

The Most Important of All

October 4, 2026

ILLUSTRATION

- Have you ever noticed that some people make simple things complicated?
- You ask someone for directions, and 20 minutes later you know the history of the county, the location of three gas stations, and where their grandmother used to live—
- but you still don't know how to get where you're going!
- Sometimes we do the same thing with religion.
- We can make Christianity so complicated that we lose sight of what it's all about.
 - We **debate** doctrine.
 - We **discuss** worship styles.
 - We **argue** over traditions.
 - We **examine** one another's religious practices.
 - We can **spend hours discussing** what the church should be doing.
- And sometimes, in all that discussion,
 - we forget the very thing Jesus said was most important.

LOVE

- In **Matthew 22**, Jesus is approached by a lawyer,
 - an expert in the Jewish law.
 - He **isn't** asking an innocent question.
 - He is testing Jesus.

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.”

- The Pharisees had heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees.
- So they gathered together, and one of them, an expert in the law, asked Jesus:
 - *“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”*
- Think about that question.
- The Jewish religious leaders had identified
 - 613 commandments in the law—
 - 248 positive commandments and

- 365 prohibitions (Don't Do's),
- according to traditional rabbinic counting.
- They wanted Jesus to identify the greatest.

JESUS **DOESN'T** HESITATE.

- He **doesn't** offer a list of ten possibilities.
- He **doesn't** give them a theological dissertation.
- **He gives them two commandments.**
 - And then He makes an extraordinary statement:
 - *"All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*
- In other words,
 - if you want to understand what God expects of you,
 - start here:
 - Love God. Love your neighbor.

ILLUSTRATION

A professor of theological ethics opened his class for the semester by reading a letter from a parent to a government official.

The parent complained that his son, who had received a good education, gone to all the right schools, and was headed for a good job as a lawyer, had gotten involved with a weird religious sect. The father continued that the members of this sect controlled his every move, told him whom to date and whom not to date, and had taken all of his money. The parent pleaded with the government official to do something about this strange religious group.

Then the professor asked the students, "Who is this letter describing?"

There was quite a debate, with the class discussing some off the wall group cults, like the Branch Dividend's, or those who were going to join the spaceship at the tail of Haley's Comet. After about 15 minutes of discussion the Professor revealed that the letter was from a third century Roman parent concerned about a group of people called.... Christians.

It doesn't sound so weird now does it?

BUT LET'S LOOK MORE CLOSELY AT WHAT JESUS IS TELLING US.

1. **The first commandment:** Love God with everything you have

Matthew 22:37

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

- a. Jesus is quoting **Deuteronomy 6:5**. *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."*
- b. So, This was not a new idea.

- i. The Jewish people had heard this commandment
- ii. throughout their lives.
- iii. It was a cornerstone of the Jewish faith.

But notice the language Jesus uses.

- c. He **doesn't** say:
 - Love God when things are going well.
 - Love God when you have time.
 - Love God when you need something.
 - Love God on Sunday morning.
- d. **He says** love God
 - i. with ALL your heart,
 - ii. ALL your soul,
 - iii. and ALL your mind.

2. Let's break this down:

1. LOVE GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART

- a. The heart represents
 - i. the center of our affections,
 - ii. desires,
 - iii. and commitments.
- b. What has first place in your heart?
 - i. For some people
 - it's money.
 - For others it's their career,
 - their family,
 - their hobbies,
 - or their possessions.
- c. There is nothing inherently wrong with enjoying those things.
 - i. But there is something wrong
 - i. when those things take the place
 - ii. that belongs to God.
- d. Jesus **isn't** asking for a little affection.

HE'S ASKING FOR FIRST PLACE!

ILLUSTRATION

Consider this question:

If someone watched your life for 7 days,

without hearing a single sermon

or religious statement from you,

Would they know that God was important to you?

That is a challenging question.

- e. We can say we love God,
 - i. **but** our priorities often tell
 - ii. a different story.

2. LOVE GOD WITH ALL YOUR SOUL

- a. This is deeper than emotion.
- b. It is the commitment of our **entire being**.
- c. It means that our relationship with God
 - i. **isn't** something we put on
 - ii. like a Sunday morning outfit.
- d. **It's who we are.**
 - i. There is a difference between attending church and belonging to God.
 - ii. There is a difference between knowing religious language
 - a. **and** having a relationship with the Lord.
 - iii. We can know
 - a. all the hymns,
 - b. all the Bible stories,
 - c. and all the right answers,
 - d. **and still miss the heart of what God wants.**

Remember the words of **1 John 4:16**:

"God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them."

- e. Our relationship with God should change the way we live.

3. LOVE GOD WITH ALL YOUR MIND

- a. This is an interesting addition.
- b. God **doesn't** ask us
 - i. to check our brains at the church door.
 - i. He wants us to

- i. think,
 - ii. study,
 - iii. question,
 - iv. examine,
 - v. and understand.
- ii. **Romans 12:2** tells us to *"be transformed by the renewing of our minds"*.
- c. Christianity **isn't** simply an emotional experience.
 - i. **It involves**
 - i. what we believe,
 - ii. how we think,
 - iii. and how we make decisions.
- d. You **cannot** consistently live for someone
 - i. you refuse to get to know.
- e. The more we understand God's character,
 - i. His **love**,
 - ii. His **patience**,
 - iii. His **mercy**,
 - iv. and His **expectations**,
 - v. the more our lives should **reflect** those qualities.

ILLUSTRATION:

Imagine a husband telling his wife, "Honey, I love you more than anything in the world."

But he never listens to her, never spends time with her, never considers her feelings, and never takes her wishes seriously.

Eventually, she might reasonably ask, "What exactly does your love mean?"

- f. Love is more than words.
- g. And our love for God
 - i. must be more than words.

1. THE SECOND COMMANDMENT: Love your neighbor as yourself

Matthew 22:39:

"And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

- a. Notice something important.
- b. Jesus says the second commandment is **LIKE** the first.
 - i. They are **connected**.
 - ii. You cannot claim to love God

- i. while deliberately treating the people He created
 - ii. with contempt.
- iii. **John** makes this especially clear in
1 John 4:20:
"For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen."
- iv. **That's pretty direct!**
- c. Loving God and Loving your Brother are directly **linked** together
 - i. Inseparable
- d. We sometimes want to separate
 - i. our relationship with God
 - ii. from our relationship with other people.
- e. Jesus won't let us do that.

2. Who is my neighbor?

- a. This is not a new question.
- b. In **Luke 10:29**, a man asked Jesus essentially the same question:
"Who is my neighbor?"

- c. Jesus responded with the parable of the Good Samaritan.

A man is traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho.

He is attacked by robbers, beaten, stripped, and left half-dead.

A priest comes along.

He sees the man and passes by on the other side.

Then a Levite comes along.

He also sees the man and passes by.

Finally, a Samaritan comes along.

And here is where the story becomes uncomfortable.

The Samaritan was a member of a group

despised by many Jews of that time.

Yet he is the one who stops.

He bandages the man's wounds,

puts him on his animal, takes him to an inn, and pays for his care.

Jesus asks which of the three was a neighbor?

The answer

"The one who had mercy on him."

- d. **Notice what Jesus did.**
- e. **He changed the question.**
 - i. The issue **wasn't** whether the wounded man qualified as a neighbor.
 - ii. The issue was whether the people passing him were willing to BE neighbors.
 - iii. That's an important distinction.
 - iv. We spend too much time deciding **who deserves our love**.
 - v. Jesus tells us to become people who give love.

ILLUSTRATION

Agatha Burgess is 87 years old and lives in the small mill town of Buffalo, South Carolina. She gets up every morning at five o'clock and begins cooking, and she has been doing this for over twenty years. She gets up and cooks for the local Meals on Wheels. At 11:00 A.M. volunteers come by her house and take the food she cooks to elderly people who can't cook for themselves, or for other needy folks.

By noon, another group of people come to Agatha's house for lunch. Mill workers, judges, truck drivers, anyone who comes at noon gets to fill their plates and go back for seconds. Agatha runs an all you can eat kitchen. For all this, they pay \$ 2.75. She knows that's too much for some of the folks who come by, so if they don't pay she doesn't say anything.

A Newspaper reporter was doing a story on this remarkable woman and asked her the obvious question, why? Why do you do this 5 day a week every week? I need you to listen to Agatha's reply because it is the heart of our message tonight. She said "I do this because I love it. I always wanted to be a person that lived by the side of the road, and could be called a friend to man. She said that she would continue to do this until she died because this is what she lived for, and these people coming everyday mean so much to her.

Agatha Burgess probably knows more about this text than any of us

3. **The reason we love:**

1 John 4:19:

"We love because he first loved us."

- a. We didn't initiate this relationship.
- b. God did.
- c. He loved us before we understood what love was.
- d. He loved us when we were undeserving.
- e. He demonstrated that love through Jesus Christ.
- f. And now He calls us to reflect that same love in the world around us.

4. Love is demonstrated through action

1 John 3:18 says:

"Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth."

- a. It's **easy to say** "we love people."
- b. It's much harder to **demonstrate** it.
- c. Love sometimes means:
 - Visiting someone who is lonely.
 - Forgiving someone who has hurt us.
 - Helping someone who cannot repay us.
 - Listening when we'd rather talk.
 - Showing kindness to someone who disagrees with us.
 - Being patient with someone who is difficult.
- d. Sometimes the greatest sermon a person will ever hear
- e. is **not** delivered from a pulpit.
 - a. It's delivered through the kindness of another human being.

ILLUSTRATION:

- It's easy to love people when they agree with us, appreciate us, and treat us well.
- But Jesus calls us to something deeper.
- Love is not merely a response to how someone treats us.
- It is a reflection of who we are becoming.

3. The two commandments cannot be separated

Matthew 22:40:

"All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

- a. Think about the significance of that statement.
- b. Jesus is saying that everything God had revealed
 - i. through the law and the prophets
 - ii. is connected to these **two** principles.
 - i. Love God.
 - ii. Love people.

CONSIDER HOW THIS WORKS.

5. Religion without love misses the point

- a. Consider the church at Ephesus:

Revelation 2:1–5

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.”

- b. Jesus commends them for
 - i. their hard work,
 - ii. perseverance,
 - iii. and rejection of false teaching.
 - They were doctrinally alert.
 - They were busy.
 - They were committed.
- c. But Jesus had something against them.
 - i. They had forsaken their first love.

THINK ABOUT THAT.

- d. Paul addresses this:

1 Corinthians 13:1–3

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

- i. That should cause every Christian to stop and examine himself.
- ii. Are we more concerned with winning arguments **than** winning hearts?
- iii. Are we more concerned with correcting people **than** helping them?
- iv. Are we more concerned with what happens inside the church building **than** what happens outside it?
- v. These are questions worth asking.

6. Three questions we should ask ourselves

Question 1:

Does God really have first place in my life?

- Not just in my words,
- but in my decisions,
- my priorities,
- my finances,
- and my relationships.

Question 2:

Am I loving people who are difficult to love?

- It's easy to love our friends.
- It's easy to love people who make us feel good.
- But what about those who
 - irritate us,
 - disappoint us,
 - or disagree with us?
- Can we demonstrate the character of Christ even when it isn't easy?

Question 3:

If I disappeared from this congregation tomorrow, would anyone know that I loved them?

- Would someone miss your encouragement?
- Would someone miss your kindness?
- Would someone remember that you took the time to listen?
- Would someone remember that you helped when they needed help?
- a. Christianity isn't just about what we receive.
 - i. It's also about what we give.

Conclusion: Two commandments - one way of life

- a. Let's return to the question the lawyer asked Jesus.

"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"
- b. Jesus answered with two commandments.
 - i. **Love God with everything you have.**
 - ii. **Love your neighbor as yourself.**
- c. The purpose of Christianity is **not** simply to make us religious people.
 - a. It is to make us people
 - b. whose lives reflect the love of God.

d. I sometimes wonder whether we have made Christianity complicated

Perhaps we need to return to these two commandments.

- Love God.
 - Love people.
- a. And let everything else in our lives grow out of those two commitments.

QUOTE

Victor Knowles- *“The biggest test we will ever face is loving a God whose letters we have read, whose heart we have come to know, but whose face we have never seen.”*