

The Great Life

1. *Great Passion for God*

September 19, 2021

Welcome to the first week of our Fall spiritual growth focus: the Great Life.

Each year high school seniors across the nation vote for the superlatives to be put in the yearbook. They rate fellow students in classic categories like:

- Most athletic
- Class clown
- Most likely to succeed
- Cutest couple

Some come up with creative categories like:

- Most likely to be Instagram famous
- Most likely to lead a protest
- Most likely to become a superhero

This year, there was an uproar at one California high school when some unkind superlatives slipped past the editors, like:

- Most likely to be cancelled
- Most likely to get Covid twice.

In the long run, it doesn't matter whether we're named "most likely" anything in a yearbook – what really matters is how we show up in God's book. Last weekend we saw that each of us are born to be great in God's kingdom. And we live a Great Life by fulfilling the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. Today we'll look at how to fulfill the Great Commandment. And what commandment is that? One day, a guy who spent all his time studying God's laws came and asked Jesus that very question:

Matthew 22:34-36 *Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵ One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶ "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"* That question is tougher than it seems, because there are a boatload of commandments to choose from in the Bible!

The first five books of the Bible are called the Law, because – surprise --- they are filled with laws from God. We've all heard of the Ten Commandments – they're in there and so are a lot of other laws. The Jewish rabbis of the day counted up all the commands they could find, and there were 613 in all. They covered everything from "don't steal" to "treat foreigners well" to "teach God's laws to your children." So 613 laws --- that's a lot of laws. Which one was the most important out of them all? "Don't murder" comes to mind. That's pretty important one, right? I mean, you can't have much of a society if people are constantly killing each other any time they felt like it. The Parkway would become a shooting gallery.

But that's not the commandment Jesus singled out as most important. In fact, he didn't choose any of the 10 commandments. When asked which of God's laws was most important, Jesus didn't hesitate. He responded, *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."*³⁸ *This is the first and greatest commandment.* – **Matthew 22:37-38**. So there it is: the most important commandment is to love God with everything you've got. Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 here. It says to love God with our whole heart, soul, and mind. We don't need to get technical about the difference between loving God with our soul versus with our mind; the point is that we are to love God with our whole being – with all we are.

True greatness starts with loving God wholeheartedly

It's the most important commandment because if we get that one right, we get pretty much everything else in life right. If we love God we are going to live in the will of God and do what pleases him. If we love God with our whole being, we will honor others, not kill them – we'll contribute, not steal. In other words, we will build a life that is truly great in all the right ways.

Those who are greatest in God's eyes are not those who have the most followers on social media, not the ones with the most money or power. The greatest ones are the ones who fulfill the greatest commandment; the ones who have a passion for God.

God is worthy of our deepest love because...

- He is the one who created us uniquely. We're born from our parents but we're created by God.
- He can love us back perfectly. Nobody knows us better than God does, and yet no one loves us more completely than he does!
- He is the most generous being we'll ever encounter. He loved the world so much he sent his one and only son so that whoever believes in him would never perish. He even loves his enemies!

Even so, it is not always natural to love God. After all, God is invisible and not like us.

So let's talk about how to love God with all we are.

To grow in passion for Jesus...

Pursue him.

We go out of our way to be with those we love, don't we? People pay lots of money to get on a plane to be with their families for the holidays. A guy arranges his schedule to spend time with that woman he's crazy about. Passion finds a way to be with the beloved. We're not passive, we're not looking for ways to cut corners or how to get by on the minimum. To grow in love for God, pursue him; *move* toward him. Sometimes people say, "I don't have to go to worship in order to get to heaven. I don't need to go to worship to believe in God." That may be technically true, but it entirely misses the point. I don't need to go home to my wife Linda in order to be legally married, but if I don't want to go home, something isn't quite right. I wouldn't tell my wife, "I don't have to come home in order to believe that you exist." If I were to ask Linda, "What is the minimum requirement I need to do in order to stay legally married to you?" she would not be impressed. Looking for the minimum requirement is not passion.

I haven't met anyone who has built a deep, intimate relationship with their spouse by doing the minimum required to stay married. And I have not met anyone who loves God with their whole being who is passive in their relationship with him. I don't know anyone who reliably hears the voice of Jesus and knows him deeply who doesn't pursue him in worship with other believers or seek him in private prayer. I don't know anyone who is being transformed into the image of Jesus -- who is growing in faith and learning to take hold of God's promises, who is passive about knowing God.

In our spiritual growth series we are pursuing Jesus in 3 ways:

1. Worship each weekend. You are doing that right now – way to go!
2. Meet with him daily through prayer and scripture. We have a bookmark with suggestions on what to read each day in the Bible. Ask him to help you to experience his love." See what God does when you repeatedly ask him that!
3. Participate in a Life Group – because we grow when we're in community with others. We'd be happy to help you find a group, just let us know on the Communicator Card or stop at the table in the lobby.

To grow in passion for Jesus...

Remove competing loves

Our love for God won't grow if we are entertaining other competing loves. This doesn't mean we can't like anything in life except God; it just means we make him the center of life. He's not one interest competing with others – he is the center of life.

Here's a way to picture what I mean. Let's say a circle represents my life and all the different parts of my life are a slice

- job/school
- hobbies
- marriage/relationships
- kids
- friendships
- financial plans
- health/workouts

Some people assume that when they come to faith in Christ that they add God as a new slice of the pie and he is then competing with their work, financial plans, relationships, and so on. Looking at it this way, God makes life more complicated. He's one more piece to juggle and they hope that their spiritual life can give the strength and peace to handle all the other parts of life.

But the way Jesus points us to is different. With God is at the center. Now I still have all these other parts of my life

- job/school
- hobbies
- marriage/relationship
- kids
- friendships
- financial plans
- health/workouts

God is not a piece of the pie, he is at the center of everything else.

There is a huge difference between these two ways of life. When God is a piece of the pie, I love God with *part* of my heart. He is an add on, so he competes for time and attention with all the other parts of my life. But when God is at the center of my life, I love him with my whole being. His voice is not competing with a bunch of others. When God is just a slice of life, I am still in charge of my life and I manage all the parts the way I think best. That means my obedience is optional. I'll juggle what God wants with what the boss wants or my friends think or what my money dictates. But when God is at the center of my life, I'm not calling the shots, he is. My obedience is not selective; it is assumed. That's because he orders all the parts of my life – speaking into them all. When I am at work, God is with me and leading me. When I am parenting my kids, I ask for his direction. He speaks into every part of my life; the way I use my money, how I live out my relationships, and so on.

Coming to Christ means you give up managing the pie of life and put God at the center. We call that dying to self and living with Jesus at the center. That frees us to love God fully. Mike Bickle says, "There are dimensions of pleasure and fulfillment that can

never be experienced until we say a passionate, abandoned “yes” to the lordship of Jesus Christ.” In other words, we can’t experience the full joy of knowing God while we’re resisting what he calls us to do. We can’t love him with our whole being while disobeying him. As long as Jesus is just a part of my life, then I will have a divided allegiance, stunted spiritual growth, compromised character and lukewarm love toward God. But when he is the center of all I do and say my heart is fully available to him.

To grow in passion for Jesus...

Ask God to reveal himself

Anybody here like to watch rom-com movies? They’re pretty popular. One of the more common rom-com plot formulas is “enemy to friend.” That’s when the 2 main characters dislike each other at first but then get thrown together for some reason. Once they get to know each other they realize they had the wrong idea about the other and fall in love. They couldn’t love the distorted idea they had at first, but then they see something else. There are many people who have trouble loving God because they have a distorted image of who he is. Here are a few of the more common distorted images of God:

1. ***Cosmic life force*** That is to picture God as an impersonal force – like electricity or gravity. If we think of God this way, we won’t love him with our whole being. I acknowledge that gravity exists, but I don’t love gravity!

2. ***The big guy upstairs*** We see God as personal –not just as a force, but he is distant and uninvolved. He is in heaven somewhere, and he doesn’t pay attention to what’s happening on planet Earth. Or if he does, it is just about the big stuff like wars and national crises. I can’t love a remote person who doesn’t care about me.

3. ***Accusing God*** The accusing God is a judge who is angry because he sees us failing and falling short. We can’t love someone who is accusing us. This is a demonic distortion; it is Satan who is called “the accuser.”

There is a way to know what God is really like: look at Jesus. **Colossians 1:15** *The Son [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God...* Jesus is not a cosmic force – he is a very real person who worked, walked the Earth and ate lunch with people in Israel. He is not remote and uninvolved – he came to this planet to enter into our reality. And he is not the accuser – he is called our Advocate – our defender. When we ask, God will show us what he is like, and we will be stunned and our love for him will grow in us. Let me suggest a prayer you can pray each day: “Father, please help me experience your love. Pray the for the next 3 weeks and see what God does!

Lastly, to grow in passion for Jesus...

Dwell on his love for you

1 John 4:19 *We love because he first loved us.* Our love for God grows when we experience his love for us. But *why* does God love us? If I were to ask you right now, “Why does God love you” what would you say? Here’s why God loves you; “Because.” Just because. Parents can love their kids irrationally – that is, for no reason. You’ve heard of “a face only a mother can love.” Well, that’s because the mother doesn’t love her children because their faces are beautiful. She loves her child just *because*. Why does God love you? Just *because*. He created you, that’s true. But he created a lot of stuff he didn’t die for. You are his child through faith in Jesus, that’s true. But he loved you before you were part of his family. God so loved the world that he sent his only son --- the love came before God sent his son. Tim Keller said, “The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.” Let that sink in – dwell on that.

Jesus was eating with a religious leader when a woman with a past came in and washed Jesus’ feet with her tears and poured expensive perfume on his feet. The leader was startled and put off by her display. Jesus explained her behavior: **Luke 7:47** *her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.*” Forgiven a lot – love God a lot. Forgiven little, love little. If we feel like we’re pretty good people, we won’t love much. But the truth is, we’ve all been forgiven much! Don’t let your past sin that God has forgiven steal love from your heart. Meditate on his love. Think of what he has provided to you, how he has protected you, and guided you.

If you find it easier to believe in God than to love him, I hope you hear this: You are profoundly loved by God. He knows more about you than you know about yourself, and he loves you more than you can imagine. And your life will be transformed as you feel his love; that will help you grow in love for him. If you feel like there is a distance between you and God, it doesn’t have to stay that way. Just tell him today that you want to him to be the center of your life.

Let’s pray.