greatest” of God’s commandments contains two fundamental assertions:

- a) **The Primacy of Love to God (22:37–38)**. Jesus states, “‘YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.’ This is the great and foremost commandment.” Although his own words would have been ultimate since he himself is greater than the Old Testament prophets and writings (Matt 12:6, 41–42), Jesus answers by quoting the *Shema* of the Mosaic Law itself

(see Deut 6:4–5). The *Shema* was recited by all faithful Jews twice daily; it was written on their doorposts and on pieces of leather kept in small wooden boxes which they attached to their bodies (phylacteries). It contained the following components:

- **The Command: “You shall love!”** Jesus does not command *worship* as man’s greatest duty (see Exod 20:1–7), although that is implied. He commands *love*—the highest of virtues. Worship can be feigned (Matt 15:8–9; Isa 29:13); love cannot. John Calvin explained the difference as follows: “Although we ought to love God far more than men, yet most properly does God—instead of worship or honor—require *love* from us, because in this way he declares that no other worship is pleasing to Him than what is voluntary; for no man will actually obey God but he who *loves* Him.”

What does it mean *to love*? It is not fundamentally a feeling or emotion, but *a whole-personed, cleaving to another*. It is not a passive response—something into which men can “fall.” It is active—something that can be commanded. It is “not firstly an attitude or affection but . . . a way of life, the sweat of labor for Another, ‘the free service of our wills’” (Allison & Davies, *Matthew 19–28*, 241).

- **The Object: “the LORD your God.”** Jesus identifies the sole object of such love not as “God” in a generic sense, but as “the LORD your God.” According to Deuteronomy 6:4–5, the title “LORD” stands in the place of the personal name of *Yahweh*. In other words, this highest of virtues—love—cannot be directed to just any “higher power.” It is due the one and true God alone, Yahweh, who has revealed himself through his word and ultimately in His Son, Jesus (Matt 17:5).

“We love God for himself, or for his own sake; not exclusively to our own advantage therein: for a desire of union and enjoyment, which is our only advantage, is inseparable from this love.”
—John Owen, *The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded*, 351

- **The Instruments: “your heart . . . your soul . . . your mind.”** In stating his answer, Jesus slightly alters the wording of Deuteronomy 6:5 to substitute “mind” for “strength.” These three terms—*heart*, *soul*, and *mind*—are difficult to define and distinguish, partly because they refer to more than just physical components that can be neatly demarcated and measured, and partly because man’s composition is complex and intertwined. In fact, elsewhere in the Bible these terms are used interchangeably.

Nonetheless, some level of distinction between these three nouns is possible in this passage, especially with respect to the third term, “mind.” The term “**heart**” describes the innermost center of a man’s being—*his mission control center* (e.g., Prov 4:23; Matt 15:18–19). The term “**soul**” describes *the life force that energizes man* (e.g., Gen 2:7; Matt 10:28). But most clearly and consistently, the term “**mind**” describes *the faculty of thinking, comprehending, reasoning, and believing*. It is a man’s disposition—his pattern of making judgments about fundamental issues in life. The “mind” is what a man uses to perceive, interpret, and make sense of himself, the world around him, and God. While the mind is exercised by the heart (Luke 1:51), it still is distinguished from it by its specific operations. It is that which is responsible for intellectual life.

Ultimately, Jesus’ thrust here is *comprehensiveness*. The command to love God compels a response from *all* of man’s being. True love to God will be expressed by the *heart*—the center of devotion and obedience; by the *soul*—the source of life’s energy and passion; and by the *mind*—the faculty of thinking and belief. Any love that is not produced by all three components of man’s existence will not be a true love to God—the kind of love that pleases God.

- **The Extent: “all . . . all . . . all.”** The repeated word “all” emphasizes *totality*. There can be no room for a divided allegiance, for a half-hearted, half-souled, half-minded cleaving. There can be no distinction between the sacred and the secular, between Sunday and weekdays, between church life and private life. As R. C. H. Lenski states, “God will have no mere part, allow no division or subtraction. Not even the smallest corner is to be closed against God” (*Matthew*, 880–81).

To reassert the primacy of this responsibility on man’s part, Jesus states, **“This is the great and foremost commandment.”** This is man’s chief end; this is his greatest and foremost duty.

“To love God with our minds is to hold Him in high esteem, to think about Him with reverence and with adoration. The more we love God with our minds, the more we’ll be driven to do that other thing that is alien to us in our fallen condition, namely, to worship Him. To pursue God with our minds simply for intellectual enjoyment and without the ultimate purpose of loving and worshiping Him is to miss what it means to love Him with our minds. True knowledge of God always bears fruit in greater love for God and a greater desire to praise Him. The more we know Him, the more glorious He will appear to us. And the more glorious He appears to us, the more inclined we will be to praise Him, to honor Him, to worship Him, and to obey Him.”

—R. C. Sproul

- b) ***The Necessity of Love for Others (22:39)***. For the second part of his answer, Jesus again quotes from the Mosaic Law—this time from Leviticus 19:18—saying, **“The second is like it, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’”** On the one hand, Jesus connects this second commandment to the first to show the necessary relationship. The second naturally reflects the first—it is “like” it. If one truly loves Yahweh with heart, soul, and mind, he will necessarily love those made in Yahweh’s image.

But the second is still wholly dependent upon the first. The order cannot be inverted without a grave departure into false religion. Apart from obedience to the command to love God, fulfilling the command to love one’s neighbor in any true sense will not only be impossible, but it will give to that neighbor that which is due to God alone (Exod 20:3; Luke 14:26). The things that belong to God must be reserved for him alone (Matt 22:21).

As a summation of his two-part answer, Jesus closes with these words: **“On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”** As William Hendriksen states, “This twofold command . . . is the peg on which the whole ‘law and the prophets’ hang. Remove that peg and all is lost, for the entire Old Testament, with its commandments and covenants, prophecies and promises, types and testimonies, invitations and exhortations, points to the love of God which demands the answer of love in return” (*Matthew*, 810).

Jesus’ answer is so powerful that Matthew does not even record a response on the part of the crowds as he did with Jesus’ previous two responses (vv. 22, 33). The reader is left to ponder his own response.

How Then Shall We Live?

How must we today respond to Jesus’ answer to this ultimate question about man’s chief end in life? Here are five applications, particularly as they relate to the mind.

1. **Loving God requires the use of your mind.** Simply stated, you cannot love God without the engagement of your thinking. *Christian anti-intellectualism*—the discounting of the importance of doctrine and the life of the mind—is an oxymoron; it is certainly not Christian. It is impossible to have biblical faith without doctrine, to love God with your heart and not with your mind (Hosea 4:6; Rom 10:1–3). Therefore, reject the false dichotomies popular in evangelicalism today and embrace the truth that the right use of your mind in response to God’s word is an ultimate act of love to him. Do not settle for anything less.
2. **Loving God requires all of your thinking.** Remember that Jesus placed an absolute claim not only each aspect of your being (“heart . . . soul . . . and mind”), but on everything within each aspect of your being (“all . . . all . . . all”). You cannot have divided loyalties within your thoughts. You cannot embrace divine revelation in part of your mind and a secular perspective in another part. There is no room for doublemindedness (Matt 6:24; James 1:5–8). Jesus makes nothing less than a radical claim to every thought. Therefore, to love God requires the constant effort to bring *every thought* into submission to him—as an expression of love.

3. **Loving God with your mind is prior to loving others.** Using your mind to love God must naturally lead to loving your neighbor. But the great travesty of our day is that the order of these commandments has been reversed—the “greatest and foremost” has been subjected to “the second.” Many Christians now align their thinking to a hierarchy where neighbor is primary and God is subservient. Perhaps this is no more vividly illustrated than in the popular mantra promoted by government officials in this Covid era and thoughtlessly parroted by many professing Christians: “Worship responsibly!” Implicit in this motto is the idea that God only demands worship if it can be done in a way that meets the approval of the surrounding community. Love defined by one’s neighbor comes first; love directed toward God is secondary. These are the community rules. But Jesus is clear: You cannot champion “love your neighbor” if you do not prioritize “love Yahweh your God” (Matt 22:34–40). As he stated elsewhere, “If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26).
4. **Loving God with your mind requires fuel.** In response to the preeminence Jesus places on this command, you cannot neglect the cultivation of your mind toward this ultimate purpose in life. The mind does not develop and improve by itself. It must be fed and exercised. The fuel for this growing fire will be found in a steady diet of Scripture (foremost) as well as in books and sermons about Scripture. It will be fanned by meditation, prayer, and singing. As John Piper states, “The fires of love for God need fuel. And the fires of love for God drive the engines of thought and deed. There is a circle. Thinking feeds the fire, and the fire fuels more thinking and doing. I love God because I know him. And I want to know him more because I love him” (*Think!*, 89).
5. **Loving God is the ultimate purpose of your thinking.** Notice that love is the *effect* of the right exercise of your whole being—your heart, soul, and mind. Thus, in the same way that *Christian anti-intellectualism* is not an option, neither is *Christian intellectualism*—the elevation of mere knowing as the highest of human achievements. The purpose of thinking is never merely to become a “thinker” or a “theologian”—to be “puffed up” by knowledge (1 Cor 8:1). Intellectual abilities must be exercised for the ultimate purpose of *cleaving to God*—of enjoying His person through delighting in thinking His thoughts after Him. As John Owen stated, “God is ‘all in all.’ He therefore is, or ought to be, the only supreme, absolute object of our thoughts and desires.”

That we can *love* Yahweh, the one true God, with all our being is truly an astonishing thought. There can be no higher and better purpose in life. Yet Scripture also teaches that this is *impossible*—impossible for man in his sinful state. This reality will be the focus of our next study.

For Further Study

1. Memorize Matthew 22:36–40.
2. Based on Matthew 22:36–40, explain what it means to “love God.”
3. Are you able to articulate the reasons *why* you love God? List some of them.
4. Provide examples—real or hypothetical—of how men fall short in loving God by not giving him *all* of their minds.
5. What are the best practices you have used to fuel your love for God in your thinking? Explain how they have helped develop your love for God.
6. List several measures you plan to take in order to fuel the fire of loving God with your mind.
7. The hymn “Be Thou My Vision” (*Hymns of Grace*, 176) is an excellent response to the truths presented in Matthew 22:36–40. Take time this week to sing through its stanzas several times, considering how it expresses a *cleaving to God* in heart, soul, and mind.

Audio, Video, and handouts for this session: gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: September 22, 7pm – “Darkened in Understanding”

Have a question? Write to menoftheword@gracechurch.org