

WWJD: Love
Matthew 22:34-40
Sunday, January 11, 2026

The Pharisees were desperate. It was clear that this guy represented a threat. Some people claimed he was a prophet. Others claimed he was the Messiah—the king of the Jews. Some even claimed he was the Son of God. And a few of the Pharisees had heard how he claimed for himself the authority to forgive sins.

His teaching was certainly revolutionary. He preached that the first would be last and the last first; that it's harder for the rich to get into heaven and for a camel to walk through the eye of a needle; that instead of seeing poverty and affliction as a punishment for sin, God had a special place in His heart for the poor, the downtrodden, the meek.

And as much as the Pharisees would have loved to just dismiss him as another revolutionary crackpot, they had to admit he was somehow different. Several of them had actually witnessed him heal a paralytic and a man with a withered hand. They'd heard how he healed lepers, brought sight to the blind, and even brought people back from the dead.

And so, of course, he had attracted a following. It hadn't been much at first, just a ragtag bunch of all the wrong kinds of people. It was actually astonishing how bad he was at picking disciples. None of them were the kind of people any self-respecting Rabbi would pick. For instance, it was reported that his very first followers weren't even students of the law, but fishermen. Fishermen! Then there was the fact that he called a violently anti-Roman zealot to follow him, along with a Roman-collaborating tax collector. It was a miracle they didn't kill all kill each other.

But, as time passed, and word of his teaching and healing spread, the crowds got bigger and bigger and bigger.

And while his teaching *was* revolutionary, he didn't seem like any kind of revolutionary they'd ever heard of. He wasn't preaching violent resistance. And he certainly didn't seem to be building himself a revolutionary army. The crowds that followed him seemed mostly to consist of gawkers, hangers-on, and unarmed peasants.

Which is what made his "triumphal" entrance into Jerusalem just a few days earlier so confusing. Huge crowds of people lining the streets, waving branches, laying their cloaks down on the road, seeming to welcome him as the coming king ... all at the same time the governor for the *real* king, Pontius Pilate, was entering the city from the other side of town. If the Pharisees hadn't known better, they would have thought he was declaring himself to be the king; that he was setting himself in opposition to the *real* king, Caesar.

Even then, some of them wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt. He had undoubtedly charm and charisma. He didn't seem that dangerous, and he *had* performed some pretty amazing miracles. But then, when he came into the temple after that entry, he turned over the tables of the money changers and got rid of the sacrificial animals. In other words, he basically declared war on the priests.

Of course, some of the Pharisees were secretly elated. It served the priests right that someone would finally call them out for selling out the Romans; for using the temple sacrificial system to line their own pockets at the expense of the people. In fact, this was one of the

reasons the Pharisees had come into existence, to renew the Jews' focus on the law rather than continuing to whitewash their sin with all those sacrifices at the temple.

And sure, in the process, the Pharisees themselves had created a system of rules and laws and regulations that normal people could never hope to fully comply with. But the Pharisees were willing to live with that. Truth be told, they had grown kind of attached to the power and control it gave them.

And so, as much as some of the Pharisees secretly appreciated Jesus' challenge to the priests, they had to admit that Jesus' challenge wasn't limited to the priests. With the titles the people were giving him, the authority he seemed to be claiming for himself, and the growing mob he attracted to himself, he represented a threat to all religious authority.

So, as much as they hated to do it, the Pharisees had decided to team up with their arch enemies, the priests and their allies the Sadducees. They would try to trap Jesus; to make him look foolish before all the people who had gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover.

They hoped to neutralize Jesus, for many reasons. For one thing, they wanted to prevent him from causing trouble with Rome. As everyone knew, during Passover, with all the visitors and nationalistic fervor, Jerusalem was a powderkeg. And if someone like this Jesus lit the fuse, the Romans would come down hard on *all* of them, priests, Pharisees, and Jesus followers alike.

More than that, they wanted to eliminate the challenge Jesus posed to their authority. Both the priests and the Pharisees had become comfortable. They liked being in charge. They liked the power. In the case of the priests, they liked the money and the political power as stooges of Rome. And Jesus threatened that.

But most importantly, Jesus' ministry of reaching out to the least and the lost, of welcoming the outcast, in short, of living out the love of God, held up a mirror to their own hypocrisy and corruption. They didn't want to face who they had allowed themselves to become, so they had a choice: change, or get rid of the mirror; get rid of Jesus. They chose option B.

So, that week following Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, this unholy alliance of priests and Pharisees decided to spring their trap. They confronted Jesus as he was teaching in the temple. And they tried everything. They tried an outright challenge to Jesus' authority as a teacher and a Rabbi. They tried to trap him into staking out a position on the politically and religiously charged questions of paying Roman taxes and whether resurrection is real. But he swatted those challenges aside easily.

In fact, he addressed their attempts so easily and so comprehensively that the priests, defeated and dispirited, gave up.

But the Pharisees made one last attempt. They decided to test Jesus' Biblical knowledge. So, they asked Jesus what was the greatest of all God's commandments. Surely this would stump him. The Pharisees had counted 613 separate commandments in the law. That's a lot. They figured he probably wouldn't know all of them. And even if he did, no matter which one he picked, someone was going to disagree.

Which is what made Jesus' answer so infuriating. Because he didn't answer. At least, he didn't answer the question they asked. They asked which was the most important law. And instead of answering that question, Jesus *summarized* ALL of the law—all 613 rules—into just 2:

love God and love people. Jesus told the Pharisees—and everyone who was listening—that following God doesn't involve memorizing and observing 613 laws, rules, and regulations. In fact, it doesn't involve behaving a certain way at all. It involves just one thing: love.

Well, how do you argue with that? The Pharisees couldn't. At least not there and then. So, they once again joined the priests, and gave up.

It would have been one thing if they could expose Jesus' hypocrisy; if they could show that he might preach love, but secretly stole candy from babies. But they couldn't. Jesus wasn't just talking the talk. He was also walking the walk. He wasn't just talking about love, he was living it.

Anyone looking at his life could see that he wasn't in it for himself. He wasn't seeking to maximize his influence by drawing together the most well-respected scholars as his disciples and focusing his ministry in the heart of Judaism, Jerusalem. No, he taught fishermen and peasants in the God-forsaken province of Galilee.

And he wasn't building himself a lavish and comfortable base of operations up in Galilee. By all accounts, he was itinerant, moving from village to village, focusing his ministry on the poor, the outcasts, the ones who for the most part could never hope to pay him back. He taught anyone who wanted to listen and didn't ask for anything in return. And he healed any who came to him.

He lived out God's love in a way they had never seen before. And, as they would see in just a few days, his love didn't stop at acts of service. He gave his own life for his people. And

now, here he was, boiling down all of scripture—all of God's laws for how human beings are to live their lives—into two simple rules: love God and love people.

Jesus was presenting those Pharisees with a choice. They couldn't deny the miracles or the healings ... many of them were eyewitnesses. And now, they couldn't deny his teaching. They knew deep down, whether they were willing to admit it to themselves or not, that he was right; that it all boils down to love.

But to accept Jesus meant to abandon the lives they had created for themselves. To abandon the self-sufficiency, to abandon the power, the prestige, the control. They had dedicated their lives to following a bunch of rules of behavior under the impression that doing so would excuse them from following the law of love. They had thought they could follow God while at the same time embracing the control, power, wealth, and human acclaim. Following Jesus would mean giving up that life—a life that they knew—and embracing—as Jesus did—utter dependence on God.

In that moment, when they thought they had trapped Jesus, they discovered that, in fact, he had trapped them. He had trapped them into making a choice: a choice to continue dedicating themselves to control, power, and prestige, or follow him. To continue blindly following the rules, or to ask themselves, "What would Jesus do?"

Well, we know how they chose. The question is, how about you? What will you do? Or, better yet, what would Jesus do?