

The greatest commandment

MEETING AIM

To discover something of what it means to love God and others.

BIBLE PASSAGE

Matthew 22:34-40

BACKGROUND

This passage comes in the middle of a section in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus is teaching the crowds. The Pharisees make several attempts to trip Jesus up, but he confounds their plans every time. The story for this session is one of those attempts to test Jesus. The question posed by the Pharisees comes from a spiteful spirit, but Jesus' answer is full of love: a love for God and love for people; a love that the Pharisees are not putting into practice.

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WELCOME ACTIVITIES

OPTION 1: Game

Invite some volunteers (of all ages and genders) up to the front and challenge them to do the opposite of what you are about to ask them to do. Try things like "Touch your toes", "Stay perfectly still" or "Don't say anything". Ask them how easy it is to disobey commandments.

OPTION 2: Discussion

As people arrive or at the start of the service, invite them to talk in smaller groups about times when people have shown them love this week. What did it feel like to be on the receiving end of such loving actions? Perhaps they have shown love to others this week. What did they do?

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BIBLE STORY

You will need: slips of paper with the Pharisees' questions written on (see below)

Before the service, give four volunteers (of different ages and genders) one of the Pharisees' questions and make sure they sit in different sections of your meeting space. Tell this story:

Jesus has been teaching his disciples and the crowds for about three years now. They all love him, but the people in charge – the religious leaders – are angry. They are worried that Jesus is getting all the attention and that people won't listen to them any more. So they have been asking questions, trying to trick him. *Invite the first three people with questions to stand up and ask them in this order:*

"Who gave you the authority to do these things?"

"Should we pay taxes to the emperor or not?"

"When God raises people to life, whose wife will this woman be?"

The religious leaders were not happy. *Encourage the congregation to grumble and complain.*

They had another question. *Invite the fourth person to ask their question.*

"What is the most important commandment?"

And this is what Jesus said: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind. This is the first and most important commandment. The second most important commandment is like this one. And it is, 'Love others as much as you love yourself.' All the Law of Moses and the Books of the Prophets are based on these two commandments."

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SMALL GROUPS

You will need: copies of the questions below; Bibles

Break into small groups (made up of one or two families or other mixed-age groups) and give each group a copy of these questions:

- Why did the religious leaders keep asking Jesus questions?
- What do you notice about the two commandments Jesus mentions?
- Do you think the religious leaders were following these commandments? Why? Why not?
- How can we love God?
- How can we love others?

Give them time to chat about these questions, referring back to the Bible passage if they need to.

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REVIEW

You will need: a roving mic (if needed); a volunteer who has put one or both of Jesus' commandments into action

Get some feedback on questions two and three from 'Small groups' using a microphone to hear people's contributions if your meeting space is large. Talk about the fact that love sits at the heart of these two commandments, and that the religious leaders were more concerned with following the rules than loving God and others.

Go on to talk about questions four and five. Get some feedback from the groups and share any stories from your own life that are appropriate to your context. Invite your volunteer up to the front and ask them what they have done to follow these commandments.

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RESPONSE ACTIVITIES

Set these three activities up in different parts of your meeting space. Explain what each one is and encourage people to go to the one that will help them process what they have discovered most effectively.

OPTION ONE: Actions

Challenge the group that chooses this activity to come up with actions for Jesus' words in verses 37 to 39 to help everyone remember the two commandments. Encourage them to make it a group effort. They could also create actions that illustrate what these commandments mean in their lives. At the end of the response time, invite the group to the front to perform the actions they have come up with.

OPTION TWO: Cards

You will need: card-making craft materials
Invite people to make cards for people in your community (both your church and the wider community) who might need to be shown love. As you work, discuss how you might deliver these cards. Chat about what it's like to be shown love when you are feeling stressed, unhappy or ill.

OPTION THREE: Reflection

You will need: holding crosses, candles (live or battery-operated) and other spiritual focus points

Create a space where people can spend time reflecting on how they love God. Encourage them to use the spiritual focuses (such as holding a cross or lighting a candle) to help in their reflection. What can people do differently this week to show their love to God?

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CLOSING

Bring everyone back together and ask if anyone would like to share what they did, thought about or discussed during the response time. Thank everyone for taking part and say an appropriate blessing to close the service.

CREATIVE WORSHIP SUGGESTIONS

In your sung worship, sing songs that celebrate how much God loves us. Talk about how our response to God's love is to love him back. Invite people to sing a song that speaks of our love for God if they want to tell him they love him.

ALEX TAYLOR

is resources editor for *Premier Youth and Children's Work*.

Fatima and the phoney photos

Fatima looked at her phone with dismay. "Where have all these pictures come from?"

She scrolled down the Instagram feed at photo after photo. All of them were tagged with #ManchesterfordHSselfie.

Jamie looked over her shoulder. "What do you mean? They look like perfectly normal selfies to me."

"Are you serious? They're all fake! Look at this one. You can tell she's edited that pic. Her eyes are completely out of proportion with the rest of her."

Jamie peered at the photo. "Yeah, I suppose she does look a bit like an alien emoji."

"And these ones!" Fatima scrolled down further. "I don't recognise any of these people. Who are they? How did they know about the competition?"

"I don't know, but look at this one." Jamie pointed to the background of a selfie that showed a glamorous woman who was clearly too old to be at secondary school. "That's Russian writing, isn't it?"

"I don't believe this!" cried Fatima. "Who's been colluding with the Russians?" She threw the phone down on the table in disgust. "Unbelievable! The competition's ruined!"

A week earlier, Fatima and Jamie had set up a competition to find Manchesterford High School's best selfie taker. The only rules were that the photos had to be decent and natural. No filters, no editing, no stickers. Just the selfie. They wanted to make people aware of how many images are photoshopped and to celebrate how awesome everyone looks naturally.

Fatima picked up her phone again and scrolled through the tagged images. She could see there were some genuine photos among the edited ones and those from the fake Manchesterford students.

"It's not fair," she said to Jamie, "there are some great genuine photos here. How are we going to encourage people to enter the competition when there are fakes and phoneys all over the place?"

"What can we do?"

"Well, we can delete all these fake ones for a start." Fatima started tapping on photos, looking for the delete button.

"Wait!" shouted Jamie. "What if you delete genuine ones? Let's wait until the end of the competition, then download them all. We can check the data on each picture and get rid of the ones that aren't from Manchesterford. Then we can have a little chat with the ones we think have edited their selfies..."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Do you agree with what Jamie and Fatima decided to do? Why? Why not?
- How would you have dealt with the problem of the phoney photos?
- How do you feel when people spoil something you've done with lies or fake news?
- What kind of punishment should be dealt out to those who spoil things in this way?

This story is based on Matthew 13:24-30 and 36-43. Read these passages to the group and compare Jesus' story with this one. Discuss what Jesus might have been saying through his parable, encouraging the group to think about it in a new way.

ALEX TAYLOR

is resources editor for *Premier Youth and Children's Work*.

You've got to go backwards to go forwards

My 12-year-old son has been going through a tough time recently. I believe every father should be a great mentor to their daughters and sons. In an effort to help I looked for opportunities to make myself available for him to talk to and access any experience or wisdom I might have to offer.

So I took him for a haircut. Obviously. While it's true that he desperately needed one, I also knew it would give us some time together where he could open up if he wanted to and I could ask some open questions if it felt appropriate. Otherwise we could just hang out together, which is important in itself.

I was surprised when a moment presented itself. We were struggling to cross the road due to traffic and he suggested we walk back up the hill to a pedestrian crossing so we could come back down on the other side. I glibly quipped: "Sometimes you've got to go backwards in order to go forwards." And then a mentoring conversation opened up. I posed the idea of how he could go back to move forward as a question and, as usual, his reply surprised me, and we had a great time together. That's the beauty of mentoring.

So I'll pose the same question to you, both personally and for use with your own mentees. In what area of your life do you need to go backwards in order to go forwards?

It might be that you have been putting too much pressure on yourself. Perhaps by not trying so hard, giving up on a few ideas or youth and children's clubs, or taking a rest from try to get up at 6am to pray every day you may actually relax, calm down and breathe a bit more life and freshness into those respective areas.

This paradox is evident in all kinds of places:

In running, going slower can develop your slow-twitch muscles and aerobic capacity, enabling you to actually run faster.

In DIY, taking longer to properly seal a shower cubicle before tiling it may save a lot more time than not...And it will also help you avoid having it leak through the downstairs ceiling (not that I'm speaking from experience or anything).

In trying to motivate a team, going back to basics and returning to the original aim often refocuses efforts and increases productivity more than introducing complicated new initiatives.

Don't forget that God went backwards too, giving up his divine rights and being born in a dirty cave in order to achieve more glorious things. He also had to suffer and die so that we could be forgiven and become alive in him.

Ask your mentee: what do you need to sacrifice in order to gain more with Jesus? Where do you need to go backwards in order to finally go forwards? Do you need to stop worrying about certain things in order to trust more and see change? Are you too busy? By cutting something out will you do other things better? If they feel a backward step is needed to progress, encourage and pray for them.

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Valentine's Day games

February brings us Valentine's Day, with its overpriced restaurants and sickly-sweet greetings cards. So here are some games that play on the theme of romantic love. You are welcome!



GREETINGS CARDS

You will need: A4 card; felt-tip pens

Give out the sheets of card and felt-tip pens, then challenge the group to design and write a Valentine's card from one member of a famous couple to the other. They should avoid using either of the people's names. Couples could include Kanye West and Kim Kardashian, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge or Sussex, Romeo and Juliet, Posh and Becks or Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn.

Once everyone has created their card, read them out to the group one by one and ask the young people to guess who the famous couple is. The person who guesses correctly keeps the card. At the end of the game, the one with the most cards is the winner.



LOVED-UP BINGO

You will need: bingo cards (see below); slips of paper; hat or bag; pens (or bingo 'dobbers')

Before the session, create bingo cards with the names of one half of various celebrity couples. Make sure all the cards are different so you end up with one winner. Write the other halves of the celebrity couples on slips of paper and put them in a hat or bag.

Give out the bingo cards and pens (or dobbers, for that bingo experience). Pull the names out of the bag one by one and shout them out. The players have to find the other half of the celebrity couple on their card and mark it off. Carry on playing until one person has marked off all the names on their card and shouts: "House!"



LOVE BALLADS

You will need: a collection of love ballads the children or young people will know and the means to play them

Before the session, gather together some famous love ballads your group will be familiar with. Split the group into two teams (or more if you have large numbers). Play the first line of the song and challenge the teams to carry on singing it. Award points for the correct next line and also for the title and artist. The groups could take it in turns to answer or you could make it a free for all! The team with the most points at the end of the game is the winner.

A variation of this game would be to give each team the lyrics to a song. Play the song and ask the children or young people to sing along (each team could sing together or nominate a member to sing solo). After a couple of lines, fade the music out. The team has to carry on singing for a few lines. Fade the music back in and award points for how closely the team is in time with the recording.



DISASTROUS FIRST DATES

You will need: a table and two chairs

Stand the group in a circle with the table and chairs in the middle. Invite two volunteers to be the two people on the date. They should start acting out a date that is going badly wrong.

Tell the rest of the group that they should shout: "Freeze!" when they have an idea of where this drama about this bad date could go next, make sure everyone knows their suggestions should be appropriate for your group. They can then tap one of the actors on the shoulder and take their place in the scene. The drama then continues with the new participant.

Everyone should give the two actors a moment to develop the scene before shouting: "Freeze!" If the actors change too quickly, there will be barely any time for a story to develop. Keep the action going for as long as it remains interesting and not too bizarre!

If your young people are reluctant to act you could do this as a storytelling activity. Sit in a circle and take turns to come up with a sentence about a disastrous date.



LOVE HEART RELAY

You will need: packets of Love Hearts sweets; bowls; chopsticks; chalk or masking tape

Empty the packets of Love Hearts into bowls and place them at one end of your space. Mark off a line at the other end. Split the children or young people into teams and line each team up opposite one of the bowls of Love Hearts. Give the first person in each team a pair of chopsticks and make sure each team has an empty bowl.

On the signal to go, the first person in each team runs to the bowl and picks up as many Love Hearts as they can with the chopsticks. They then run back to their team, still carrying the Love Hearts with the chopsticks. They drop the Love Hearts in their empty bowl and give the chopsticks to the next person in the team, who goes back to the bowl and so on. If a player drops their Love Hearts on the floor they have to return to their team empty-handed and pass the chopsticks to the next player.

At the end of a given time frame (or when all the bowls have been emptied), count how many Love Hearts each team has collected. The team with the most is the winner!

Finally, get the teams to vote on the best and worst slogans on their Love Hearts.

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Love is...

BACKGROUND

1 Corinthians 13 is an incredibly popular Bible passage that explores the characteristics of love. It is often used at weddings but has much to say about love in all its different forms. These craft ideas will help children explore more of what Paul has to say and what it means to them.

CORNFLOUR CONFESSIONS



You will need: cornflour; water; a large, flat container such as a roasting tin or a plastic takeaway container; lolly sticks or plastic knives

It's often hard to forgive people when they have hurt us, but Paul talks about love's capacity to let go of wrongdoing. The cornflour mix in this craft will not let anything

drawn in it remain permanently, so it's a great way to explore this characteristic of love.

Put a cup of cornflour into the container and mix in half a cup of water. Encourage the children to use lolly sticks or plastic knives to draw or write in the cornflour some of the things they do that annoy others. Watch the 'wrongs' disappear as the cornflour mix moves of its own accord. Talk about love being forgiving. When someone you love does something that annoys you, you try hard to let it go and not hold it against them. Relate this to God showing his love for us by forgiving us when we have done wrong things.

CUP AND BALL GAME



You will need: paper or plastic disposable cups; ball-pool balls or ping-pong balls; sticky tape; string; scissors; felt-tip pens; stickers

Cut a piece of string the length of an adult's arm. Tape one end of the string to a ball in the bottom of the cup. Poke the free end of the string through the hole from the outside of the cup

and tie a knot on the inside to secure it in place. Add some tape to keep the string secure. Let the children decorate their cups with the pens and stickers.

The aim is to hold the cup and try to get the ball inside by throwing it upwards. This takes a lot of patience! Talk about what patience and perseverance mean and how this relates to love, for example when life is hard but people who love each other stick together to keep going.

SPREADING HEARTS



You will need: a cup; water; water-based felt-tip pens; kitchen roll cut into strips

One of the important characteristics of love is that it helps us think about the needs of others. This craft is a very visual reminder of love reaching out.

Put about an inch of water in the bottom of the cup. Halfway up the strip of kitchen roll, draw a heart and colour it in. Above the heart,

write the initials of friends and family. Put the end of the strip in the water and watch as the water climbs up the kitchen roll and starts to spread out the colour of the heart, which will then cover the initials. Talk about how love (modelled by the life of Jesus) helps us think of others and care about them just as much, if not more than, ourselves, just as the heart on the kitchen roll covers the initials of our friends and family.

PAINTED ROCKS



You will need: rocks; paint; paint pens; permanent markers; varnish

Paul tells us that love never fails and that, when everything else has disappeared, love is the greatest thing that remains. Rocks and stones are symbols of strength and long-lasting durability, so they are a great craft resource for exploring this theme.

Ask the children to decorate the stones with pictures of what love means to them or words about love, using the paint and pens. Use the time to talk to them about the words and pictures they have chosen. What stories from the Bible do they know in which God shows the strength of his love for people?

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Mission Impossible: Fallout

CLIP: 00:50:24 – 00:56:46 / RATING: 12A

SYNOPSIS

Two years after Ethan Hunt had successfully captured Solomon Lane, the remnants of the Syndicate have reformed into another organisation called the Apostles. Under the leadership of a mysterious fundamentalist known only as John Lark, the organisation plans to acquire three plutonium cores. Ethan and his team are sent to Berlin to intercept them, but the mission fails when Ethan saves Luther and the Apostles escape with the plutonium. With CIA agent August Walker joining the team, Ethan and his allies must find the plutonium cores before it's too late.

The clip focuses on Ethan and his team leading a daring plot to extract the evil Solomon Lane. Having to work undercover for some shady characters, Ethan must mastermind a daring plan to ensure that civilian casualties are minimised while evading the French police. (To see the chase in full, watch until one hour and seven seconds.)

DISCUSS

After showing the clip as a stimulus, break into small groups (you may wish to have a designated discussion leader in each group) and pose the following questions:

- Would it be possible to be a Christian and a secret agent?
- Is Ethan Hunt a good person?
- Have you ever felt as though your life is out of control?
- Do you plan for everything or do you react to things when they happen?
- Are some bad people beyond redemption?

After discussing the first set of questions, read through Joshua 8:1-29. (Reading the whole chapter would be better if time allows. You may also want to give the context of the story to the group first.) Return to your groups to discuss the next set of questions:

- Why does God tell Joshua to act in this way?
- Is Joshua a good person?
- How could this passage be justified morally?
- Should Joshua have allowed his enemies a chance to surrender and become better people?

If you have the time, why not watch the whole of *Mission Impossible: Fallout* so the group can see the clip in context?

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A cover is not the book

ARTIST: Emily Blunt, Lin-Manuel Miranda and the company of *Mary Poppins Returns*
SUITABLE FOR: Under 10s

INTRODUCTION

Don't judge a book by its cover! This is not only the source of the song, but also one of the most precious lessons for our children and young people as they discover that, while people look at outward appearances, God looks at our heart.

Begin the session with a 'noticing' game, such as getting a few leaders to change something obvious about their appearance and waiting to see whether anyone comments. Alternatively, try a memory game, asking questions of a blindfolded member of the group about what other members are wearing. You could play 'Kim's game' with a selection of objects laid out on a tray. When one item is removed the children or young people have to correctly identify it.

Explain that you are going to be thinking about how as human beings we make assumptions about and judge one another, compared with how God looks at people. As a group, discuss:

- What cues do we use to help us decide what a person is like?
- Have you ever made a wrong judgement of someone, based on your first impressions?
- How does it feel when people are quick to judge what you are like and don't get to know you?

LISTEN AND DISCUSS

Play 'A cover is not the book' and, as a group, discuss:

- What does the singer mean by the line 'a cover is not the book'?
- Is it ever OK to make a quick judgement of what a person is like?
- What does it mean for us to read a person rather than their 'cover'?

Allow the children to share their own experiences and describe how this has made them feel before drawing the discussion together. Explain that while 'don't judge a book by its cover' is a well-known saying nowadays, God said something very similar thousands of years ago.

Look together at 1 Samuel 16, either reading the whole chapter or summarising the meeting between Samuel and David, depending upon your group, before turning back to verse seven together. Ask the group:

- What does it mean for God to look at the heart?
- How can we do the same?

Challenge the children to think about what it means to make careful, considered decisions about what a person is really like based on their heart, rather than on the image they put across. Explain that God alone can see into our hearts and make judgements about what we are really like, but we should not be too swift in judging others based on our 'cover appearance', but rather to try to get to know a person well and discover what they are really like. Close the session by praying that your group would be slow to judge others and willing to dig a little deeper.

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LAMENT

Sometimes we can think that prayer just means asking God for what we need, or perhaps saying “thanks” for what he has given. But the Bible shows us lots of other ways of praying. One is called lament. It’s a way of expressing the things we feel sad or upset about to God. Some of the poems and songs in the Bible are laments. Use the words below (from Psalm 6) to help you pray and express yourself honestly to God.

VERSES 2-3

Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am faint;
heal me, Lord, for my bones are in agony.
My soul is in deep anguish.
How long, Lord, how long?

**What do you want to ask God
“How Long?” about?**

How would you describe the way you feel right now?

How do you express your sadness and upset?

VERSES 6-7

I am worn out from my groaning.
All night long I flood my bed with weeping
and drench my couch with tears.
My eyes grow weak with sorrow;
they fail because of all my foes.

**Did you know that God accepts your
prayer even when you’re sad and upset?**

VERSES 8-9

Away from me, all you who do evil,
for the Lord has heard my weeping.
The Lord has heard my cry for mercy;
the Lord accepts my prayer.

**Perhaps you know another person or situation where
things are going badly. Talk to God about that.**

What else do you want to say to God right now?

SARA AND SAM HARGREAVES

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