

The Great Commandment Part One

A sermon delivered at Calvary Chapel DC Metro
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If you were to go up to somebody on the street and ask, “What does God really want us to do? In a short answer, can you tell me?” What kind of answers do you think you would get?

I suppose some people would give us something that God doesn’t want us to do. Maybe they would say:

- Don’t tell lies. Have integrity.
- Don’t murder
- Help yourself (because I can’t help you until you help yourself) Actually, that idea doesn’t appear anywhere in Scripture.

Maybe some people would say, not it’s not a negative command; it’s not something God doesn’t want you to do. It’s something He does want you to do.

- Pray 7 times a day and really mean it
- Wear particular clothes
- Feed poor people and build schools
- Give money

Well, way back in the day before iPhones and Angry Birds, people would kill time or entertain themselves by posing difficult questions or philosophic puzzles to one another. Then they would debate the answers; they would discuss ideas and argue their points back and forth. And a favorite debate in Israel was ask, “What is the most important commandment?”

You may know that God gave the nation of Israel the Ten Commandments and carved them in two tablets of stone that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai. A scene typically depicted in religious art by a big shaggy and grey Moses wearing a red and black striped tunic cradling two large tablets in his hands.

But those were only the foundation of the Israel’s law. God would later go on to give them 603 more for a total 613. These laws spanned the entire range of life. They told you what you could and could not do on the Sabbath, where you could and could not go to the bathroom – which was actually kind of interesting, because long before diseases were studied or anybody had any idea what bacteria were, or why sanitation was necessary, God had commanded his people, “when you have to go number two, you do it outside the camp and you cover it up.” (Deu 23:12-13).

Now that seems pretty funny to us today, but if you have ever been to some countries and seen the squalor and lack of sanitary habits they have, it doesn’t seem so funny any more, it seems like the kind of instruction a loving parent gives to their child so they don’t get sick.

Anyway, there were all kinds of laws and just like today, there were all kinds of interpretations of the laws. So the big question was – out of all that God has said – *what's the Cliff's Notes version?* Or for those of you who work on executive staffs – what's the elevator brief version?

So, one day in Jerusalem, a bunch of people were trying to trip Jesus up. Remember, not everybody liked Him, especially the religious establishment who had a lot to lose if He didn't stop making such a scene. So in Matthew 22 we see several attempts to trip Him up.

In verse 15, the Pharisees come to Him and ask a question about paying taxes – should they show any loyalty to the Roman government that was occupying their country or not? He answered their question and people were blown away by the insight of His answer, so vs 22 says “When they heard these words they marveled, and left Him and went their way.”

But then another group came along, that same day in verse 23. The Sadducees who didn't believe in the resurrection, tried to ask Him a question that would make him look dumb for believing in the resurrection, but He spun it back around on them and showed how little they really knew about the Scriptures. And verse 33 says “And when the multitudes heard this, they were astonished at His teaching.”

So now, read me starting in verse 34:

[34](#) But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together.

It's time to pull out the big guns, the big stumper. The impossible question, and let's see what He does with this.

[35](#) Then one of them, a lawyer, asked *Him a question*, testing Him, and saying, [36](#) “Teacher, which *is* the great commandment in the law?”

[37](#) Jesus said to him, “ ‘*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.*’ [38](#) This is *the* first and great commandment. [39](#) And *the* second is like it: ‘*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*’ [40](#) On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Then, He went on to pose a question back to them about who they were expecting the Christ to be and He stumped them again. So, finally, in verse 46 “And no one was able to answer Him a word, nor from that day on did anyone dare question Him anymore.”

And this took place at pretty much the peak of His public ministry. He has a few more final teachings for His disciples and some warnings to give them about the last days, and then He will celebrate the Passover with them and be betrayed, tried and crucified.

So in other words, what have here is a kind of distillation of His life and ministry – the “big idea” if you will. Certainly not as important as His atoning sacrifice on the cross, but if you think about it, the Great Commandment as it is called, is a kind of commentary on what He was doing on the cross. In giving up His life, He was demonstrating His *obedient love* for the Father and His *sacrificial and atoning love* for us.

So let's note a few things about this Great Commandment.

First, Jesus is quoting from two separate Scriptures. The admonition to love God comes from Deuteronomy 6:5, and loving your neighbor comes from Lev 19:18 – most of you probably have those references already in the margins of your Bible. They come from the first five books of the Bible, known as the Torah. We just finished studying Genesis, then you have Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy – all attributed to Moses who wrote them after leading the people out of Egypt. Some people think Job might be older chronologically than these five, but other than perhaps that one book, these are the oldest Scriptures for Jews and Christians.

And this is where Jesus quotes from in giving His answer to the question, “What is the greatest commandment.” Now, I find that interesting, because Jesus doesn't give some new answer, some new revelation. He doesn't give them some fresh insight or new interpretation. He points back to the very beginning – to the answers that have been there all along. As human beings, we like the next big thing. We like change. We get tired of things quickly. But you need to be careful of anything that seems new when it comes to Christianity. There's a saying that goes “if it's true, it's not new. And if it's new, it's not true.”

I don't have the corner on the market for any shocking new religious truth. You have access to everything I've got and that's the way it should be. If anyone comes along saying they have secrets to reveal or mystery knowledge to explain, watch out.

Another thing for us to note, is that if this is the **Great** Commandment, then it gives us a significant clue regarding what is wrong in life. If by doing *this*, we can do things right, that gives us a pretty good idea about what is wrong. So, the Great Commandment keeps us from avoiding a great error.

But you know what I find interesting, is that that great error is not a simple reverse of the Great Commandment. In other words, we're not to love God because otherwise we would hate Him. Hating God is not the opposite of loving Him.

We just finished Genesis, so think back with me to the very beginning. Did Adam and Eve eat from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because they hated God? No.

Then why did they do it? Not because they hated God, but because they loved themselves too much. They thought they knew better than God. They wanted to do what they wanted to do more than they wanted to obey the One who had made them and blessed them with everything He had surrounded them with.

And the same thing is true today. We don't hate God, but simply not hating Him doesn't mean you are loving Him. Our sin is the same as Adam and Eve, we take the love we should be giving to God and to others and we spend it all on ourselves.

According to a poll done just three years ago in 2008 by the Pew Research Council, 92% of all Americans believe in God. 80% believe in miracles, and over half of all Americans pray at least once a day.

So why do we have all the problems we do? Why can't you tell we are this amazingly pious nation? Because once again, it's not that people hate God or are anti-god, they're just too pro-self.

And that manifests itself in two important ways: for some it means that they don't want to receive the truth about the one-true living God – they would rather hammer together a bunch of religious ideas and make up their own god because the god they make up doesn't require the same kind of devotion and submission as our Father. See, when you collect your own ideas about god, you just kick out whatever ones seem distasteful to you personally. Or, there are those who do know the Father and do know His expectations of them, but they just continue to persist in their own ways, because they love themselves too much to change.

But once again, the bottom line for everyone is the same, very, very few people are actually hostile to God – most of us don't hate Him, we just love ourselves too much.

So the commandment is for us to stop loving ourselves so much and give that love back to the One who properly deserves it, and then to also love our neighbors. And we'll get to who our neighbor is in a few weeks....

OK, so we now we know – this is the Big Idea, we're supposed to love God and love our neighbor, *but what does that mean?*

Have you ever sat down and pondered that? What is love? If you had to explain it to someone, what would you say, what comes to your mind? I did a little brainstorming myself and here's what came to me:

- pink – that was actually the first thing
- hearts
- hallmark cards
- poetry
- songs
- dating
- longing or missing
- and “making love” which is really kind of ironic because it's nothing of the sort. It might be an expression of love, but no love is being suddenly hatched.

Most of what we think of when we think of love is romantic love with direct ties to an emotional feeling. We think of love as something you are in. It's something we say you “fall in” like the pool.

But that can't be what Jesus has in mind here because remember, this is the Great COMMANDMENT. You can't command someone to feel a certain way. I can't tell you to feel

happy or sad and just expect you to do it. Our emotions are fickle. They're open to manipulation; they're affected by our hormones, our mood, our environment and even the food we eat. Emotions are real and they are valuable, but they are not, all by themselves, the basis for love.

Here's where we confuse what we might properly call infatuation with love. Infatuation is that initial attraction – and trust me, it's good and necessary. Infatuation is what makes your palms sweat, your throat constrict, your heart start pounding, your mind start wandering. Infatuation takes your breath away. But that feeling is not love, at least it's not the total of love all by itself.

In our relationships, I describe that season like the booster tanks that help the space shuttle take off. Remember way back when we had a Space Shuttle program? ☺ Anyway, in order to overcome the incredible force of Earth's gravity, the shuttle was strapped to these two massive rockets with a huge fuel tank. During the first two minutes of takeoff these powerful rockets provided 83% of the force needed to get the shuttle into orbit, and then they fell away and the shuttle was left to proceed with only the five little rockets at it's rear and the small amount of fuel it had on board.

That's like infatuation – infatuation provides the necessary fuel to get us moving, but at some point we have to transition to a different source of power and fuel for the rest of the flight. The average shuttle mission was 10 days, but the last one was 14 – compare that to two minutes of initial takeoff. Infatuation gets you off the ground, but love sustains you.

Alright, so once again, *what is love?* Well, the fact that we are commanded to do it *with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength* ought to give us a clue. We'll get more into this more in the coming weeks, but you need to know that this isn't like a checklist – like first through fourth gears or something. It's just a way of saying, your whole identity – all of who you are. Love, in the way that God is speaking of it here, may include emotion, but it also includes a lot of action as well.

Turn with me to 1 John 4 and we'll find some more data that we can add to our understanding.

[7](#) Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. [8](#) He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

God Himself is love. OK, maybe you've even heard that before. God is love. But that still doesn't tell us too much all by itself. I can tell you Bob is brave and that doesn't tell you much about bravery. You need to know, what kind of stuff does Bob do? Well, John gives us the answer here...about God, not Bob.

[9](#) In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. [10](#) In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins.

Now we see some stuff we can really sink our teeth into. We see that it was love when God sent His Son, Jesus, into the world for us. And when was that? Vs ten says it wasn't when we loved

God, but when we were busy loving ourselves. Once again, maybe you didn't hate God, but you were certainly being self-centered and taking the love and devotion that should have been given to Him and you were doing other stuff with it.

And yet that is when God moved for you. Ooooh, now I see. **Love is initiating, not responsive.** Well, that runs counter to most of the emotional view of love. The emotional view of love looks like a well-played tennis match – you hit the ball to me, I hit the ball back to you, and back and forth it goes. We're dancing back and forth because we're in love.

Well it's easy to do that. But that's not what God did. He reached out and did something heavy, something crucial, something that cost Him dearly when we didn't seem to give a rip. Is that the way you love? Look at the next verse:

[11](#) Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

You see, this is something you can take home and start working on today. You don't just show love to people because they have shown love to you, you show love and kindness to people because they are made in the image of God and He commands it. Once again, we'll get into the idea of who is my neighbor later, but for now, just think about how this affects the way you should respond in your next argument with a loved one – whether that's a parent, your child, your boyfriend/girlfriend, spouse, co-worker whatever. You need to *initiate* love to them, even when you don't think they deserve it.

One more thing to point out here. Demonstrating this love required Jesus to become a propitiation for our sins. Now that's a big technical theological word, but it means that He took our place. He took the punishment that we deserved for spending our lives on ourselves instead of on God and others.

Let me break that down for you – it means that in order to show us love He didn't just deny Himself, he sacrificed Himself. What's the difference?

Well, to deny Himself would mean that He just didn't take something that He could have had. If you and I get into an argument, I might show a whole lot of restraint and close my mouth and walk away and deny myself the opportunity to have the last word. Denying myself just means stopping short. But to sacrifice myself, I would actually have to come back to you and say, I'm very sorry, would you please forgive me for what I said, AND not bring up any buts.

Now I'm not only not taking the last jab, I'm actually opening myself up and being vulnerable knowing that you could take that chance and say, "yeah, you're right, don't do it again." When I'm hoping you'll say you're sorry too.

Now that's just a petty example compared to what Christ did for us on the cross – but you see a little bit of what I'm talking about, and you see that there's a whole lot more to this than just some butterflies in your stomach and the feeling of being in love.

So much more in fact, that we don't have time to get into any more this week. We're going to take communion together now and remember what Jesus has done for us, we're going to thank Him for His demonstration of love toward us, and it would be a great time for us to ask Him to show us anything we need to ask forgiveness for, or any thing He wants us to do in order to demonstrate more love to Him or someone else in our lives.

Act on what God has shown you – even if you don't “feel” like it – remember that love is more than feelings, sometimes it involves a gut-wrenching sacrifice, but you need to show it because it is what He has done for you, and as you do it, He wants people to see Him in you.