

Matthew 22:37-40 "The Wholehearted Life"

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Good morning, everyone. I trust the Lord has been faithful to you over these past few weeks, even as we gather together on this sixth day of Christmas. This time of year, more than most, can cause me to get a little bit more disjointed and compartmentalized in my approach to life and living.

People who deal with grief and death and all of that, you know, the absence of the ones who we mourn and whom we miss can accentuate this time of year a little bit, and I think most of us know that feeling as well.

So, and yet we get to come and be together and sometimes pretend and sometimes not with each other. But as we reflect on Advent and relish in this Christmas season, we're going to go a little slower this morning and consider what it means to actually be a whole person, the way that we were created to be, the way that the creator God intended as he secures his way for his people and brings them to himself.

I apologize a few weeks ago when I had to turn in my information for this sermon. You don't have an outline on the back of your bulletin, but I promise if you pay attention and write good notes, especially kids, go see Pastor Derek after the service today and he has a special prize for you.

[1 : 37] So one of my favorite sequences in the Bible, especially considering the assurance of salvation, is found in Deuteronomy between chapters four through six.

Moses is kind of writing his parting sermon to the Israelites as they've been wandering through the desert and they're about to take over the promised land. And if you remember the story, Moses won't be there with them.

He violated God's law and part of his punishment is not entering into the land flowing with milk and honey with them. So for these people who are prone to wander, idolatry always seems to be right around the corner.

But their God is the one and true and living God. So Moses, by way of assurance, starts talking to them in Deuteronomy.

We'll start in chapter four, verse seven. He says a few things to them. For what great nation is there that has a God so near, so near to it as the Lord our God is to us whenever we call upon him?

[2 : 48] And he continues right there in verse eight. And what great nation is there that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?

Then he continues in verses 34 and 35. Has any God ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another by testings and by miraculous signs and wonders or by great and awesome deeds like all the things the Lord has done for you in Egypt?

You were shown these things so that you might know that the Lord is God and beside him there is no other. Then this is quickly followed by the giving of the law in chapter five, which is similar to the giving of the law in Exodus 20.

And what Moses is doing is he's setting up the righteousness of God over and above the righteousness of the people. God acted and rescued his people from Egypt before he commanded a response.

He spoke to his people and gave them his rules after calling them his people. God offers his presence listening to people who are only required to call upon him.

[3 : 59] And then Moses slams down the gavel in chapter six, verses four and five, which even in the Hebrew, it's startling. In verse three, he's talking about entering the land flowing with milk and honey.

And then he stops in a famous passage often called the Shema. In Hebrew, he says, The Lord your God, the Lord is one.

Shema, hear me, stop, hear. The Lord your God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

What a powerful and fitting exclamation to Moses's encouragement to God's people to respond to the love of their father.

In our text this morning, Jesus is calling those around him back to this reality. And although the scene is recounted in a couple of other gospels, it's important to remember when you're reading Matthew that this was primarily written to a Jewish community.

[5 : 08] And there's an assumption that these people are able to track with Jesus on a much deeper level than just some surface level of understanding that he's saying, reciting something from the Old Testament.

There's some deep context that should be able to be understood and should be able to be followed here. The Jewish leaders are picking at Jesus with several questions about certain theological points, perhaps to get his input, perhaps an attempt to get him to say something that'll help them in their conversations, but more than likely to get him to say something out and not heretical.

And Jesus gave them Jesus answers and he baffled them. Then the Pharisees get together and they send a scribe to ask Jesus a question. And that brings us to our text this morning.

It's in Matthew 22 and we'll be reading verses 34 through 38. This is a famous text. Please understand that we're only going to tackle the first part of it today.

Not nearly enough time to do both parts justice. Probably not even this part, but we'll work hard at it. So Matthew chapter 22, beginning in verse 34. When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, he being Jesus, they gathered together.

[6 : 21] And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law? And he said to them, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

This is the first and greatest commandment. Pray with me if you would. Gracious God and Heavenly Father, we come before you today, a people who bless a people who need you.

Even in our time as we listen to your word today, we pray that that need would be shown in ways that we've never felt before. Understood in ways that we've never considered before.

Thought of in ways that are hard for us to deal with. But are also good for us to deal with because you're a faithful God who loves his people and refines us.

Turning us more and more into Christ. And I pray that the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts will be focused upon you. And that our hearts will be illumined to the work of your spirit even now.

[7 : 33] And we pray all this for the sake of King Jesus. Amen. Amen. I love counseling. I love that I studied for my main counseling.

I love that I have friends who are licensed professional counselors. And I have as many of those friends, it seems, as I do who are pastors. I love brain science. And here's why I love all those things.

And this is also going to be my pitch for counseling. I'll throw that out to you. Things are not the way that they're created to be. The world and the flesh and the devil wage war against all the good things that God created.

All of the good things of our Heavenly Father. People sin. People are sinned against. And sometimes you're just an innocent bystander who gets hit in the drive-by of sinning. This is why an argument like to each his own or as long as you're not hurting me and I'm not hurting you, those ring as fallacies to me.

Things are way too complex to understand that. Nothing's ever that simple. And what counseling does is counseling helps people bring things out of the individual compartments that we keep them in and open them up and apply them to the whole of life.

[8 : 52] And counseling helps people to process things and discover the dignity. And when I say dignity, I mean the things that are good and that are of God. And the depravity. Things which don't measure up to God in any given situation.

And when we practice this, what we're able to do is live life more wholly and more fully.

W-H-O-L-L-Y. Hopefully also more H-O-L-Y. But more wholly and more fully.

But the reality of most people heading into counseling, however, is to get a quick fix on something in their life. Or more usually, someone else is hoping that they get a quick fix on something in their life.

That they perceive to be wrong with them. And the assumptions here are, one, they're in counseling because something is in fact wrong with them. Two, that something that's wrong with them can be fixed through talking probably in a half an hour or less.

And then we can sit there shooting the breeze for the rest of that time. Or three, once that thing is fixed, they're not going to find out that there's anything else wrong with them. And this comes from a segmented and compartmentalized view of who we are as people, as creatures, as God's creatures.

[10:06] We want to treat symptoms in our lives and quickly get past things and we don't want to dive into what the root cause of these things actually are. And much like someone seeking counseling for those reasons I just mentioned, the religious leaders in this text are coming to Jesus with symptoms or perceptions of something wrong with their religious understanding or practices.

Jesus, being the fulfillment of any substance in their religiosity at all, answers them by driving them to the root problem of their systems and their practices. They think they can perfect certain things and keep themselves with God.

And this isn't much different with us. Some of us like to talk about grace and then hold out some flag of responsibility, waving it around, proving that we have shown grace because of the responsible way in which we live.

This is to say that we hold up our sanctification, sanctification being the completed work of Christ in us as well as the ongoing work of Christ in us. As our proof to others of the grace that we found, that's the I'm better than you way of living life and encouraging and exhorting others.

And others talk about our sin as though it doesn't really matter because of the grace of Jesus Christ. And we claim to be repenting of our sin when really what we're actually doing is merely reciting our sin.

[11:31] We're just saying it out loud with no real intention of turning from it and turning to God. And certainly not in any type of joyful obedience. But both of these things lack the humility that we see here from Moses and from Jesus.

Humility, which drives us to joy in the work of our Father through Jesus and by the Spirit, which continues to change us. We think that we can bring ourselves to and keep ourselves in right relationship with God.

But the ultimate truth here is that if we can bring ourselves to God or keep ourselves with God, God doesn't matter. He's unnecessary. And so is Jesus.

And so is everything that Jesus did. Our qualifications both of omission and commission replace those things. And we are ultimately what keep ourselves with God.

Thankfully, the gospel is so much richer than all of that. In the book, *The Whole Christ* by Sinclair Ferguson, he writes this. Jesus says, God doesn't need or want our naughty and nice lists in order to keep his people as his own.

[13:32] God comes to us. He shows us his goodness. And he uses it to change our whole person. He calls us back to himself with the most incredible of commands.

Love me with all of your being. And because God is good, he becomes our righteousness, bringing us into right relationship with him.

We're going to look at this in a couple of ways this morning. We'll go a little bit quicker. But kids, get a pencil out. Remember, Pastor Derek, after the service. We're going to look at this in a couple of ways.

First, God calls us to the impossible. And second, God keeps us through the incredible. So how does God call us to the impossible?

Let's look at what's happening here in verses 34 through 36 of chapter 22. They've already blasted Jesus with some pretty impossible questions here.

[14:31] And he's astonished them with his answers. In the ESV, it says that they gather together. But in the Greek, it says something a little bit more sinister.

Let's read it together. When the Pharisees heard that he'd silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. Teacher, which is the greatest commandment of the law?

Well, and the sinister tone there in the Greek is actually more like they became of one mind or they put their heads together. They didn't just gather together and say, hey, let's go ask Jesus a question.

They said, hey, let's get together and let's stump this guy. He's astonished us. Let's get him. Let's not let this keep going. And maybe they'd been talking about, without some resolution to this question, that they ask him about what's the greatest commandment.

And maybe they really wanted his opinion, but it seemed like they would rather him fall on his face than do anything else. And it also seems to me that a question like this can be a motivational piece.

[15:34] I mean, these people are the teachers of the law. They are the leaders of the Jewish community. And if you're encouraging people to figure out which is the greatest commandment without giving them any real leadership, well, they're going to press into that.

And that means they're going to study all the commandments. And that means they're going to try to perfect keeping all of the commandments. And in this culture, that's probably what you're looking for out of people is everybody's striving to do things perfectly all of the time, right?

So they say that those who can't do coach. About 12 years ago, I put on a pregnant suit. And I haven't taken it off yet. But even before that, after my college basketball career was over, I got into coaching college and high school basketball.

And to me, my philosophy of winning, at least, comes down to a very certain easy thing to look at. And this is how I would explain it to the guys that I was coaching.

If we win every offensive possession, that is to say that every time we have the ball, we score. And if we win every defensive possession, that is to say every time the other team has the ball, they do not score.

[16:46] We will win the game. Are we able to follow that? Now, in a setting like this, it seems silly. I see several of you laughing. But you should see the look on a 14 to 22-year-old's face when they hear you take the game of basketball and simplify it down to that.

It is an aha moment like you have never seen before. It's laughable, but it also changes the motivation of everything we do.

Now, everything you do on offense can be graded by the simple reality of, how did this help us score a basket? Everything you do on defense can be graded by the simple reality of, how did this keep the other team from scoring a basket?

But even when you simplify a game like basketball down to that, whether it be in practice or whether it be in scrimmages or whether it be in actual games, inevitably, we had offensive possessions where we couldn't score the ball.

And we had defensive possessions where the other team did score the ball. We couldn't be perfect. Jesus knows in this setting that he's being invited to play an impossible game.

[18:07] He also knows that no man can play this impossible game other than himself, the God-man. Let's look at verses 37 and 38.

And he said to them, answering this question, 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 don't be alarmed at strength missing from here. Because the point is not all of the different words that are used in the different times that this is told. The point is actually to bring everything together.

It's not about the absence of the word. It's about the reality of all of the words. Scripture doesn't make a clear distinction between the soul and the body and the mind and our strength.

It's always kind of a this thing. You know what a this thing is? You can't pull it apart and you don't really know how it's all intertwined, but it all is all the time.

[19:14] And Jesus is answering them by saying, you're treating symptoms and you're asking me weird questions and I'm trying to give you an answer that answers the hole and the root of the problem that you're dealing with.

Because God is good, he calls us to wrestle with that same reality. Jesus reminds us that it's not actually about our inability to complete this impossible task.

It's actually about understanding that God rescued us and simply called us to love him and respond accordingly. It's not about being burdened with bringing ourselves to God or keeping ourselves with God.

It's about acknowledging him in all of our ways. Trusting that he will make straight our paths. It's about having a daily regimen of prayer in the mornings.

I encourage you, pick this book up. Do this with us. It's about praying before meals and before bed and developing an astonished and thankful attitude that the God of the universe listens to you and cares for you.

[20 : 30] You're not becoming worthy because you pray. You pray because you get to talk to God. It's about reading and studying scripture daily.

And I'd suggest at the start and at the end of your day, not because you're better than someone else or because it gets you something, but because your heavenly father has acted in history and has actually written down his word for you.

He's communicated the wisdom of the ages for you and for me in his word. It's about turning to him daily in confession and repentance.

As Derek was saying earlier, because he loves you. And if you confess your sin, he's faithful and just to forgive you of your sin and to cleanse you from all unrighteousness.

God calls us to the impossible because he's good. His faithfulness endures forever. The whole person, this whole person, this thing, is edified through pursuing our father through some practical means.

[21 : 38] We're not merely called to the impossible to linger, but we're actually kept with him. Point two, kids. We're actually kept with him through an incredible means, via the incredible.

Understanding the context of where this falls in Matthew is really helpful in understanding just how remarkable this interaction is between Jesus and the Jewish leaders.

Jesus follows what we're diving into this morning by lighting up the Pharisees and the scribes. He digs into them, giving them seven woes in the very next chapter.

And you can flip through and see that. And then you flip to the end of that chapter. And all of a sudden, he's lamenting over Jerusalem. And then he gives some prophetic things about the end times.

And the next thing you know, in chapter 26, the passion begins. Jesus. And that's the way that Matthew's telling us the story. Jesus shut them up.

[22 : 45] And that drove them immediately to kill him, to plot to kill him. Jesus is present with the people of God. Their Messiah, their very Messiah, is in their midst.

And yet those charged with knowing him best instead choose to run away, and they ignore his grace. And they can't understand anything which he says, and yet know he's correct.

But they turn from him instead of toward him. Even so, many are not interested in what he can give them. Many of the people listening to him, they're actually only interested in him.

Our youngest child, Susanna, she may be a typical fifth child. I don't know. I withheld the desire to put, like, an amazingly cute picture of her behind me right now.

And I don't know if she's typical, but what's really unique about her is that the way that she presses into Emily and me, she wants us. And that's not remarkable.

[23 : 50] I can understand the attachment to Emily. I'm attached to Emily too. And she would be attached to Emily on multiple levels. But it's been the most remarkable thing for me just to be wanted by her for no apparent reason.

And let me tell you, when she walks up to me at any point and just looks at me and goes, up-a-da-da, I'm picking that thing up. I'm picking her up.

There's no way I'm not doing that. I pick her up and I hold her. And I dance with her. And I sing to her. And I tickle her.

And I snuggle her. And sometimes we just sit there. And she snuggles into me. And I hold her.

Just a daddy and his daughter wanting nothing more than that from each other. The goodness of God seeks a relationship with us that resembles this.

[24 : 57] A relationship that we're intended to have with him. Sure, we fight with our brothers. We sometimes are mean to the dog and we knock things over and we scream, mine!

When someone touches our toy or when we want something else. We cry at the wrong times about the wrong things. And we mostly babble incoherently when we talk to God. But what it often looks like to love God with all of our being is to turn to him knowing that we want to be with him.

Not necessarily to be safe and not necessarily to be fed and not necessarily to have our diaper changed. Or maybe all of those things and probably more.

We need him. We want him. I'm almost 6'9". Susanna can't get to me. She can reach for me all she wants to but she can't get to me. She can't put herself in my arms. And once she's in there she certainly can't keep herself in my arms.

[26 : 08] Jesus was about to endure the climax of his whole mission on the earth. He tears into the Pharisees and scribes and then immediately laments over Jerusalem.

And he prophesies about the end of days and then he's anointed. He's betrayed by Judas and then he prays. He's tortured and crucified.

Then he's resurrected. Jesus said the Father's will as a whole person. And Jesus as his whole person and as his work is the incredible way which we're brought to and kept in God.

A familiar passage from 2 Corinthians says, He became sin who knew no sin so that we might become the righteousness of God.

God gives himself to us through his son and even grants us his spirit so that we can always endeavor to love him with our whole being.

[27 : 21] Not a compartmentalized part of myself. Not something that comes and gets washed and clean on Sunday mornings. Or maybe for some of you you came to church on Christmas Eve and you're coming back today and you don't really have plans to come back to church beyond that.

Maybe it's not even about that much cleansing. But he grants us his spirit so that we can try to love him with our whole being because of his goodness and when we succeed he's there to hold us. And when we fail he's there to hold us. Jesus became our sin so that we might become his righteousness eternally kept by our Father.

This is incredible and unfathomable grace. Here's my main pitch for counseling. Counseling is actually what the community of believers is called to do with and for each other.

I might have been taught certain therapeutic strategies and know certain ins and outs and be able to pass some exams that you can't pass. But that doesn't make me a better listener than anybody in this room.

[28 : 41] That's essentially what I do. I'm a listener. I listen to someone talk and I tell them what I heard them say. It's really that simple. And once I know that you've communicated to me we can talk about how the gospel of Jesus Christ intersects that reality.

And although we're off for this week our connect communities are an entryway to that type of community in our church. We get together and weigh and discuss the things of God and see how the gospel intersects our lives.

Is that why you go to connect community? I hope it is. I hope there's good intention there. I hope there's intention of diving into real life and real community with each other. We listen and we learn and we grow together by the power of the Holy Spirit through the mutual pursuit of a loving God dealing with our whole person.

We want everyone here to be involved in a small group for that same reason only it's that big group setting brought to a much more intimate and close and relational level that's easier to go deeper into God's word with and easier to go deeper with each other in.

We're called to live in a community reminding each other of God's faithfulness in the past so that we might understand his faithfulness in the present. The Holy Spirit is alive and at work in us as individuals.

[30 : 11] He's alive and at work amongst us as the people of God and God is good and through his goodness he's given us himself in relationship and he's given us each other.

Thanks be to God. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father we thank you for the love shown to us through your son Jesus through his love and life through the way the God man came and lived perfectly as God but able to understand everything as a man.

a great sympathizer and a great savior. We thank you for the gift of your Holy Spirit that allows us to know you at all allows us to grow in you and allows us to grow together as a body of believers and we pray that that would never be an inward focus things but to us community would mean always accepting other people and knowing the change that necessarily happens when someone new enters a community and loving them the way that you've called us to love each other.

We pray that our hearts and minds would be changed and that we would know more of your love for us now than we even knew before now. We thank you for the grace found in our King Jesus.

We pray all this in his name. Amen. Amen. For more information visit us online at southwood.org