

What's the Greatest Commandment About Work?

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Matthew

Jewish leaders in Jesus' day often fought over the relative importance of commandments. Some held the view that observing the Sabbath was the most important of all commandments. Others valued circumcision over all else. Still others would have believed, as many modern Jews do today, that the most important commandment is found in Deuteronomy 6:5 "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

So when a lawyer asked Jesus to weigh in on the question, he might be asking Jesus to pick sides in an already contentious debate.

Yet Jesus plunges into a new area of insight by answering not only which commandment is the greatest, but how people might go about fulfilling it. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," Jesus says, and then he adds a second commandment, from Leviticus 19:18 "love your neighbor as yourself," which he joins with the first commandment by saying it is "like it." Through Jesus' logic, loving God is linked inextricably to loving other people.

In the parables that proceed Jesus's explanation in Matthew 22 we can see that work is often the primary way through which we love other people. The parable of the two sons, for example, tells of two brothers whose father tells them to go work in his vineyard. One tells his father that he will

but doesn't do it. The other tells his father that he won't but ends up working all day among the vines. Jesus then asks the question, "Which of the two did the will of his father?" The answer is clear: the one who actually worked, though initially refusing to do so. This parable continues earlier stories in Matthew about the people who actually are part of God's kingdom. Jesus tells the religious leaders in his audience that the non-religious-looking "tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you" (Matthew 21:31), because they are the ones doing God's will.

In our work, actions speak louder than words as we attempt to love those we work with and work for. This can be particularly difficult, as work is often the place where we encounter the widest diversity of people, and their nearness to us day after day gives us the unique challenge of loving people who are different from ourselves. Many organizations have mission statements that include loving care for employees and customers. If your organization doesn't have such a mission – or doesn't live up to the stated policy – there are still things individuals can do to love others through dedicated work.

Loving others at work as we might love our own selves might look like a cook double-checking the internal temperature of a hamburger after someone says "Does that look all right to you," because that's what she would do if cooking the hamburger for herself. It might look like a sales clerk calling over a more-experienced colleague when a customer asks a

question he is not sure he knows the answer to—rather than giving an answer he thinks is right—because he would want that information himself before buying. It might look like a businessman asking his colleagues, “Is it possible we’re not taking her seriously enough because she’s a woman?” knowing that he would want a colleague to stand up for him when he’s being misunderstood.

These are small examples, yet each of them may come at a price—a lost commission, or the risk of diminished reputation or access to power. To love a neighbor, as yourself, may require taking risks that we would surely take in order to serve our own ends, but which loom large when undertaken only for the benefit of someone else. It is truly a high bar, and perhaps that is why Jesus joins “love your neighbor as yourself” with “love the Lord” in what is called the “greatest” commandment.