

Semicontinuous

Deut. 34:1–12

Ps. 90:1–6, 13–17

Complementary

Lev. 19:1–2, 15–18

Ps. 1

1 Thess. 2:1–8

Matt. 22:34–46

It All Hangs on Love

**Goal for
the Session**

Adults will bear witness to the two loves that Jesus identifies as the linchpins for living faithfully.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Matthew 22:34–46

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Patrick Gray

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WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Tim Beach-Verhey

God’s purposes are larger than any single people. The Messiah’s mission transcends the salvation of any particular group. Those who follow the Messiah must subordinate all particular interests, identities, and purposes to the Savior’s universal mission. Jesus refuses to identify love of God with rigid religious requirements or to identify faithfulness to himself with loyalty to a particular community of people. As he approaches the cross, Jesus makes clear what it means to love God and be a follower of the Messiah: “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40).

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Earl F. Palmer

I think it is important for us as interpreters of this Monday event to see these encounters as a deepening journey. The lawyer may or may not be sincere in his question, but what has happened is that what he asks is near to the center of what really matters in life. My own experience as a Christian disciple and pastor is that if we wait it out with those in our lives who have questions on their minds, and then take each question in turn and do our best to say some one or two things in response, then sooner or later even the questions themselves get better, deeper, and more significant.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Allen Hilton

In his answer to the Pharisees’ question, Jesus gives two separate commands: the “greatest,” to love God; and the “second,” to love neighbor. Although he says the second is “like” the first, Jesus does not collapse the two, as if love of God *equals* love of neighbor. We probably should not collapse them either. “What is it to love God whole-lifedly?” One Ignatian author has hoped to be “seized so completely by the love of God that all the desires of my heart and all the actions, affections, thoughts and decisions which flow from them are directed to God.” How would one obey a command to “be seized”?

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Matthew 22:34–46

Focus on Your Teaching

Many adults in your group may feel overwhelmed by multiple tasks and commitments that crowd schedules and muddle priorities. These adults, and you, would likely be grateful if there would be a way to clearly delineate the most important one or two things to be done above all others. What might serve as such a prioritizing principle for the many demands made upon us? Today's passage addresses just such a question, and the session unpacks how the answer given might bring focus to our lives and faith.

God of light and truth, help me to discern in my preparations for this session that which is most important for me to do. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- newsprint
- marker
- colored dots with adhesive backs
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 (optional)
- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for November 1, 2020

For Responding

- option 2: hymnals or songbooks, construction paper, markers, scissors, tape
- option 3: paper, pens

Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Matthew 22:34–46) is not used in this session plan; however, feel free to make copies to give to participants to read on their own for additional reflection.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Welcome the participants. Introduce any newcomers to the group.

Have participants imagine that a scientific breakthrough has made human habitation possible in a region previously uninhabited. A new nation will be formed there by peoples from around the world—and you have been tasked with writing its constitution. Brainstorm ideas critical to include in the constitution, and write these on the newsprint as participants call them out. When the list (or three minutes) comes to an end, give each participant two of the colored dots. Direct participants to place one dot each on the two items they consider to be the most important ideas.

When dots have been placed, briefly discuss reasons that those receiving the most dots did so.

Note that in today's focus scripture Jesus is asked which commandment is the most important—and he also answers with two dots!

Offer this prayer or one of your own choosing:

God, guide us as we move from exploring your Word, and into the living of it. Amen.

EXPLORING

Remind participants that this is now the fifth focus scripture in the last few weeks that comes from Matthew's Gospel. Invite participants to summarize what they have discussed so far about Matthew's Gospel, as well as the contexts in which Matthew sets Jesus' teaching. Recall last week's discussion of the four main groups in Judaism at the time of Jesus. Ask participants to recall the insights brought out in the conversation about the Pharisees and

Sadducees. Note that these groups, one directly and one indirectly, once again are at the center of this narrative.

Have the participants read Matthew 22:34–46 silently. Afterward, discuss the following questions:

- ✧ What roles do questions serve in this exchange between Pharisees and Jesus?
- ✧ What do you make of the outcome related in verse 46 in terms of no one asking Jesus any more questions? (In other words, is that good, bad, or neither, and why do you think so?)

Form pairs. Have partners review the dialogue in verses 31–40 and discuss the following:

- ✧ What part of the conversation (and what character) do you most identify with, and why?
- ✧ At the end of this conversation, what would you have wanted to ask the Pharisee?
- ✧ At the end of this conversation, what would you have wanted to ask Jesus?

Gather the group and distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Jesus the Good Rabbi); have participants read it. Discuss each of the three paragraphs, one at a time.

- ✧ With the first paragraph, focus conversation on participants' views about the significance of Jesus' Jewish roots for our understanding of his ministry.
- ✧ With the second paragraph, make sure to read Deuteronomy 6:4–5. Talk about why this verse might have come to play such a dominant role in Jewish identity. Ask participants what other teachings of Jesus it calls to mind.
- ✧ With the third paragraph, read at least Leviticus 19:18—better yet, read Leviticus 19:1–2, 15–18, one of the other lectionary readings for today—and discuss why Jesus might single this command out as “like” the first. Ask participants what they understand Jesus to say by “and a second is like it.”

Reread Matthew 22:40. Note that of the seven occurrences of “hang” (*kremannymi*) in the New Testament, four refer to Jesus' crucifixion. Discuss why, for Jesus, love would hold such a prominent place in his teaching.

Encourage participants to silently reflect on the following issues as you transition to Responding:

- ✧ In what ways might our understanding of Jesus' cross relate to love of God and love of neighbor?
- ✧ How have the hallmarks of love of God and love of neighbor borne witness to the life of this congregation?
- ✧ How do you bear witness to these hallmarks by the way you seek to practice faith?

EASY
PREP

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Keeping Love's Commands** Communities of faith as well as individuals are called to practice the kinds of love that Jesus identifies as the greatest commandments. Identify ways in which your church practices love of God and love of neighbor. Discuss how your congregation does (or might better) encourage its members to join with others in such practice of love. Have each participant identify one such community practice of love that they will devote special attention to in the coming week.
- 2. Singing Love's Creed** One way the church bears witness to faith is through its hymns. Distribute hymnals or songbooks, and direct participants to the construction paper, scissors, markers, and tape. Have participants write phrases or lines from hymns or other songs that reflect the call to love God and/or neighbor on strips of construction paper. Post these on a wall in your room. Discuss afterward how they individually and together witness to our calling to love God and neighbor. Encourage participants to use one of these excerpts as a daily companion in prayer and in their practice of love's command in their lives.
- 3. Love: A Prayer and Action List** Practicing love of God and love of neighbor is a daily calling. Distribute paper and pens. Ask participants to write across the top of the paper: *Love: A Prayer and Action List*. Have them write down situations or opportunities in their lives that call for the practice of love. Encourage participants to use these notes in the coming week as a checklist or reminder for the daily practice of love of God and neighbor. Add items for prayer and practice to the notes through the week as needed.

Some participants may find it helpful to divide the paper into two columns, one for love of God and one for love of neighbor. The intention is not to "split" the two loves Jesus commands, but rather to work toward a balance of them.

CLOSING

Gather the group in a circle and join hands. Invite participants to name something that impressed them about today's session on love of God and love of neighbor.

When all have spoken, lead the group in the following commission chant. Explain that you will speak first, and then the group will repeat what you say.

We shall love. (repeat)
We shall love God. (repeat)
We shall love. (repeat)
We shall love neighbor. (repeat)
We shall love. (repeat)
We shall love God and neighbor. (repeat)
We shall love. (repeat)
For we are loved. (repeat)

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for November 1, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet prior to the next session.

Focus on Matthew 22:34–46

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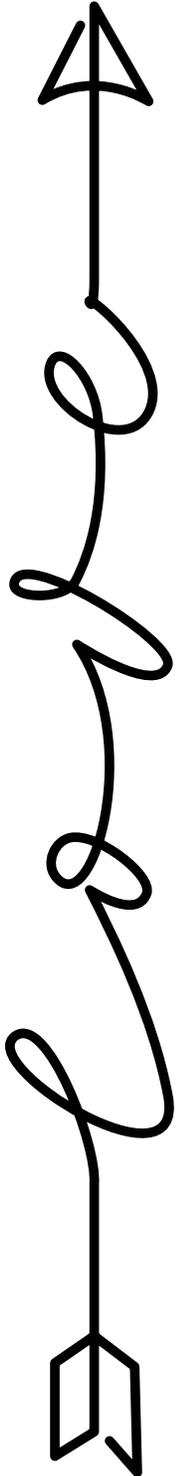
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Jesus the Good Rabbi



The church has often made the mistake of separating Jesus from his very real Jewish roots. Old Testament “law” is frequently contrasted with New Testament “grace”—as if the Old Testament knows nothing of grace and the New Testament conveys nothing of law. The exceptions to that misapplied standard are not only legion, they are dispelled in the very ministry of Jesus. Consider his answer to the inquisitive (or it is inquisitorial?) Pharisee in today’s passage. Good rabbi that Jesus is, he quotes the Torah for revealing his take on the greatest commandment(s).

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

Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:4–5, sometimes called the Shema (from the Hebrew word meaning “to hear” or “to listen”).

The Shema was (and is) integral to Jewish piety, to be prayed twice daily and used in community prayer services. Likely not coincidentally for Jesus’ use here, these verses are immediately followed in Deuteronomy 6:6 with the injunction “Keep these words that I am commanding you.” Jesus’ appeal to this as the primary commandment would have placed him in good stead with the Pharisees and in the whole of Jewish tradition.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus pairs the Shema with yet another quote from the Torah, this from Leviticus 19:18b. In Leviticus, the confession of God as holy (see 19:2) becomes the basis for a complex series of codes aimed at evoking Israel’s holiness as a people. And here in chapter 19, the basis for holy living takes the form of this command to love neighbor.