

LOVE, THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

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I. Introduction

What is the greatest commandment? In Matthew 22:34-40, a religious lawyer asked Jesus this very question. Jesus told him: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost commandment.” Jesus did not stop there. He continued . . . “The second is like it – You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Expressing God’s love in our lives is the most important act we can perform. How do we show our love for God? Anyone can say: “My love for God is great.” Jesus said that we show our love for God by *loving our fellow man*. John expanded this saying of Jesus when he wrote: “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen” (First John 1:21). Loving God and loving our fellow man are tied together. If we love God, we *will* love each other. If we love each other, we *will* love God. If we do not do the one – we will not do the other. The idea of God’s love for man is not something that was created in the New Testament. Some theologians over the past 100 years have tried to say that sometime between the Old Testament and the New Testament . . . *God grew up*. They view the God of the Old Testament as an angry, wrathful God while the God of the “New” Testament is seen as a caring, loving God. Their error was in focusing on only one aspect of God’s character in either the Old or New Testaments.

In both testaments, we see both a loving and a wrathful God. God loves all mankind. He will not, however, tolerate sin and rebellion. His perfect love and justice demand that God reward those who obey Him and punish those who rebel against Him. In Deuteronomy 7⁹⁻¹⁶, God told Israel that He loved them and would bless them for a thousand generations. He would always love them but His blessings were conditional upon their obedience to His commandments. Failure to obey His commandments would result in famine, drought and foreign invasion. The choice was theirs. They could either obey and receive God’s blessings or rebel and receive His punishment.

In Colossians 3:1-11, Paul wrote that God will reward those who accept His Son, Jesus Christ by being *glorified* with Jesus. In the other hand, those who do evil will face God's wrath. God is the same . . . yesterday, today and tomorrow. He loves and blesses those who do His will. Those who reject Him will face His wrath. In both the Old and New Testaments, we see a God of love and a God of wrath – equally. His love is directed toward all mankind. He wants all men to know and obey Him. Those who refuse and turn their backs on God will face His wrath and punishment.

II. God Is Love

A. Knowing God

How do we know about God? Paul wrote in Romans 1:18-23 that God has built into both nature and us the knowledge that He exists. By looking at ourselves and the universe around us, we can know that God exists, that He is divine and powerful, and that He has invisible attributes.

Paul does not, however, tell us what these invisible attributes are. In his sermon at Lystra, Paul told its pagan inhabitants that nature witnesses to God's existence in the rains that produced abundant harvests for them (Acts 14:15-17). He was telling them that God was showing His love and concern for them by providing them with food, clothing, and shelter. The pagans recognized these blessings came from a *god* but instead of acknowledging God – they created their own “gods” of wood, stone, and gold. We *can* see God in nature. However, what we see is extremely limited. We see a loving God who provides for us but we do not know much about Him.

Another way we can know God is through what He has revealed to us. Throughout history, God has chosen certain men and women to act as His spokespersons. He gave them certain messages and they told everybody else. The Bible is a result of these messages. The Bible tells us of God's love for us, His limitless power, His unchangeable nature, His demand for justice, His refusal to accept sin (rebellion against Him), and other aspects of His character and activity.

God's love for man is a strange concept. When considered from a human point of view, there is no reason God should love us. He created us. But, we in turn, reject Him and spend most of our lives doing things that He does not approve of our doing. When people – even our friends and family – treat us meanly and spitefully, we usually do not want to have anything to do with them. We reject them. God, on the other hand, instead of rejecting us, tries to get us to change our attitudes and behavior and be reunited with Him. His love for us is so great that He came to earth in the person of Jesus. He lived like us and taught us what we need to do to be reunited with Him. Instead of accepting Him, we rejected Him and killed Him. Even in the act of dying, He showed His love for us. His death provided the means of escaping from our rebellious lives and becoming reunited with God.

In First Corinthians 1:23-25, Paul wrote that to the Jews – the *cross* was a scandal and to the Gentile – it was foolishness. To those who believed, the cross and Jesus'

sacrifice was God's power and wisdom. This is true power, wisdom, and love. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, so that whosoever believes might have eternal life" (John 3:16).

B. God's Love for Us

Why does God love us? One reason is that He created us in His image (Genesis 1:26-27; 2:7-8). God is spirit. He is logical and reasoning. He has emotions. When God created the rest of the universe, He made it strictly physical. When He created man, He added those aspects that would make us like Him. We have not only a physical nature – but also a *spiritual* nature. Of all the living creatures, only man is logical and reasoning. Also, man is the only physical creature who can show emotions. God's love for us is not something fickle. He does not get tired of us or change His mind about loving us. In Jeremiah 31:3, God declared: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore, I have drawn you with loving kindness." God will always love us but this does not mean that He will not punish us when we rebel against Him. He will. His love demands that He reward those who accept and obey Him and that He punish those who reject and disobey Him. First John 3:1-3 tells us something about the greatness of God's love for us. It says that those who accept God's love will be called "children of God." God takes us and changes us from His enemies and makes us His children.

How many people do you know who treat their enemies this way? Few, if any. Most people either ignore or try to destroy people they do not like or who do not like them. The reason we act like this is that we have sold ourselves to the Devil. God's love is something that is not isolated. Paul joins it with God's "peace" in Second Corinthians 13:11 and with God's "knowledge" in Ephesians 3:19. We show God's love when we accept God's Son, Jesus. When we reject Jesus, we are doing the "works" of the devil (John 5:30-47). Another way is by allowing the fruit of the Spirit to grow in us. Paul says that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). A third way is when God abides in us. First John 4:16-17 says that because God loves us, when we accept His Son, He lives in us. His love perfects us. His love makes us complete and righteous. In the day of judgment, that love will save us and provide us eternal life.

III. Expressing Our Love to God

Usually, when we think about loving others, we focus on our friends and family. God is frequently left out except maybe as an afterthought. This is not the way God wants it to be. Throughout the Bible, God tells us that He loves us and, in turn, we should love Him. The Apostle John writes extensively about God's love for us and our love for Him (read First and Second John). How do we love a being such as God? He is beyond our ability to know and understand, but love Him we must. The purpose of the Bible is to reveal God to us. Although we can never fully know and understand God, He does tell us enough about Himself so that we can know and understand Him to a small degree with our limited abilities.

A. Our Love to God Must Be Total (Matthew 22:37-40).

Jesus, the Second Person of the Godhead, declared that the greatest and most important commandment is . . . “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This means our love for God must be total. We are to love God with every aspect of our personality – our emotions (heart), with our spiritual life (soul), and with our intellect (mind). When we do this, we are giving ourselves totally over to doing God’s will. Jesus did not end His discussion of important things with only loving God. He continued by declaring . . . “The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.” John borrows this and asks this question: “How can we love God if we do not love our neighbor?” His answer was – *You cannot!* If we truly love God, we will love our neighbor.

B. Our Love for God Is Expressed When We Trust and Obey Him (Joshua 6)

Joshua 6 records an example of how we must trust and obey God. The city of Jericho blocked Israel’s admission into Canaan. As long as it remained unconquered, it would be a threat to their conquest and occupation of the Promised Land. Instead of telling Joshua to make siege engines to storm the fortress city, God told Joshua to have the Israelites march around the city once a day for six days without making any noise. On the seventh day, they were to march around it seven times and then shout. From a human point of view, this was a ridiculous military plan. God, on the other hand, wanted Israel to know that He was greater than any military plan or force Israel did as God commanded. The city collapsed and the city was destroyed. Israel believed God would do as He said He would. They trusted His command and obeyed it. Today, we show our love for God when we trust what He has told us and then do it.

C. Our Love for God Is Expressed When We Love Ourselves (Romans 6:4; 13:9; Galatians 2:20; Philippians 4:13)

Another way we show our love for God is when we love ourselves enough to do His will. If we really love ourselves, we will do whatever is necessary to protect and care for ourselves. The most important thing we can do is obey God.

D. Our Love for God Is Expressed When We Love the Non-Christian (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 10:1-11, 21; Romans 13:9)

In both the Old and New Testaments, God tells us to love our neighbors. One way we can show love for the non-Christian is by telling him or her about God and about God’s plan for mankind to be restored to an intimate relationship with Him. In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus tells us that as we go throughout our daily lives, we are to “make disciples” (telling them of God’s love, grace, and salvation) of those with whom we come in contact. We can do all kinds of good deeds to help people. We can provide them with food, clothing and shelter. These things, however, are only temporary. Tomorrow they will need these “things” again. When we introduce them to the *spiritual* blessings of God, they will never be without them (Ephesians 1:3). This is the greatest love we can show to our fellow man.

E. Our Love for God Is Expressed When We Love Our Spouse (Ephesians 5:22-33;

Colossians 3:18-19; First Peter 3:1-7)

Paul said that Christ's love for the church is the model for the love between a husband and wife. Christ's love for the church was so great that He died for it. It is to be the same between the husband and wife. They are to love each other to such an extent that they will be willing to die for one another. In Second Peter 3:1-2, Peter talked to Christians who had non-Christian spouses. He does not tell them to "preach" to the unbelieving spouse. In fact, he tells them not to do so. Instead, the Christian is to live a life of such holiness and purity that the non-Christian spouse will see God glorified and desire to become a Christian.

F. **Our Love for God Is Expressed When We Love Our Children** (Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Ephesians 6:1-3; Colossians 3:20-21)

There are several ways we show our love for our children. One way is to teach them God's ways. When we do this, we are preparing them to one day decide for themselves to accept Jesus as their Savior. Another way is to help them grow and develop into mature, independent adults. This allows them to become the type of people God wants them to be.

G. **Our Love for God Is Expressed When We Love Our Enemies** (Matthew 5:43-46; Luke 6:27-38; Acts 7:60; Romans 12:20; First Corinthians 13:4-7)

In Romans 5:6-11, Paul wrote that all men were enemies of God. Instead of punishing man, God sent His Son, Jesus, to restore man to God's favor. In our relationship with people – especially those we dislike or consider enemies – we are to follow the example of God. Because God forgives us for rebelling against Him, He expects us to forgive those who insult or mistreat us.

H. **Our Love for God Is Expressed When We Confront Those Christians Who Still Enjoy Sinning** (Romans 6:1; First Corinthians 5:1-2; Jude 22-23)

As we read the gospels, we see Jesus confronting the Jewish religious leaders with their evil ways. The Jewish leaders had so corrupted God's Law that evil had become good and good had become evil. Jesus rejected their "version" of religion and called them back to God's truth. Instead of following Jesus, they saw Him as a threat and had the Roman occupation forces kill Him. When we see our fellow Christians corrupting God's law and enjoying sin, we need to follow Jesus' example and confront them. It should be done in love, hoping they will leave their sinful ways and return to God. Some will listen while others will not. Regardless of whether or not they change, we have an obligation to confront them to return to their first love.

IV. Conclusion

We are created in love (First John 4:8) and through the love that God has given us, we can do all things (Philippians 4:13). The most important thing that we can do is accept God's love and, in turn, love Him and other people.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Name _____ Date _____

Address _____

1. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your
(a) mind (b) mine
(c) kind (d) none of these.
2. You shall love your neighbor as
(a) he loves you (b) long as he is kind
(c) yourself (d) all of these.
3. If we love each other, we will love
(a) ourselves (b) enemies
(c) God (d) policemen.
4. One reason God loves us is that He created us in
(a) His spare time (b) His image
(c) two days (d) darkness.
5. God does not change His mind about loving us and He
(a) does not get tired of us (b) gets tired of us
(c) does not love others who are different from us (d) all of these.
6. One way we show love for God is when we
(a) decorate the Christmas tree (b) hide Easter eggs
(c) sing the National Anthem (d) accept His Only Begotten Son
7. Believing and doing what God says is called
(a) earning your salvation (b) trusting God
(c) works-oriented redemption (d) none of these.
8. The love of a husband and wife is a reflection of Christ's love for
(a) married people (b) single adults
(c) infants (d) the church.
9. One way we show love for our children is to teach them
(a) God's ways (b) the value of a good education
(c) how to make money (d) how to save money.
10. When we see Christians doing wrong - if we love them, we will
(a) say nothing (b) ignore it
(c) confront them in love (d) none of these