

Love Your Neighbor as Yourself, Part 1
by John Piper

Matthew 22:34-40

But when the Pharisees heard that He had put the Sadducees to silence, they gathered themselves together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, "Teacher, which is the greatest 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."

The Incredible Context of This Commandment

My main concern in this text is the commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But it is surrounded by such stupendous statements we would be foolhardy to plunge into it without pondering these surroundings. So it is going to take us two weeks at least to deal with this text.

The Great and Foremost Commandment

The two stupendous things I have in mind are, first, the greatest commandment in the Word of God. In verse 36 a Pharisee asks Jesus, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" Jesus answers by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5,

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.

Then he adds his own words to put the commandment even higher than the question required. The question was, "Which is the great commandment?" and Jesus says, "This is the great and foremost commandment."

So the first stupendous thing surrounding the commandment to love your neighbor as you love yourself is the commandment to love God as the greatest and foremost thing that is in the entire Word of God. The greatest and most important thing you can do is love God—love GOD—with all your heart and soul and mind.

On These Two Depend the Whole Law and the Prophets

The other stupendous thing surrounding the command to love your neighbor as you love yourself is what follows in verse 40,

On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.

Everything else in the Old Testament in some sense depends on these two commandments: the commandment to love God and the commandment to love our neighbor. This is an amazing statement. We have the authority of the Son of God here telling us something utterly stupendous about the origin and design of the entire plan and Word of God.

The Overwhelming Commandment to Neighbor Love

Now those are the two stupendous things we need to ponder before we dive into the overwhelming commandment to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. I say it is overwhelming because it seems to demand that I tear the skin off my body and wrap it around another person so that I feel that I am that other person; and all the longings that I have for my own safety and health and success and happiness I now feel for that other person as though he were me.

It is an absolutely staggering commandment. If this is what it means, then something unbelievably powerful and earthshaking and reconstructing and overturning and upending will have to happen in our souls. Something supernatural. Something well beyond what self-preserving, self-enhancing, self-exalting, self-esteeming, self-advancing human beings like John Piper can do on their own.

Before we take up such a commandment and apply it to our lives, we need to ponder these two stupendous things that surround the commandment. That the commandment to love God is the great and foremost commandment in the Word of God and that all the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commandments.

The Whole Law and the Prophets

Let's start with verse 40. "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."

He Didn't Have to Say This

First, consider the sheer fact that Jesus said this. He didn't have to say it. The Pharisee didn't ask this. Jesus went beyond what he asked and said more. He seems to want to push the importance and centrality of these commandments as much as he can. He has said that the commandment to love God is great and foremost. He has said the commandment to love your neighbor as you love yourself is "like it." Verse 39: "The second is like it . . ." That's enough to raise the stakes here almost as high as they can be raised. We have the greatest commandment

in all the revelation of God to humanity (Love God); and we have the second greatest, which is like the greatest (Love your neighbor).

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He wants us to be stunned at how important these two commandments are. He wants us to stop and wonder. He wants us to spend more than a passing moment on these things. More than a week or two of preaching. So he adds, "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets." They are 1) the first and the greatest, and 2) the second that is like the first and the greatest. But they are also the two commandments on which everything else in the Bible depends. "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."

Now what does this mean? Let me see if I can open a window into heaven by contrasting what Jesus says here (in v. 40) with what he says in Matthew 7:12 and what Paul says in Romans 13. Turn with me to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:12. This verse is better known as the Golden Rule. It is, I think, a good commentary on "Love your neighbor as you love yourself."

Matthew 7:12: This Is the Law and the Prophets

Jesus has just said that God will give us good things if we ask and seek and knock, because he is a loving Father. Then in Matthew 7:12 he says,

Therefore, however you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

Notice that again Jesus refers to the Law and the Prophets like he did in Matthew 22:40. He says, if you do to others what you would have them do to you, then "this is the Law and the Prophets." In Matthew 22:40 he said, "On these two commandments hang the whole Law and the Prophets."

Take notice here that the first commandment is not mentioned in Matthew 7:12. Loving God with all your heart is not mentioned. Treating others the way we would like to be treated, he says, "is the Law and the Prophets."

We must be careful here. Some people over the centuries have tried to take sentences like the Golden Rule and say that Jesus was mainly a profound teacher of human ethics; and that what he taught is not dependent on God or any relationship with God. They say, "See, he can sum up the whole Old Testament, the Law and the Prophets, in practical human relationships: the Golden Rule."

I say we must be careful here, because thinking like that not only ignores the great things Jesus said about God elsewhere and the amazing things he said about himself coming from God to

give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45); it also ignores the immediate context. Verse 12 begins with "therefore" (dropped in the NIV):

Therefore, however you want people to treat you, so treat them.

What this shows is that the Golden Rule depends on what went before—on our relationship to God as our Father who loves us and answers our prayers and gives us good things when we ask him (Matthew 7:9-11). In fact this is a very profound key to how we are able to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. So God is here upholding the Golden Rule by his fatherly provision. His love for us and our trusting, prayerful love back to him is the source of power for living the Golden Rule. So you can't turn Jesus into a mere teacher of ethics.

But still, Jesus does say that treating others as you want to be treated "is the law and the prophets." He does not say that loving God "is the Law and the Prophets." Why does he say it in this way? I think what he means is that when you see people love like that (fulfill the Golden Rule), what you are seeing is the visible expression of the Law and the Prophets. This behavior among people manifests openly and publicly and practically what the Old Testament is about. It fulfills the Law and the Prophets. Loving God is invisible. It is an internal passion of the soul. But it comes to expression when you love others.

So loving others is the outward manifestation, the visible expression, the practical demonstration, and therefore the fulfillment of what the Old Testament is about. So there is a sense in which the second commandment (to love your neighbor) is the visible goal of the whole Word of God. It's not as though loving God is not here, or that loving God is less important; rather loving God is made visible and manifest and full in our visibly, practically, sacrificially loving others. I think that is why the second commandment stands by itself when the New Testament says that love fulfills the law.

Romans 13:8–10: Love of Neighbor Fulfills the Law

Let's look at one other text that points in this direction.

Look at **Romans 13:8-10**.

Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. 9 For this, 'You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet,' and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; love therefore is the fulfillment of the law.

Two times (vv. 8, 10) Paul says that the command to love our neighbor is the "fulfillment of the law." This is what Jesus meant when he said (in Matthew 7:12) that treating others as you

would like to be treated "is the law and the prophets." And, just as in Matthew 7:12, Paul doesn't say that the law is fulfilled in loving God and loving neighbors. He only says that if you love your neighbor, you fill up the law. I think this means the same as Matthew 7:12, Loving our neighbor as we love ourselves is the visible expression and manifestation and practical completion and fulfillment of all that the Old Testament was about, including love for God. Love for God comes to visible manifestation when we love others. Or you could say, our love for God is "fulfilled" when we love others.

We know Paul saw this practical love as utterly dependent on our relationship to God. In Romans 8:3-4 he says,

For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, 4 in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh [= self reliance], but according to the Spirit [= God-reliance].

In other words, fulfilling the law—loving our neighbor as we love ourselves—is not something we can do on our own. We do it by the Holy Spirit. And we saw last week that Paul teaches God supplies the Spirit to us through faith.

So it's the same as in Matthew 7:12. When Jesus and Paul say that loving our neighbor as we love ourselves is the fulfillment of the Old Testament, they don't exclude our love for God and his love for us; they assume it.

Matthew 22:37–40: On These Two Hang . . .

But let's go back to our text in Matthew 22:37-40. Here Jesus DOES mention both love for God and love for neighbor; and he explicitly says (in v. 40), "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets." Why? I want to suggest that he is saying something different here than in those other texts (Matthew 7:12; Romans 13:8, Romans 13:10). Here he does not say that these two commandments "fulfill" the Law and the Prophets, or that they "are" the Law and the Prophets. He says that the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commandments. Verse 40:

On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.

Now this is a window into heaven, if you have eyes to see. When he says here that the Law and the Prophets depend (literally: "hang," like a stone around the neck, or a snake on the hand, or a man on a cross) on love, this is the reverse of what those other texts were saying. They were saying that the Law and Prophets lead to and find expression and fulfillment in love. But here in Matthew 22:40 Jesus is saying the reverse: love leads to and finds expression in the Law and

the Prophets. The Law and the Prophets are hanging on—depending on—something before them, namely, God's passion that this world, this history of humankind, be a world of love to God and radical, other-oriented love to each other.

Illustration

Let me see if I can put this in a picture, so that you can see it more plainly. It is so important, if we are going to grasp the magnitude of the significance of love in our midst, as we move forward into the practical expressions of it in our preaching and in our life together at Bethlehem.

Let's picture the inspired history of redemption from creation to consummation as a scroll like the one John saw in Revelation 5. This is the Law and the Prophets (and the New Testament). The story of God's acts and purposes in history are told in this scroll, along with God's commandments and promises. Matthew 7:12 and Romans 13:8-10 tell us that, when the people of God love their neighbor as they love themselves, the purpose of this scroll is being fulfilled. Its aim is being expressed visibly, manifested practically so "that people can see our good deeds and give glory to our Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). So the scroll is leading to love. Love is flowing from the scroll.

But then Jesus gives us an incredible perspective. He lifts us out of history and out of the world for a moment and shows us the scroll from a distance. Now we can see it whole—the Law and the Prophets, the Old Testament, the story of redemption, the purposes and acts of God in history. And what we see is that the scroll is hanging by two golden chains, one fastened to each end of the scroll handles. And Jesus lifts our eyes to heaven, and we see the chains run up and disappear into heaven.

Then he takes us up to heaven. And he shows us the ends of the chains. They are fastened to the throne of God. One chain is fastened to the right arm of the throne where the words are inscribed: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind." And the other chain is fastened to the left arm of the throne where the words are inscribed, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

And Jesus turns to us and says, "The whole scroll, the whole Law and the Prophets, the whole history of redemption and all my Father's plans and acts hang on these two great sovereign purposes of God—that he be loved by his people, and that his people love each other."

I believe it would not be too much to say that all of creation, all of redemption, all of history hang on these two great purposes—that humans love God with all our heart, and that from the overflow of that love we love each other.

Which means that love is the origin (Matthew 22:40) and the goal (Romans 13:8, Romans 13:10) of the Law and the Prophets. It is the beginning and the end of why God inspired the Bible. It's the fountainhead and spring at the one end, and the shoreless ocean at the other end of the river of redemptive history—remembered and promised in the Word of God.

God's Word to Us This Morning

God's word for us this morning is that we take with tremendous seriousness this season of dealing with love at Bethlehem. That we let this picture stun us and remake our priorities. That we get alone with him and deal with him about these things. That we not assume that we fully know what love is or that it has the proper centrality in our lives. He is saying: All of Scripture, all of his plans for history, hang—HANG—on these two great purposes: that he be loved with all our heart, and that we love each other as we love ourselves.