

The Essence of Obedience

Matthew 22:34-40

Introduction

Magic Trick: I've got to confess that I love a good magic trick (not into these feats of strength; I don't need any "mind freaks"; I don't care how long you can live in a cage, in the dark, under the frozen arctic tundra). I like good ol' fashioned "magic." I wanna see a card come out of a lemon or a rabbit out of a hat or the Statue of Liberty disappear (it's fun when people who hate magic just say "mirrors" and "magnets").

- Why is magic so interesting? It's the unexpected, the surprise, the out of the ordinary.
- But there's another side to the entertainment of magic, trying to "figure out" how they do it. Sometimes you know! (Penn and Teller *Fool Us*).
- Once you know a trick, there is no surprise or intrigue to the "magic."

While not discounting a church's unique gifts, situation, and context, I worry when the church tries too hard to use "tricks". "What you catch 'em with, you gotta keep 'em with."

- The secret is there really is no secret.
- There is no trick to spiritual growth (exercise and weight loss). There are gifts of grace, invitations to discipleship, basic commands that allow you to grow, but there is no secret.
- There's no magic bullet to holiness, there is no simple or easy way to get into the kingdom of God.

The core of the issue boils down to this, do you truly, actually, deeply love God with all of your life for all of your life?

³⁴ But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. ³⁵ And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" ³⁷ 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. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."¹

1. A Question of Priority (vv. 34-36)

³⁴ But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. ³⁵ And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?"

Another Question: Coulda done a miniseries on questions? (1) Pharisees ask a political question, (2) Sadducees as a theology question, (3) now the Pharisees ask an ethical question.

¹ ³⁴ Οἱ δὲ Φαρισαῖοι ἀκούσαντες ὅτι ἐφίμωσεν τοὺς Σαδδουκαίους συνήχθησαν ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό, ³⁵ καὶ ἐπηρώτησεν εἷς ἐξ αὐτῶν [νομικὸς] πειράζων αὐτόν, ³⁶ Διδάσκαλε, ποία ἐντολὴ μεγάλη ἐν τῷ νόμῳ; ³⁷ ὁ δὲ ἔφη αὐτῷ, Ἀγαπήσεις κύριον τὸν θεόν σου ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ καρδίᾳ σου καὶ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ ψυχῇ σου καὶ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ διανοίᾳ σου· ³⁸ αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ μεγάλη καὶ πρώτη ἐντολή. ³⁹ δευτέρα δὲ ὅμοια αὐτῇ, Ἀγαπήσεις τὸν πλησίον σου ὡς σεαυτόν. ⁴⁰ ἐν ταύταις ταῖς δυσὶν ἐντολαῖς ὅλος ὁ νόμος κρέμαται καὶ οἱ προφῆται.

- These two groups represent (sort-of) the worldly and the religious (even though both are religious).
 - The Pharisees (the religious) get a lot more of Jesus' condemnation *probably* because they are a lot closer to his theology (missing close is a lot more dangerous than missing widely).
 - The gospel is not the way of the world (rebellion) or the way of the religious (self-righteousness), it is a new way that transforms all of your life into the service of Jesus.
- After the Sadducees get another rhetorical smackdown from Jesus, the Pharisees take another swing at testing him (diminish his power to preserve their own). Wouldn't it just be easier to surrender and submit? (Like a child needing sleep: how much of parenting is convincing a tired person to sleep?). Yet they persist in their refusal to believe.

Most Important Command?: What is the most important commandment? What is essential for obeying God?

- Maybe I could ask you this question. Prayer? Worship? Missions? Community Service?
- What is central to your faith?
 - Most religions have such a thing. In Islam there are "5 Pillars." In Buddhism, it is the 8-fold path.
- In Second Temple Judaism we find similar discussions trying to figure out what to focus on. For the Pharisees and later Rabbinic Judaism, they identified in the Torah 613 commands (e.g., *mitzvot*, cf. Bar Mitzvah). And all of these are *real* commands but they understood that some were more serious than others (e.g., which are "heavy" and which are "light"). Some Rabbis looked at various passages from the Prophets and the Writings (explain TNK and BT of later OT to earlier OT).

Example Summaries:

- Ps 15:1-5 (11): **O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill?** He who ¹walks blamelessly and ²does what is right and ³speaks truth in his heart; who ⁴does not slander with his tongue and ⁵does no evil to his neighbor, ⁶nor takes up a reproach against his friend; ⁷in whose eyes a vile person is despised, but who ⁸honors those who fear the LORD; who ⁹swears to his own hurt and does not change; who ¹⁰does not put out his money at interest and ¹¹does not take a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things shall never be moved.
- Isa 33:15-16 (6): He who ¹walks righteously and ²speaks uprightly, who ³despises the gain of oppressions, ⁴who shakes his hands, lest they hold a bribe, who ⁵stops his ears from hearing of bloodshed and ⁶shuts his eyes from looking on evil, **he will dwell on the heights**; his place of defense will be the fortresses of rocks; his bread will be given him; his water will be sure.
- Mic 6:8 (3): He has told you, O man, **what is good**; and what does the LORD require of you but to ¹do justice, and to ²love kindness, and to ³walk humbly with your God?.
- Isa 56:1 (2): Thus says the LORD: ¹"Keep justice, and ²do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my righteousness be revealed.
- Amos 5:4 (1): For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel: ¹"Seek me and live;
- Hab 2:4b (1): but the **righteous** shall ¹live by his faith.

- It should not surprise us to find correspondence between summaries. These prophets are looking at the commands of God and showing how they fit into a life of faith. Jesus comes in a long line of these prophets, he is the greater prophet to come (cf. Deut 18). He is not only the messenger of God's Word, he is the Word become flesh, he is God himself.

Minimum Required Effort: It wouldn't be a terrible question if we didn't know something about their motives. Throughout the Gospel they have opposed, undermined, and questioned Jesus. They have rejected his authority and been jealous of his popularity. Here, again, they are trying "to test him."

- Either they think they know the answer and he'll be wrong ("gotcha") or he'll say something that the people disagree with and lose credibility and popularity.

We should have known there was something foul afoot because a "lawyer" (νομικός) asked the question.

- What's the difference between a lawyer and a liar? The pronunciation.
- How can you tell a lawyer is lying? Their mouth is moving (same as a politician; why else are so many politicians lawyers).

Just joking, there are wonderful, godly lawyers in the world, some I know personally, some in our congregation. But without the ethical guidance of the gospel, legal thinking *can* quickly devolve into what is "legal" not what is "right" or "just."

- This is an expert in the Torah (Jewish law).
- We see this today, there are times when something is "legal" but it is "immoral." Just because something is "legal" doesn't make it "right" and *certainly* doesn't make it "godly" (*sidenote* We need good, godly lawyers and laws and should continue to fight for them).

Test or Learn?: They weren't interested in the right answer, their question was a test, it wasn't sincere. They wanted to trip him up, not learn from him.

- Because they refused to recognize Jesus' authority, the truths of his words didn't penetrate their hearts or transform their lives.
- Here's the truth, they were not trying to love God more, but love God less. They weren't asking how they can love God better (to the max), they were asking what is the minimum amount they must do to be "good enough." They were looking for the minimum possible effort and missing out on maximizing their joy in God.
 - This is what's wrong (often) with the tithing question (or attendance question, prayer, evangelism, etc.). How much must I give? (It all belongs to Jesus). How much should I pray? (Pray without ceasing). How often should I attend? (Do not forsake the gathering). Who should I share with? (Make disciples of *all* nations).

2. The Root of Obedience (vv. 37-38)

³⁷ 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." ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment.

Shema: Jesus gives an unsurprising (but surprising) answer.

- It's **unsurprising** because he quotes part of Deut 6, right after the *Shema* (שמע). The first word is *Shema* ("hear"): "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deut 6:4). This was the basic "confession" of faith said by faithful Jews at their morning and evening prayers. It would have been very familiar to them.
- But it's a little **surprising** because he doesn't quote the most famous verse, but the next one (Deut 6:5): "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."
 - There is a minor difference (might = mind) in the Matthew version (maybe because of paraphrase, or translation; cf. Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek) but the point is clear.

Loving God with All: Just looking at the construction of the verse we can see the main parts. The **main verb** is "love," the **object** of that love is "the Lord your God," and the **extent** of that love is "total" (i.e., "all").

- Christopher J. H. Wright, missionary and OT scholar describes the essence of Deuteronomy 6:5 thusly: "'Love the Lord your God with total commitment (heart), with your total self (soul), to total excess.' Loving God should be 'over the top!'"

The most repeated word in this verse is "all." That is the hard part. Loving God with all, nothing held back.

- We so often want to love God with *some* of our hobbies, *some* of our time, *some* of our money, *some* of our relationships ("I surrender some").
- Not even the top priority but the page on which your priorities are written.
 - What does it look like to love God above your family and *with* your family, above your job and *through* your job, above your money and *with* your money.

All You Need is Love: What does it look like to obey God? Or (for us), what does it mean to be a "good" Christian? Jesus gives a unique answer, he focuses on "love." At the root, at the core, is not what you do (that is the fruit) but what you love.

- Think about the core of Islam: (1) profession of faith (shahada), (2) prayer (salat), (3) alms (zakat), (4) fasting (sawm), and (5) pilgrimage (hajj). It's not about loving Allah but about doing certain things for him. You don't have to love Allah, you have to obey him.

At the core of life, behavior, purpose, is not primarily what you do (that flows out of this) but what (who!) you love!

- Your loves direct your decisions, your values, your behaviors. And, unfortunately, in our sin, our sins are self-directed. Who do most people love most? Themselves!
- So, if I love myself, then I am relying on myself to give me sufficient value, purpose, and identity.
- "The question isn't whether you're going to believe, but who; it's not merely about what to believe, but who to entrust yourself to. Do we really think humanity is our best bet? Do we really think **we** are the answer to our problems, we who've generated all of them? The problem with everything from Enlightenment scientism to mushy Eat-Pray-Love-ism is **us**. If anything [is] irrational, it's the notion that we are our own best hope" (James K. A. Smith).

“Whether for good or evil, each man lives by his love” (Augustine).

- Too often in our vision of discipleship we’ve focused on what you know (which matters) and what you do (which matters) but to the exclusion of what you love! The reality is that our loves are in the driver’s seat. So we have a lot of people who know Christian things (e.g., theology, doctrine, etc.) and do Christian things (e.g., tithe, worship music, Christian t-shirt, attend church) but **don’t love God**.
- If all that matters is what you do and what information you have, then God would have made all of us robots. But God desires our worship. He deserves our love. So he made us free creatures that can love him (and not love him). You are not a mindless automaton who just *does things* but a free being who loves things, and you are called to love God (cf. runaway horse vs. pet rock).

We are made because God loves us and are made to love God. Love is our origin and our goal.

- Which means we find our identity and value in the fact that God loves us and we found our purpose and mission in our act of loving God.
 - Doctrine of Mixed Loves (disordered loves) (Augustine). We love God as a means to an end instead of an end in himself.

The Pharisees, in their attempt to *do* for God, were missing God himself. “God has given his word as a revelation of himself. If, then, I use his word rightly, I will long to see him, and he will be the focus of my study” (Dale Ralph Davis). If all of your religious activity doesn’t lead you to love God more, then you’re doing it wrong.

- Now, you might hear that and, at first, think that what you do doesn’t matter. But there is an important relationship between our habits and our loves. Just like our loves guide our behavior, our habits and rhythms shape our loves (e.g., conversation, date night, etc.; falling vs. walking in love).
 - One reason we need to come to worship each week, not to please God but to see and worship God. To get a clear vision of who we love.
 - The reason you need to spend time in Scripture is not out of religious obligation but out of God’s invitation to know, see, and love him more (e.g., love letter from spouse).

Love and Obedience: And there’s a beautiful relationship between obedience. The more you love God, the more joyfully you will obey him. Obedience is the fruit of the tree of faith that has been nurtured in the soil of love.

- Good behavior done to prove righteousness or earn a blessing is insufficient fuel for our obedience. It will dry up as soon as we mess up (which we will) or, if we think we’re doing well, it will make us proud and self-sufficient, twisting our hearts toward ourselves rather than God.
 - “Resting in the love of God doesn’t squelch ambition; it fuels it with a different fire. I don’t have to strive to get God to love me; rather, because God loves me unconditionally, I’m free to take risks and launch out into the deep” (James K. A. Smith). I’m free to obey without fear of failure or worry about reward. I can obey him wholeheartedly simply because I love him.

3. The Result of Love (v. 39)

³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Both/And: Here Jesus quotes from Lev 19:18. How does command one relate to command two? Truly loving God should always lead to loving others. Our vertical relationship (God) always impacts our horizontal relationships (others).

- Which means you can't have one without the other. If you think you can truly love God but your life shows no love of others then you don't *really* love God. And if you think you can love people well, even with all their flaws, in your own strength, then you are mistaken.
- Too often people want to separate these two (I can just love God; or I can just be nice to people).
 - Think of the 10 commandments (two tables of the Decalogue). The first four to God, the last six to others.
 - "Two-fold law of love" (Barth)

Love for God and neighbor are conjoined (not same, but related).

- The love of God must be foundational (start there). True love of neighbor starts with loving God (true of marriage and everything else)
- If it is, then it will *always* flow into love of neighbor (i.e., "like it). The love of God is the foundation upon which real love of others is built. We don't love like the world. We don't love based on what others can do for us. We love "because he first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19).

So the love of God results in loving others: "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom 13:8-10).

- **If you do not love others, you are not loving God!**

Love Your Neighbor: Jesus goes to great lengths to show that everyone is your neighbor. What does it look like to love your neighbor? How much do you love yourself?

- The gospel, in its truest form, always points outward. It's others focused (e.g., Phil 2).
- Loving your neighbor as yourself is radical because it cuts right at the root of sin. In our sin we are *self-centered*, in Christ, we learn to consider the needs of others (you are rarely more like Christ than when you love others who don't deserve it).
 - Are you self-seeking or self-giving?
 - "The person captivated by Christ is never content with merely seeking the well-being of him or herself or (even) of (just) his family; he or she will also seek justice as widely as possible."
 - Loving God, leads to loving others, and can never be threatened because it is directed and empowered by God.
- Loving your neighbor is not asking what's best for me (like modern politics), it's asking what is best for others: "Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise" (Lk 10:36-37).

Conclusion

Bear the Weight: ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

- The commands of God “hang” on these two sides of love (God and neighbor), meaning this kind of love is **sufficient** to bear the weight of the entire (Hebrew) Bible.
- These are the heart of obedience. I truly believe, **if you love God with all your heart, and you love your neighbor as yourself, you will always be heading in the direction of obeying God.**
 - But when your love of God wanes, and your love of self increases then you are heading away from God’s will and righteousness.

Personal Questions: My questions for you today are ones that **only you can answer**: do you love God?

- Is your heart captivated by the beauty of God, the truth of his promises, the hope of the gospel?
 - Not... Do you believe the right things? Do you love the right things? Do you *enjoy* God? Do you love his Word? Do you desire his presence? Do you trust his path?
 - Are you a person who loves God and others effusively, authentically, deeply, unreservedly?
- “Being a disciple of Jesus is not primarily a matter of getting the right ideas and doctrines and beliefs into your head in order to guarantee proper behavior; rather, it’s a matter of being the kind of person who loves rightly—who loves God and neighbor and is oriented to the world by the *priority* of that love” (James K. A. Smith).
 - What can you do to cultivate your love of God?
 - To think about God deeply. Worship him. Spend time with him. Get to know him.
 - What patterns, habits, and activities are you doing to cultivate that love (e.g., dating).
- Don’t abandon your first love (cf. Church of Ephesus, Rev 2:4).