

“The Great Commandments and Gospel-Centrality”– Matthew 22:34-40

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com.]

If you have your Bible, meet me in Matthew, chapter 22. We began a sermon series last week that will only last a few weeks, but, Lord willing, will have long term ramifications for our church because it's an attempt to articulate what your leadership at Southern Oaks sees as God's will for our church. The point of the series is to articulate that vision and demonstrate that this direction is not anything new that we came up with, it's not innovative in the least, because it's driven by the biblical narrative and informed by God's directives. So, as ministerial staff, we have wrestled with how to grasp what God, in His Word, has called us to pursue and summarize it in a shorthand and memorable fashion that we can use to help keep the church on track and help us not lose our focus. We've come up with a few short statements to that end. The first one relates to our purpose as a church and here it is:

We Exist to Glorify God through Gospel-Transformed Lives

Last Sunday's sermon was meant to demonstrate that this reality is communicated throughout the Bible in various ways and in far more texts than we had time to work through last week. But we saw enough, hopefully, to be convinced that God desires all of our *doing*, individually and corporately, to be aimed at His glory. It's not about us. We are not the stars in our stories. If we choose to live lives that our self-exalting, we are choosing to live lives that are God-belittling and that's not what we want to do as a church. So we covered a lot of biblical text last week to reinforce this conviction. Among those Scriptures were several that demonstrated how every aspect of our salvation is clearly said to have been done for God's glory. And since God's Word teaches us that His saving power is at work in and through the Gospel, then it stands to reason that we glorify God through Gospel-transformed lives.

Ultimately, glorifying God is good for us, though that is incidental and wouldn't change whether or not we should live God's glory. But it is good for us. Since God glorifies Himself in, among other things, our very salvation, that's good news for us. And it's good news for the world too as a result. Why? Because, having saved us, God sends us out for the sake of the world, as those who do good in the world and bring good news to the world.

I encountered an interesting example of this outcome the past week from none other than Richard Dawkins, arguably the most famous atheist (or anti-theist) of our day. In 2010 he made a statement acknowledging that the teachings of Jesus do not lead to the kind of terror we see in the world today. Here are Dawkins' own words:

“There are no Christians, as far as I know, blowing up buildings. I am not aware of any Christian suicide bombers. I am not aware of any major Christian denomination that believes the penalty for apostasy is death. I have mixed feelings about the decline of Christianity, in so far as Christianity might be a bulwark against something worse.”¹

I suspect that was a reluctant admission on his part. For all his criticism of Christianity, he can't seem to deny the fact that Christianity is doing at least some good in the world such that it's good for Christianity to exist in these turbulent times. Indeed it is. Glorifying God is good for God's people and by extension it's good for the world.

All of these ideas were addressed last week. Today we want to take things a step further. If that's our purpose—to glorify God through Gospel-transformed lives—then what should we be doing? What's our plan? Well, this leads us to the next statement, at least the first part of it...

We do this by actively embracing Gospel-Centrality, the Great Commission, and the Great Commandments...

That's what the next sermons are designed to show, including this morning's. But let me begin by noting something significant. There is nothing in that sentence that most Evangelical churches would recoil from. You're not going to find a church in East Texas, in all likelihood, who would say, "Listen, that's cool but at our church we don't really like the Gospel, the Great Commandments are so outdated, so first century, and the Great Commission is for chumps." You're not going to find that church. Most churches would affirm these things on some level. But we at Southern Oaks don't want to merely affirm that these things are important, because that doesn't go far enough.

You can affirm that poverty is a bad thing and then do nothing to help your poor neighbor. You can affirm that it's great to vote in an election and then not get out and vote. You can affirm that Jesus calls us to be generous and then not give generously. Today is the National Sanctity of Life Sunday. It's quite possible for us to affirm the truth that abortion is wrong and then do nothing to seek that it comes to an end and nothing to love and care for mothers who are in such desperate circumstances that abortion has become a temptation because they can see no other option.

Do you see what I'm getting at? It's possible for us to affirm something and it make absolutely no difference in our daily life. This tendency is not unique to individuals. It's true of churches as well. So here's the point... We don't want to be a church that merely says we embrace these things, these three "GCs" (as we're calling them). We want to be a church that *actively* embraces them, meaning they are truly setting the agenda for our activity as a church. Makes sense? Just because it's on our paper, doesn't mean it's in our practice. We don't want all this to be mere lip service. We don't merely embrace these things. We actively embrace them.

Now we're going to examine them in a different order. Today we'll start from the back and explore what is meant by "the Great Commandments." Then we will begin to identify the relationship between these commandments and Gospel-centrality. That's the plan, so let's look at Matthew 22. Everything I said last week about my strong convictions in favor of expository, book-by-book, preaching and my aversion to topical preaching applies today, but yet again we will be a bit more topical this morning. Nonetheless, I am doing so cautiously and you can and should examine these things in God's Word on your own to test and see that what I am saying is consistent with what God has revealed. By all means, do so.

Matthew 22 has a context. And that context involves a series of tests that the religious leaders of the day were trying to trick Jesus with. They wanted to make Him look bad, so they were bringing calculated questions in order to trap and humiliate Him. They have asked questions about His authority (21:23), taxes (22:15-17), and even the resurrection (22:23-28). Yet each question these Jewish leaders ask backfires on them, because Jesus comes out looking even more brilliant than before. In fact, after the most recent question, the Sadducees have nothing more to say. The Pharisees, on the other hand, gather together and come up with one more question crafted to ensnare Jesus. Let's pick things up in verse 35...

"And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?'" (Matthew 22:35-36)

This is a tricky question because of all the rabbinic debates on these matters in that day. There were a lot of opinions as to which of God's commands deserve pride of place. No consensus had emerged. The Pharisees know this and therefore this is a great question for their purposes because Jesus' answer will likely place Him in one interpretive camp and therefore outside of many others. So they are hoping that Jesus will alienate several groups by His answer. In selecting one command, they could claim that He was neglecting or annulling others. They think they've got Him, you see? But they're really just teasing Jesus up for another home run at their expense. Look at how Jesus responds. Verse 37...

“And 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.’³⁸ This is the great and first commandment.³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.’” (Matthew 22:37-40)

That's a brilliant answer. Why? Because He hasn't ignored or dissolved any of God's commands. Instead, He cites two commands (the first from Deuteronomy 6:5 and the second from Leviticus 19:18) and claims that they are the foundation upon which all the other commands of God are built. That's what's meant by *“On these two commandments depend² all the Law and the Prophets.”* This is something we have talked about at length in the past because this idea is reiterated in a number of places in the Bible (e.g., Mark 12; Luke 10), so I won't belabor the issue here.

But recall how, in the past, we have spent time exploring how all of God's commands are related. At the risk of oversimplifying things, one could say that all of the commands we find in the entire Old Testament are summarized in the Torah, the Law of God. All of those Laws that Moses passed down to Israel could be summarized in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5). And all of those Ten Commandments could be reduced still further to these two commandments that Jesus articulates in this passage—love God and love neighbor.

In fact, sometimes the first four of the Ten Commandments are referred to as the “first table” and you'll notice that they all have to do with loving and worshipping God—don't worship other gods, don't make idols, don't misuse God's name, and keep the Sabbath. The “second table” then covers commands five through ten, which deal with loving our neighbor appropriately—honor your parents, don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't lie, and don't covet. So what is the essence of the Ten Commandments? A call to love God and love neighbor. (And, by the way, if you are curious about who would fall under the umbrella of “neighbor,” read Luke 10:25-37 where Jesus is asked that very question and answers it with the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus' answer shows that your neighbor is anyone you have opportunity to love. So basically people. That's your neighbor: people. Even enemies [cf. Matthew 5:43-48].)

So Jesus' answer is brilliant because He simultaneously avoids all the controversy and demonstrates that He truly understands the essence of all that God has commanded. They all come down to love God and love people. By framing the discussion in this way, Jesus is showing that this is the summary ethic of God's people, regardless of which side of the cross they find themselves.³ Therefore, to say that we want to be a church that actively embraces the Great Commandments is another way of saying that we want to be a church that takes seriously and applies all of God's instruction.

Nevertheless, notice He does prioritize love for God. He calls that *“the great and first command”* and labels loving neighbor *“the second”* greatest. Why? Because, as we have seen in the past, we can't truly love our neighbor as God intends unless it flows out of our love for God. A former professor of mine, Grant Osborne, says, *“The vertical love for God must be acted out in the horizontal love for others.”⁴* That's absolutely right. They go together. This is a common criticism that the Old Testament prophets launch at the unrepentant nation of Israel. Israel would claim that they love God because they were carrying out some religious rituals, but their neglect for neighbor proved the shallowness of their love for

God. So, for example, Isaiah says in the opening chapter that the Lord hides His eyes and refuses to listen to the people because of their social injustice. Other prophets draw the same connections (e.g., Jeremiah 5:28-29; Micah 6:7-8). When we abandon our love for God, it's no wonder that our neighbor suffers. We cannot love people the way God desires, unless our love for them is an extension of our love for God (cf. Matthew 25:31-46). When the love of God reigns in our hearts, we will love others. In this sense, all of ethics flow from this one command to love God with our whole selves.

John wrestles with the same reality in one of his New Testament letters. He wrote:

“We love because he [i.e., God] first loved us. ²⁰ If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. ²¹ And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.” (1 John 4:19-21)

Do you see? To the extent that we love the Lord, we will love our neighbor. When we don't love others, we demonstrate a lack of love for God. But also notice that John predicates the love that we have for God (or others) on God's prior love for us. We cannot love the way God intends, unless God first loves us! Grace first, then obedience. Why do we love God and love others (i.e., why do we keep any of God's commands?), because God first loves us. He showered us with love and then He calls us to respond to that by extending love to God and others.

That's not an original thought for John. It's the same way God's commandments are introduced to Israel. Before He gave them the Law, He rescued them. He delivered them. He graciously saved them. If you don't see that the salvation comes first, you misunderstand the entire Law. This is why the Ten Commandments begin with a reminder of God's prior work of redeeming Israel—*“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”*, therefore, keep all these commandments (Exodus 20:2). Grace first, then obedience. God is saying, “You don't keep the Law to earn my deliverance. I delivered you, therefore keep the Law.” Grace first. Always. Their obedience flows from the grace they had been shown. It's not something they were to do in order to obtain grace from God.

It's no different for us. John understood this. We love because God loved us first. We have been delivered out of our bondage to sin because of God's saving initiative in Christ. We didn't earn that. Through faith in Christ, that comes to us as an unmerited gift. And that gift, that love, that salvation, is what motivates our love for God and our following Jesus. We don't follow to earn God's favor. We follow because He has given us His favor in Christ. Grace first, then obedience. The obedience is a response to grace. We obey because of grace.

This is the glory of the Gospel. What is the Gospel? It's an announcement, the central announcement we find in the Bible. It announces to us something about God, something about ourselves, something about Christ, and something about how God wants us to respond to all of this. God is the creator of all things. He is perfect in every way and worthy of our absolute worship and allegiance. Yet we, though originally created good, have become sinful by nature and by choice. Because of that sinfulness we are, from birth, alienated from God, predisposed to live in hostility to God and His ways, and deserving of God's wrath and condemnation.

But the good news (which is the meaning of “Gospel”) is that God loves sinners like us. This love is the explanation for why God the Father sent Jesus, His Son. Jesus is fully God and fully man. He lived a life without sin. He died on the cross in the place of sinners and absorbed the wrath of God that they deserved for their failure and rebellion against God. His substitution—His life on the cross in the place of the sinner—is what secured full forgiveness for every person who would acknowledge their sin, turn from it, and trust in Jesus alone to save them (not their good behavior or effort or any other savior). His resurrection

gives His people right standing with God and eternal life. The only appropriate response is faith. Through that faith we are saved, brought into the people of God, and adopted by God as sons and daughters. And it's the work of Christ that ultimately brings redemption to God's creation. Salvation comes not through our work or initiative, but through that of Jesus Christ, the Savior.

Do you believe this? This is your only hope in this life and in the next. So believe. Turn from your sin and trust in Christ and you will be saved. He is the only way. That's the Gospel. That's the good news. Everything in the Bible is telling some aspect of that story. It's either pointing to the Gospel, or our need for the Gospel, or the implications of the Gospel. But the Gospel is the story that the Scriptures are announcing and it should be the story that every believer is announcing.

We need to be a Gospel-centered church. There are reasons that we're making a big deal about Gospel-centrality at this church and chief among them is the fact that Bible presents it as central and instructs us to do the same. For instance, listen to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15...

"Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, ² and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you— unless you believed in vain." (1 Corinthians 15:1-2)

Notice, Paul says that the Gospel was the content of his preaching, something to be received by them, something upon which they are to stand in life, and the means through which they are being saved. That means the Gospel is pretty important. But it's actually of "first importance." Keep reading...

"For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received [and then Paul gives a summary of the Gospel]: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. ¹¹ Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed." (1 Corinthians 15:3-11)

Paul says this Gospel message is of "first importance." There is nothing more important for him to proclaim and upon which we must take our stand than this message. Something similar is said to the Colossians. Listen to this beautiful description of Jesus.

"[God] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. ¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. (Colossians 1:13-16)

That is why you exist—for Him, for His glory. That's last week's sermon, right? But there's more...

And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. ²¹ And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his body of

flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, ²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.”

So what is all of that? That’s a summary of the Gospel! But notice Paul says there (in verse 23) that we are called to persevere in the faith. But how does he say we do that? How do we remain “*stable and steadfast*” in the faith? He says we do this by “*not shifting from the hope of the gospel...*” Don’t shift away from the Gospel. Keep it in front of you. It’s central. It’s of first importance. Don’t stray from it to the left or the right. What is that instruction? That’s a call to Gospel-centrality.

Why does the church exist? Because God has saved a people through the Gospel. The church is meant to make the Gospel visible, which it can’t do if it “*shifts*” away from the Gospel. It’s not a coincidence that the ordinances in the church—baptism and the Lord’s Supper—are signs that act out the Gospel. When we baptize a new believer we see signified in that act the gospel of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. When we partake the Lord’s Supper together, we are putting on display the Gospel of Jesus’ broken body and shed blood for the redemption of sinners.⁵ The church is meant to put on display the Gospel. But, of course, not all churches do. Not all churches keep the Gospel at the center. And this is far more tragic than you realize.

But there is more to the Gospel than just content to be believed. There’s power. God’s power. Transforming power. Paul said to the Romans,

“I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” (Romans 1:16-17; cf. 1 Corinthians 2; 1 Thessalonians 2:4)

God’s power is manifest in and through the Gospel. That’s where the power of salvation is found. The Gospel is “*bearing fruit and increasing*” (Colossians 1:6). And in it we also find the power needed for the Christian life. How do we fulfill the Great Commandments? Through the power of the Gospel. The Great Commandments are about love. We love because God first loved. We look at the Gospel and we see the love of God. That love of the Gospel shapes us. It makes us for the first time able to actively and intentionally live our lives for the glory of God. We love God as a result. We love neighbor as a result. All the commands of God, summarized in the Great Commandments, are fulfilled in our lives to the extent that the Gospel’s power is at work in our lives. This is why Peter, in his first New Testament letter, instructs us to...

“...love one another earnestly from a pure heart [what is that? That’s Great Commandments language], ²³ since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God...And this word is the good news [i.e., the Gospel] that was preached to you.” (1 Peter 1:22-23, 25)

So why do you love one another according to Peter here? Because the Gospel was preached to you and you have been born again through this living and abiding word of God, which is the Gospel. That’s why you “*love one another earnestly from a pure heart*”...because the Gospel has changed you. This is why we need the Gospel at the center, because it prompts us and enables us by the Spirit of God to fulfill the commands of God. This is why we must preach the Gospel to ourselves regularly. And this shows that the Gospel and the application of the Great Commandments are connected.

D. A. Carson writes this:

“One of the most urgently needed things today is a careful treatment of how the gospel, biblically and richly understood, ought to shape everything we do in the local church, all of our ethics, all of our priorities.”⁶

He’s right. And that’s what I want to illustrate in next Sunday’s sermon. I want to show you why keeping the Gospel central is absolutely vital for a church and for the Christian life. We’ll talk about how Gospel-centrality keeps Jesus at the center of our church. We will talk about how the Gospel should influence everything about us, individually and as a church. I’ll show you some of the ways God’s Word teaches these things next Sunday, Lord willing.

But let me close with this thought to whet the appetite a bit. Thom Rainer, who is the president and CEO at Lifeway Christian Resources and the author of a number of very helpful books, is known for his research into the state of the Evangelical churches. Not too long ago, he came out with a book titled, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*,⁷ in which he researched dying and dead churches and summarized his findings. It’s a helpful book for gauging the health of a church. Elsewhere Rainer states a principle that is related to these matters. He writes, “When the preferences of the church members are greater than their passion for the gospel, the church is dying.”⁸ Did you hear that? That is as true as it is sobering.

If the Gospel is not at the center, then something else is and that something else may be killing your church without you even realize it. “But pastor, what about all those churches that are growing in size, but don’t take seriously the Gospel?” What about them? “Well, doesn’t that disprove your point?” Why would it? “You know, because they’re growing.” You know what else grows? A tumor. Numbers don’t tell the whole story. The health of a church is inextricably linked to their understanding of the Gospel and their willingness to keep it, and therefore Christ, at the center of all they do. We will only be able to live out the Great Commandments the way God intends if we keep the Gospel before us. When we fail to live out God’s commands, it’s a Gospel-drift problem. I learned this from the New Testament and, if the Lord allows, I will show some places where this is demonstrated clearly in God’s Word next Sunday. We will explore what happens when Gospel-centrality drifts to Gospel-marginality.

But the takeaway today is that, as a church, we need to be about the Great Commandments—loving God and loving others. We need to actively embrace this ethic as our own. And if we are going to be about the Great Commandments, then Gospel-centrality needs to be very important to us as well. We will turn our attention to why this is next Sunday.

Let’s pray...

¹ The statement and a link to the original source could be found, as of January 16, 2016, at <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2016/01/12/professional-atheist-dawkins-says-christianity-bulwark-against-something-worse/>.

² Some translations say that all the commands “hang” on these two. That’s another way of capturing the thought—“as a door hangs on its hinges, so the whole OT hangs on these two commandments” (BAGD, 450).

³ Grant Osborne similarly says, “Love for God and others is this the foundation of OT religion and ethics and the fulcrum that links OT and NT ethics.” Grant Osborne, *Matthew* (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 824.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Trevin Wax, *Counterfeit Gospels: Rediscovering the Good News in a World of False Hope* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2011), 156.

⁶ D. A. Carson, “What Is the Gospel?—Revisited,” in *For the Fame of God’s Name* (ed. Sam Storms and Justin Taylor; Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 165.

⁷ Thom Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014).

⁸ Thom Rainer, Twitter post, January 28, 2011, 2:51 p.m., twitter.com/ThomRainer/status/31107227125288960.