

Matthew 22:37

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

Analysis

Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This verse, known as the Greatest Commandment, represents Jesus's distillation of the entire Law into its most foundational principle. A lawyer, testing Jesus, asked which commandment was greatest (v.36), seeking to trap Him in the endless rabbinic debates about legal priority. Jesus's answer, quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, silences all debate by identifying love for God as the supreme obligation from which all other commands flow.

"Thou shalt love" (ἀγαπήσεις/agapēseis) uses future indicative that functions as imperative—a divine command, not a suggestion. This is ἀγάπη (agapē), self-giving love that seeks God's glory regardless of cost or feeling. Critically, love here is commanded, demonstrating it's volitional commitment, not mere emotion. We cannot command feelings, but we can command the will to prioritize, treasure, obey, and delight in God. This confronts modern sentimentalism that reduces love to warm feelings or emotional attraction. Biblical love is covenant commitment—choosing God's glory above all competing affections, regardless of circumstances or emotions.

"The Lord thy God" (κύριον τὸν θεόν σου/kyrion ton theon sou) identifies the object. Not generic deity or abstract spirituality, but Yahweh, Israel's covenant God, now revealed fully in Christ. The possessive "thy God" emphasizes personal relationship—not distant philosophical concept but the God who has bound

Himself to His people in covenant love. This is the God who delivered Israel from Egypt, who gave the Law at Sinai, who dwelt among His people, who promised redemption. We love Him because He first loved us (1 John 4:19), responding to His prior covenant initiative.

"With all thy heart" (ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ καρδίᾳ σου/en holē tē kardia sou) demands totality of affection and will. In Hebrew thought, "heart" (lev/kardia) represents the inner person—will, affections, desires, core identity, the decision-making center. "All" (ὅλῃ/holē) permits no reservation, no compartmentalization, no divided loyalty. God claims the entire emotional and volitional center of our being. This excludes loving God partially while reserving some affections for idols—whether money, comfort, reputation, relationships, or self. Jesus later declares: "No man can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24). The heart either belongs wholly to God or is divided and therefore false.

"And with all thy soul" (ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ ψυχῇ σου/en holē tē psychē sou) adds the dimension of life itself. ψυχή (psychē) means soul, life, vital breath—the animating principle that distinguishes living from dead. We're to love God with our very life force, holding nothing back, willing to surrender life itself for love of Him. This echoes Jesus's later teaching: "He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal" (John 12:25). Martyrs throughout church history have embodied this soul-love, choosing death over denying Christ. But daily discipleship also requires laying down our lives—our plans, ambitions, preferences—for God's kingdom.

"And with all thy mind" (ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ διανοίᾳ σου/en holē tē dianoia sou) encompasses intellectual devotion. διάνοια (dianoia) means mind, understanding, faculty of thought and reason. Loving God isn't anti-intellectual emotionalism but engages the whole mind—studying His Word, contemplating His character, thinking God's thoughts after Him, bringing every thought captive to obedience to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5). Faith seeks understanding; love pursues knowledge of the Beloved. We love God by developing biblical worldview, pursuing theological understanding, meditating on Scripture, and using our intellectual capacities to glorify Him.

The threefold formula (heart, soul, mind) isn't dividing human nature into separate

parts but emphasizing totality through comprehensive categories. Matthew adds "mind" to Deuteronomy's "heart, soul, strength," perhaps emphasizing intellectual love for Greek audiences who prized philosophy. Mark 12:30 includes all four terms. The point remains constant: love God with absolutely everything you are and have—emotionally, volitionally, physically, intellectually. No part of our being falls outside love's demand.

Verse 39 continues: "And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." Love for God necessarily overflows in love for neighbor—vertical love flows into horizontal love. We cannot genuinely love the invisible God while hating visible image-bearers (1 John 4:20). Verse 40 concludes: "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." All biblical ethics reduce to love—love God supremely, love neighbor sacrificially. Every command finds its root and purpose in these two loves.

Historical Context

This exchange occurred during Passion Week, likely Tuesday, in the temple courts. Jesus had just silenced the Sadducees regarding resurrection (Matthew 22:23-33). The Pharisees, seeing their theological opponents defeated, gathered to test Jesus themselves (v.34-35). They sent a *νομικός* (nomikos), a lawyer or scribe—an expert in Mosaic Law and rabbinic tradition—to entrap Jesus with a theological question designed to expose heresy or inconsistency.

First-century Judaism engaged in extensive legal debates. With 613 commandments in Torah (248 positive, 365 negative according to rabbinic counting), questions of priority were inevitable and contentious. Which commands were "heavy" (weighty, important) versus "light" (less significant)? Could one command summarize all others? Rabbi Hillel (c. 110 BCE - 10 CE) famously summarized the Law: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole Torah, the rest is commentary." Rabbi Akiba (c. 50-135 CE) identified Leviticus 19:18 ("love thy neighbor as thyself") as the great principle of Torah. Jesus's answer combines Deuteronomy 6:5 (love God) with Leviticus 19:18 (love neighbor), showing both vertical and horizontal dimensions of covenant faithfulness.

The Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-9), which Jesus quotes, stood at the absolute center of Jewish identity and practice. Devout Jews recited it twice daily—morning and evening—binding these words to their hearts, teaching them to children, writing them on doorposts. "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might." Every Jewish listener would instantly recognize this foundational creed, the core confession of monotheistic faith distinguishing Israel from pagan polytheism. Jesus affirms continuity with Israel's faith while radically simplifying legal complexity to one governing principle: love.

The question was designed to trap Jesus. If He elevated one command above others, He could be accused of diminishing Torah's authority or negating other commands. If He refused to prioritize, He'd appear indecisive or unable to answer—discrediting His authority as teacher. Jesus transcends the trap by identifying the command that undergirds and fulfills all others—not negating the Law but revealing its heart and purpose. As He stated in the Sermon on the Mount: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil" (Matthew 5:17). Paul later writes: "Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:10).

For Greco-Roman audiences, Jesus's teaching contrasted sharply with prevailing philosophy. Stoicism taught rational self-sufficiency, controlling emotions through logic, achieving apatheia (freedom from passion). Epicureanism pursued pleasure and pain avoidance, seeking tranquility through withdrawal from public life. Mystery religions offered ecstatic religious experience but little ethical content. Greek philosophy prized intellectual contemplation but considered passionate devotion unworthy of the divine. Jesus demands total devotion of heart, soul, and mind to the personal God revealed in Scripture—not philosophical abstraction but covenantal love relationship requiring whole-person engagement.

Throughout church history, this command has shaped Christian spirituality and ethics. Augustine's famous dictum, "Love God and do what you will," captures how authentic love for God governs and sanctifies all action—not antinomianism but recognition that genuine love fulfills law's intent. Medieval scholastics distinguished love of God for His benefits (*amor concupiscentiae*) from love of God

for Himself (amor benevolentiae), the latter being superior. The Puritans emphasized "experimental knowledge of God"—not mere intellectual assent but experiential, heart knowledge of divine love. Jonathan Edwards explored "religious affections," showing true spirituality engages emotions, will, and intellect in loving God. Modern therapeutic culture often reduces love to subjective feeling or sexual attraction, but Jesus commands volitional commitment of entire being—emotions, will, life, and mind—to God's glory above all competing affections.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. How does understanding that love for God is commanded (not merely felt) change your approach to worship, obedience, and spiritual disciplines?
2. In what specific ways can you love God with your mind—intellectual devotion—without reducing faith to mere academic exercise?
3. What areas of your life (heart, soul, mind, strength) are you most tempted to withhold from complete devotion to God?
4. How does Jesus's linkage of loving God and loving neighbor (v.39) challenge purely vertical or purely horizontal approaches to Christianity?
5. What would change in your daily decisions, relationships, priorities, and pursuits if you truly loved God with all your heart, soul, and mind?

Interlinear Text

ο δὲ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτῷ, Ἀγαπήσεις κύριον τὸν
G3588 G1161 Jesus said unto him Thou shalt love the Lord G3588
G2424 G2036 G846 G25 G2962

θεόν σου· ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ καρδίᾳ σου· καὶ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ
God thy with all G3588 heart thy and with all G3588
G2316 G4675 G1722 G3650 G2588 G4675 G2532 G1722 G3650

ψυχῇ σου· καὶ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ διανοίᾳ σου·
soul thy and with all G3588 mind thy
G5590 G4675 G2532 G1722 G3650 G1271 G4675

Additional Cross-References

Luke 10:27 (Love): And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.

Deuteronomy 6:5 (Love): And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.

Deuteronomy 10:12 (Love): And now, Israel, what doth the LORD thy God require of thee, but to fear the LORD thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul,

Mark 12:33 (Love): And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.

Deuteronomy 30:6 (Love): And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.

Romans 8:7 (References God): Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.

