

# Matthew 22:34-40 “Heart Check”

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- [ 0 : 0 0 ]     You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.
- I'm really looking forward to jumping back into John's Gospel with you next Sunday. As we pick up our study there in the middle of chapter 6. It's been a while. But I wanted to take this first Sunday of the new year to do a little heart check.
- About why we're here. What we're living for. That topic, this passage we're going to look at have been on my heart for a while.
- Because it is always important to remember what is most important. As you've heard me say often, the main thing is to keep the main thing.
- The main thing. That's what those letters remind you of. Got that from my dad. You'll figure it out eventually. But I've realized especially at the beginning of this new year.
- [ 1 : 0 9 ]     How loudly we are told by voices both inside us and around us. What the main thing is.
- Multiple experts and media outlets summed it up this year as love yourself more in 2024.
- That's the thing. In most lists of New Year's resolutions, you have to get past the top 10 best New Year's resolutions to find anything that doesn't fit under love yourself.
- The top three almost always are looking out for your physical fitness, your mental health, and your financial stability. Some combination of those three in some order.
- And there are a lot of good ideas out there, okay? Diets and exercise. Saving. Getting out of debt. Self-care and counseling.
- [ 2 : 0 9 ]     All of those things can be so helpful. Neither God's word nor this sermon is telling you to hate yourself. Okay? Please don't hear that.
- But it is striking that when the greatest man who ever lived tells us what the greatest commandment ever given is.
- When Jesus tells us what the main thing should be focusing our lives. What should be the priority for how we live this year. He points us in a very different direction.
- Listen to what he says and then let's do a check up on our hearts. Matthew's Gospel, chapter 22, at verse 34.
- This is God's word given to direct our hearts and lives. But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together.
- [ 3 : 1 1 ]     And one of them, a lawyer, asked Jesus a question to test him. Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law? And Jesus 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 first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.
- Let's pray together. Father, we have heard love God and love neighbor before. Don't let our comfort with those words make us complacent.

Would you come, Father, and so work by your Spirit that our hearts would not grow cold to this, but that they would burn with love in a fresh way.

Bring your Spirit powerfully. Change our hearts as you would do. Shape them after the image of your Son, our Savior.

[ 4 : 27 ] We ask it in his name. Amen. Amen. One of the first things that struck me when I was reading this passage this week is that Jesus actually answers this question that's asked to test him.

He so often reframes or ignores questions asked to him by religious leaders. Even twice, in fact, earlier in this very chapter he's done that.

But this question, a seeming puzzle, he takes head on. What's the main thing for how we are to live, Rabbi?

Out of hundreds of laws in the Old Testament, which one stands out to you, Jesus? And not only does he answer, but he also does so without downplaying any other laws or commandments.

In fact, he says, upon loving God and loving neighbor hang the whole law and prophets. Just as we heard Jesus say in our Christmas series, part of why he came was to fulfill the law and the prophets, right?

[ 5 : 41 ] So here, with authority that is really remarkable. I mean, think about that. To pick a single main law from hundreds of laws given by whom?

God himself. Just pick one. Tell me which one's most important. Jesus doesn't hesitate. Jesus affirms them all here and says you can organize them all.

You can pursue faithful living by focusing on two basic directives. Focus number one. Start here.

The great commandment. Love yourself more. No. No, that's not what he says. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

Notice, not merely obey the Lord your God. Not merely sing to the Lord your God. Not merely claim the name of the Lord your God, but love.

[ 6 : 50 ] It's a relational word, isn't it? Getting to know him more. Growing in appreciation and value of who he is. Understanding and then treasuring more of his heart.

That's why we talk about our relationships with God as the very first of our three key relationships that impact eternity.

We exist to love God. Not just a little. Not just occasionally. But with all our heart.

And all our soul. And all our mind. Elsewhere, Jesus adds all our strength. What he's saying is focus number one is loving God with all we are and have.

All our faculties. All our resources. All our relationships centered on God. Our affections and our commitments.

[ 7 : 54 ] Our plans and our decisions. Our energy and our will. All of them always toward what? Loving God.

Brothers and sisters. Please hear clearly what Jesus is saying to us this morning. Nothing is more important than loving God.

It's the main thing. That wasn't hard to figure out, was it? I doubt it surprised anyone in here to hear that.

It's a pretty familiar verse. In fact, I found as I examined my own heart and as I've been wrestling with this in recent months.

It's so familiar that I often just assume that I'm doing it. I assume that I live that way.

[ 8 : 51 ] That I do love God with all my heart and soul and mind. I've been hearing it since I was a kid. I mean, I'm here at church, right? What do you think I'm doing? Loving God.

But see, Jesus is asking not what building are you in? Not have you heard this before. Jesus is asking, is God truly central in our lives?

Is God deeply satisfying to our hearts? If I'm honest, here's how I function so many days.

Just imagine me sitting down with my wife and pulling out the calendar. Say, I don't know, like a few weeks ago maybe. Let's start with at the top.

With what's central to our lives. And let's talk about the next couple of weeks. I mean, we've got school and work. And then there's dance, of course, and swim and soccer and PTA.

[ 9 : 59 ] We've got to fix the house. Somebody might be staying here soon. We've got to deal with that. And get the Christmas presents. Yep. You know, honey, I'd really like to carve out some time for our family just to be together.

You know, when can we do that? Oh, and for Jesus, too. I mean, Jesus is really important. I mean, it's coming up on Christmas time.

He's really, really important. I think I actually said those words about family. And trying to carve out some time.

And I thought them about Jesus. And it made me shudder a little bit. But if those distorted priorities show up in conversations about my time and my money and my energy, shouldn't I assume that those priorities are probably playing out often in my heart?

That they're revealing what I really most love and live for? I talk with enough of you to know that I'm not alone.

[ 11 : 21 ] That that conversation I just described is not a weird or strange one to most of you. In those experiences, perhaps it would be more helpful to say in those idolatries, that feel like a big jump to you?

I was just talking about something normal, right? Idolatry. Yeah. We're talking about what our hearts love most. I think we better use words like that.

Most of us, most days, feel a lot like what I described. I'd picture it this way. Functionally, practically.

Go back one. There you go. I myself am at the center. And I want, what I want is to feel good about myself.

Don't you want that? I want to look good to others. I want to have a good life. Right? And so what I do is I take all of these other things, my job and my money and my family and my free time, and I manage all of those other things so that I can feel good about myself.

[ 12 : 46 ] And Jesus, too. You know, church, grace groups, maybe a Bible study, because that fits for me. Maybe not for everybody, but for me, that fits part of what helps me feel good and look good the way I want my life so others see me as respectable or successful.

Jesus is a part of what's important to us. Probably that's somewhere on your radar you wouldn't be here this morning. But can you relate to that picture of your life where all of it spins around me?

It may be part of why you don't feel the closeness to God, the power of God, the hope in God that you long to feel and feel like you should be experiencing.

But the reality is he's just kind of lingering out there when we need him. When really a good day is when I am praised, when I am successful, when I am loved.

That's why we need to sing, I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold, houses or lands, worldwide fame, anything this world affords.

[ 14 : 11 ] Because we need our hearts called back to the glory, the preeminence, the centrality of God, of loving him.

As Jesus does in this passage, it's what he's doing. He's calling us back. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind.

Bring him back to the center. Right? Jesus has to be there in the center. See, it's not that you have to stop having a job or a family or hobbies.

Those things are still a part of what's going on. But rather, you have a relationship with God that comes first. So the question changes for us.

From how does my job, for instance, make me look or feel good or make my name great? To how does my job make God's name great?

[ 15 : 13 ] How does my time with my family deepen my love for God? How do I spend my free time in ways that help me long for the kingdom of God to come here and for me to be a part of spending my energy working toward that end so that it's all for Jesus, not all about me?

That's the new question. Y'all, it is nearly impossible to ask those kinds of questions moment by moment when we're never stopping to contemplate God and make those priorities when we just keep moving.

We can't expect a relationship. You know what a relationship is, right? You can't expect a relationship with God to flourish, love for Him to grow if we're not spending time listening to His heart for us in His Word and sharing our hearts with Him in prayer.

That's what Derek was describing earlier when we talk about reading God's Word and then being able to talk back with Him. We have to make that a priority.

You don't have to use our reading plan. It's not magical. It is right here and it's better to leave here this morning with this plan than no plan for being with God.

[ 16 : 37 ] But if we are to find God deeply satisfying, to find Him actually at the center of our days and decisions, we have to be with Him.

We have to be in conversations with others who point us to Him. You don't have to search for input in your life to urge self toward the center of your heart.

Don't worry about it. You won't have to go looking. Every ad, most media and social media, our own sinfulness, the air we breathe in our culture, it will do plenty of that.

What's one decision you could make today to make Jesus more central? Commit to praying for His Spirit's help, reordering the loves of your heart.

He loves to answer that prayer. Put grace group participation on your calendar first. Start spending maybe 10 minutes a day if you're not reading God's Word, reflecting on His story in your life, and writing just one reason that you love God.

[ 17 : 51 ] If you read His Word for five minutes, talk to Him for even five seconds, you're going to have a reason to write down to love Him. Imagine, y'all, someone you love writing not just a letter, but an entire book about His relationship with you, the story of His love for you and what He feels about you.

And imagine that He explains all of that. Wouldn't reading that and contemplating it and sharing it with others grow joy in your heart for that relationship?

Wouldn't sharing it with others make you think, oh, my love for Him is growing? He's fairer than lilies of rarest bloom.

He's sweeter than honey from out the comb. Are you stopping to taste it? Are you actually saying, not just I can sing those words, but that's true for my heart.

I'm experiencing that so that actually I can say He's all that my hungering spirit needs. Let His love satisfy you.

[ 19 : 06 ] Stop and let it fill you up. I'd rather have Jesus and let Him lead. He really is better. What a gift His Word is, right?

For the very first place we're told to focus on loving the Lord our God. But Jesus actually keeps going.

He's certainly not going to contradict that. But He wants to add one other thing that's connected to it. Verse 39. The second is like it.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Having focused first on our relationship with God, this verse now commends the other two key relationships that impact eternity that we say here we exist for.

Loving neighbor here in this verse means those in the church family, that's what we call our relationships with one another, and those beyond our church family, our neighbors.

[ 20 : 14 ] And it doesn't just say, be a generally nice person to everyone. No.

Jesus says at the heart of this second fundamental commandment is to love our neighbors as ourselves. The question He's asking us is, are your neighbor's needs as important as your own?

Think about that for a minute. Honestly, it is hard to imagine thinking and living this way. It's really important to you, isn't it, that you have food to eat today and a warm place to sleep tonight.

It should be just as important that the same is true for your neighbor. Oh, come on. I mean, no, no really.

as yourselves. What else do you long for for yourself? A listening ear when you're hurting. You probably long for someone to celebrate Christmas with and a present or two to open.

[ 21 : 35 ] Meaningful work where you're treated with dignity. Jesus is saying, good. Long for that for your neighbor to work toward their enjoying those same things the way that you do.

And by the way, it will likely cost you something to love your neighbor like that. It cost the Good Samaritan. It cost Jesus.

As Irish missionary to India Amy Carmichael said, you can give without loving but you cannot love without giving. Making your neighbors needs as important as your own.

Not normal for us. Not natural for us. Only possible if you've actually moved self out of the center to that outer ring where something has displaced your love for yourself.

Where Jesus is now first. Where Jesus is now central and look what happens. self and neighbors are equal. If Jesus becomes central if we get the first relationship if we get that first then we're actually able to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

[ 23 : 03 ] Both self and neighbor love are outgrowths of love for Jesus. Both are ways that I live out that first relationship.

will we really sing Jesus I my cross have taken all to leave and follow thee. Thou from hence Jesus my all shall be perish every fond ambition the things I've sought or hoped or known even if that happens if I lose everything else yet how rich God in heaven are still my own I'm rich.

See there's one other important way to think about loving neighbor as yourself. Self love in this passage not hatred is taken for granted isn't it?

It has to be as you love yourself. But remember what Jesus has just said what's best for you?

God that's what you need to have your relationship with God at the center of your life is the very first thing self love is taken for granted but it is redefined as being fully satisfied in God.

[ 24 : 37 ] So love for neighbor as you love yourself means what? Longing for them to know that same reality that you long to know for God to be central in their lives.

I live now to help my brother or sister in my grace group be satisfied in Jesus. I live to help my co-worker my neighbor next door my friend my classmate taste that true life is found not in living for themselves but in knowing God and his love for them.

See what that's love for neighbor is that I want you to know this God that I long to know because they're in his life. What's love for neighbor going to look like for you this year?

I'm not sure there's so many options y'all. It may be committing to pray as long every day for the needs and hearts of others as you do for your own. Maybe volunteering with jobs for life or our youth ministry or our missions team.

Maybe fostering kids to show God's love to them and to their families. Maybe gathering a team to minister to people battling mental health issues. Maybe taking the time to sit regularly with someone who's aging and alone.

[ 26 : 00 ] Maybe talking about Jesus with the person you've been praying for over the last year. I don't know exactly all the places God will send you to love your neighbor as yourself but I do know that you'll have a lot more ideas for it if you sit with Jesus.

If you talk with him if you ask his spirit to direct you because you want nothing more than with everyone everywhere Jesus show me today where are you sending me Jesus tells us really clearly where to focus it's not hard to understand love the Lord your God love your neighbor that's the main thing that's what we're to be about not just to say it sounds nice and didn't pastor preach a good sermon about it but maybe a little long no no actually to live like it because it's what we were made for and it's what we were saved for kids can I tell you some good news this morning I want to make sure you hear this especially if you're in school okay school aged kids what Jesus is saying means that the main thing for you this year is not making good grades at school

I hope that is a relief to some of you it's not making bad grades either but sometimes I've felt like that's all that matters you're not just little test takers who need to do better this year and maybe someone will love you if you do the main thing in fact is not that you be the star player on your team or that that boy likes you it's not the main thing God wants for your life this year is love God and love neighbor it's it's that he wants your relationship with him to grow for you to know him more to know more of his love for you so that you love him more and for you then to show that love to others right where he places you and you'll take

I suspect some tests along the way you'll have some hard relationships and some hurts but the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing love the Lord your God with all your heart all your soul all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself will you let that be your main thing this year well pastor there's one more important question if I do who's going to focus on me if I'm focusing all my time and energy and resources on loving God and loving neighbor what about me you know that's why everyone tells us that our focus should be loving ourselves right I read it this week if you don't love yourself no one else will in fact if you don't love yourself why would anyone else love you

I'll tell you why grace God's love for the undeserving the unlovely enemies God has loved you so completely that you are freed and sent to love him and neighbors with all you are and all you have with no fear that you're going to be left out he will keep loving you let give you a picture of this from a movie that didn't win any awards and didn't deserve to for 90 minutes like Mike which came out about 20 years ago I know you all saw it is a very cheesy utterly predictable movie that you don't need to bother seeing it's the story of a 13 year old orphan named Calvin and he and his friends at the orphanage where he lives so desperately long for a family to love them and nothing seems to go their way until Calvin of course finds magic basketball shoes that make him an incredible basketball player so he starts living with

[ 30 : 54 ] NBA star Tracy Reynolds and you could write the script yourself I promise you Calvin loves to bring his orphan friend Murphy over to Tracy's awesome house and swimming pool and pantry they go to all the NBA games and of course in the last game they win and the season is over and it's time for Calvin to go back to the orphanage except that what happens Tracy decides to adopt Calvin you already knew it and you've never seen the movie Calvin finally has what he's most longed for not just lots of stuff not just fame not just money a father but this one moment is why I'm telling you the story at this climactic moment where Calvin's greatest needs and his deepest longings have finally been met he turns to his new father and says hey did you know today is two for one orphan day he turns and hugs his friend

Murphy who is now his brother and Murphy too gets a father of family two for one orphan day man I like that maybe this year could be two for one orphan year at Southwood I want you to listen to me brothers and sisters because I love you and I want this to sink down deep into your hearts Jesus doesn't tell you love yourself because the main thing for you to remember is that that's covered that is taken care of because of Jesus you have been adopted as a child of the king you're an heir of heaven in Christ God meets all of your needs according to his glorious riches if

God has graciously given his own son to us how will he not also along with him give us everything that we need if God clothes the grass of the field and feeds the birds of the air will he not much more care for you are you not much much more valuable than they even the very hairs of your head are numbered he has loved you with an everlasting love he holds you in his everlasting arms no one can snatch you out of his hand nothing can separate you from his love he's got you he won't let you go off we contemplated that every day make delighting in that relationship with your gracious and loving heavenly father the main thing this year yeah and inviting others into it too two for one orphan day the streams of his love are unending you can keep sharing them with your neighbors with full confidence they won't ever run out for them or for you the main thing love the

Lord your God with all your heart all your soul and all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself let's pray father so help us that we wouldn't be recognizable you so transformed us that our love for you would so fill our hearts and overflow from us that Huntsville would know how much God loves them how amazing is your care and provision how good is your grace how comforting is your faithfulness work in us and then work through us we pray for the glory of

Jesus amen for more information visit us online at [southwood.org](https://southwood.org)