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Do the Most Important Thing

Matthew 22.34-40

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I listened to a podcast this week about a new book that's just been released. ***Know What Matters: Lessons from a Lifetime of Transformations*** is by Ron Shaich, the founder, and former CEO of Panera Bread. In the book, Shaich shares the lessons he learned **from a lifetime of asking what really matters** and then making the transformations necessary to bring what really matters to life. Shaich is a business visionary who's been part of building three restaurant brands: Au Bon Pain, Panera Bread, and now Cava. Along the way, he developed "fast casual," a \$100 billion-plus segment of the restaurant industry. Shaich says **telling yourself the truth, knowing what really matters, and getting it done** is the path to creating and sustaining a meaningful life, a market-leading business, and even a healthier society. He says if you want to get to the end of your life with no regrets, then focus each day on **leading a life you can respect** and leaving a positive impact on the world. He said he wrote the book primarily for his children so they would know **what was most important** to him.

**What is most important to you?** If you were asked to go to your local middle school and give a speech about the Most Important Thing to Do in Life, what would you talk about? If a child or grandchild approached you and asked you that question what would you say? If a person who was struggling to find purpose asked you that question what would you tell them? If you knew the days of your life were nearing the end and you wanted to pass on your answer to that question what would you communicate? Perhaps our answers would be shaped by our life or work. A Dentist might say, "*Floss every day.*" An athletic trainer might say, "*Exercise regularly.*" A financial advisor might say, "*Understand and act on the power of compounding.*" Jesus had an answer to this question, and it's found in Matthew chapter 22.

Before I read his answer, I want to repeat something I said last week in case you weren't with us. The 22<sup>nd</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Matthew contains scenes of escalating conflict between Jesus and his critics from three groups: the Sadducees, Herodians, and Pharisees. The Sadducees didn't believe in an afterlife. The Herodians

aligned themselves with the ruler Herod who was a puppet of Rome. The Pharisees advocated strict obedience to the Law of Moses especially regarding the sabbath and dietary laws. Last week, we talked about how the Pharisees and Herodians tried to trap Jesus with a question about paying taxes and Jesus' answer left them amazed (Matthew 22:15-22). Next (Matthew 22:23-33) the Sadducees step into the ring and Jesus brilliantly responds to them saying they're wrong **"because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God,"** and the crowd was *"astounded at his teaching."* In this spiritual interrogation tag team wrestling match, it's the Pharisees turn again. After they hear that Jesus has silenced the Sadducees, *"they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him."*

Before I reveal the question he asked I want to remind you of something else I said last week. Sometimes people ask Jesus a question not because they're looking to learn and grow and live a meaningful life of love and truth. There are times when the questions posed to Jesus are intended to trap him or to get him to say something that could be used against him. **Regardless of the motives behind the question, Jesus always answers truthfully**, because he is the Truth, and he cannot and will not lie. That is the case in **Matthew 22:34-40** as well. Now let's turn to the Word of God.

*"When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"<sup>37</sup> 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.'<sup>38</sup> This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'<sup>40</sup> On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."*

Many times when Jesus is asked a question he doesn't give a short, concise answer. Often he responds to a question with a question of his own, or with a parable or a story, such as in **Matthew 21:28**, *"What do you think? A man had two sons...."* When the lawyer in Matthew 22 asks Jesus to identify what's most important, for once Jesus doesn't answer the question with a question. He doesn't tell a story or a parable. He gives a clear, straightforward answer. **What's most important? That's easy, Jesus**

says, Love God and love people. There is a lot that isn't clear, in faith and in life. But this one thing is clear. The most important thing, the thing that Jesus shows us with his life, and tells us with his words, the most important thing to do in life is to love God and love people. We don't have to wonder. We don't have to speculate, debate, or argue - not about this. This one thing is clear. This one thing we know without any doubt: the most important thing in our faith is to love God and love people.

The first thing Jesus says is, "*You shall love the Lord your God.*" The important word in that phrase is "*your.*" You aren't to love "God," you're to love the Lord your God. This implies a personal relationship, an intimate friendship; it's not impersonal and distant. God is with us and for us. You're to love the Lord your God.

Jesus says you're to love the Lord your God with **all** that you are, with every bit of yourself. Did you hear the threefold repetition of the word "**all**?" We're not to love God half-heartedly, lukewarmly, or just when it's convenient. We're to love God with **all our heart** passionately in surrender and abandonment as we genuinely love anyone. The heart in the Bible is not merely a muscle or a blood pump, it's the seat of our emotions, passion, and drive. We're to love God with **all** our heart.

Next we're told to love God with **all our soul**. **The soul is what integrates all of our various parts (our heart, will, body, and mind) into a single person.** Think of someone in your life whom you deeply love. Can you picture that person? When you love someone fully, completely, passionately it touches every aspect of who you are as a person – the response and actions of your heart, will, body, and mind all reveal and reflect that you love that person. That's what it looks like to love someone with all our soul. That's how Jesus says you're to love God. **Jesus says we're to love God with all our heart, all our soul, and - what does he say next - with all our...mind.**

**Now here's something interesting.** Jesus answers the lawyer's question by quoting **Deuteronomy 6:5** which says, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*" The Hebrew word translated "might" means exceedingly, force, abundance,. But Jesus changes the final word of the great commandment from "*might*" to "*mind*." While you and I don't alter the words of

scripture at our own discretion, Jesus makes a change that's found in any translation you look at – why would Jesus do that? Perhaps Jesus changes the word from “might” to “mind” because even though he knows the lawyer's question isn't coming from a good and sincere heart, Jesus wants him and us to **think** about what we're saying and doing. We're to love God with all our mind.

Christian spirituality and faith challenges us to **think deeply** about the great questions of life. We're to love God with our heart and our emotions, with our soul, the totality of who we are, and with the fullness of our intellect. Jesus says this is the greatest and first commandment and it's nothing new, it's something every Jewish child learned at home from an early age.

Jesus continues, “*And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*” We have to stop and linger here for a moment because there's something that we need to acknowledge. **You can't love your neighbor as yourself if you don't love yourself appropriately.** To love yourself the way God wants you to means you grasp in your gut that your life matters to God, to other people, and to what God wants to happen on this earth. **Do you understand in your heart of hearts that God loves you deeply, that your life has eternal significance, and that God wants and needs you to do things that only you can do?** This is really important to grasp.

God loves you more than you know. Having a positive self-understanding that comes from knowing God loves you and that your life matters is crucially important to loving yourself. Some of us grew up in families where love and trust and having a healthy sense of self were part of our upbringing. Others unfortunately didn't have that beneficial experience. However, part of the value of being a Christian and part of a church is we learn that even if important people around us didn't love us or don't love us the way we deserve to be loved, God does. It's because God first loves us that we can love our neighbors. You can't share what you don't have. If I don't have love in my heart for God and myself, I won't have any love to share with anyone else. Romans 5 tells us God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. Connecting to something bigger than ourselves and realizing that there is

someone who is wiser than we are, who is more loving than we can imagine and is there to help us shapes how we feel about ourselves. We're able to love ourselves.

Having said that, Jesus very clearly tells us **we're to love other people**. That's foundational and basic to being a Jesus follower – **we love God, and we love people**. If we don't do those two things, if we aren't **doing** those two things, it doesn't matter what else we're doing, it doesn't matter what we **say** believe or how correct our doctrine is, we're missing the main point. Jesus is quoting from the Law again from **Leviticus 19:18** (NRSV) which says, *"You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, **but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.**"*

**What's the most important thing to do in life?** Jesus says, that's simple. **Love God. Love people.** Jesus connects two verses, one from Deuteronomy about loving God and the other from Leviticus about loving your neighbor. To Jesus and for us, they're inseparable. This is beautifully stated in **1 John 4:7-12, 19-21**, ***"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." 19 "We love because he first loved us. 20 Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. 21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."***

What a difference it would make in our country and in our world if those of us who call ourselves Christians sought to live up to those words and the clear answer of Jesus to the lawyer – **love God, love people**. It's that simple and that vital. In fact, Jesus says, <sup>40</sup> *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.* Can you imagine owning a beautiful and incredibly valuable painting by Leonardo Da Vinci in

a big heavy frame and then hanging it on a little hook with a small nail? You'd never do that because you know what would happen. Your priceless painting wouldn't be priceless for long after it fell off the wall and broke the frame and tore the canvas because the nail, hook, and wire weren't strong enough to hold it. Jesus says loving God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and loving your neighbor as yourself are like strong, reliable hooks and wire that can hold everything else in God's Word. Everything else written in the Law and the Prophets in the Bible is simply commentary on these two commands. There's nothing more important in life.

What's the most important thing to do in life? Ron Shaich is right about the value of knowing what matters and doing it to build a life you can respect. Your dentist is right about the helpfulness of flossing daily. A personal trainer is right about the benefits of regular exercise. Financial people are correct about the power of compounding. **But Jesus is right that *the most important thing to do in life is to love God and love people*.** That's the path to a contented, God honoring, and love-filled life.

### Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. How do you determine what's most important to you? What ethics, values, principles, and people influence your answer?
2. A lawyer asks Jesus, "*Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?*" How would you respond if someone asked you, "*What's the greatest or most important thing I should do?*"
3. What might be different in your life if you more fully pursued living out the great commandment? For example, what would it look like for you to love God with all your heart?
4. How do you love God with all your soul?
5. Why is it important to love God with all of your mind?
6. What is significant and transforming about Jesus linking loving God with loving our neighbor? How do you show your love for God by how you love and treat other people?