

## THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

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SCRIPTURE: Mark 12:33-39

And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that he had answered them well, asked him, Which is the first commandment of all? And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hearken and hear O Israel, The Lord our God is one Lord; And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. This is the first commandment. And the second is like this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these. And the scribe said unto him, Well, Master, thou hast said the truth; for there is one God, and there is none other but him. And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength; and to love his neighbor as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. And when Jesus saw that he answered discreetly, he said unto him. Thou art not far from the kingdom of God.

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All the law is fulfilled in one word, even this: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. (Gal. 5:14)

In our last sermon, we discussed Jesus' saying, "Ye cannot serve God and mammon," saying that the Christ calls for an undivided loyalty and allegiance. Today's subject follows naturally, and even grows out of this preceding subject; for the first and greatest commandment is: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all." Here again we see that there is no room for division, for variableness, for half-hearted commitment to God. It is "all or nothing" with him.

Jesus says first that we must love the Lord "with all thy heart." Love is an emotional experience. Religion, or loving the Lord, is first of all an emotional experience. It is the emotional response to God's love for us, which is also emotional -- which is boundless, full, and free, without calculation, and even without reason; for if God stopped to compute the measure of our worthiness before extending that portion of his love of which we are worthy, there would be little love. The man who loves wife or children does not coldly calculate how much he loves them, nor does he both to find logical reasons for that love. Love springs from the heart. It is emotional, rather than intellectual. We love God because he first loved us. He expressed that love in all the wonder and beauty and majesty of the created world and the created universe in which we live. He expressed that love in his provision for all man's needs. He expressed that love in the gift of his Only Begotten Son. Our love of God is a response to the love already given, without calculation, without measure, without stint, and often without worthiness on our part.

It is not safe, however, to let one's life be ruled altogether by emotions, even if the emotion be love. Emotion needs to be balanced with intellect. Love needs to be supplemented by sound common sense. God is love, but he is also wisdom, light, knowledge, intelligence, mind, intellect. When love dictates one course of action, wisdom often intervenes to suggest quite another. A father who loves his child does not want to see that child hurt by punishment, but a wise father sometimes has to let his child learn obedience by the things he suffers in punishment for his wrongdoing.

When a man and woman fall in love, there should be an emotional reaction and response of each to the other; but there also needs to be a balancing intellectual appraisal to determine whether they are suited for each other by physical fitness, wholesome heredity, compatible temperaments, similar likes and dislikes, similar

convictions with regard to religion and morals, etc. We should first love the Lord with the emotions -- with all the heart; but we should carefully balance that emotional response by loving him also with all the mind, with all the intellect, lest blind emotionalism lead us into inconsistencies and excesses that will do more harm than good.

Jesus also commanded that we should love the Lord with all the soul. The soul embraces the whole personality -- both spirit and body. It is the spirit which quickens and enlivens, orders and governs, renews and rehabilitates the body, and which finds expression through the implementation of the body. But it also includes the body, without which the spirit is incomplete. The redemption of the soul is the restoration of spirit to body and body to spirit in the resurrection, that there might be one perfect, eternal, indestructible unity of body and spirit to form the soul. To love the Lord with all the soul, then, is to love him with all our spiritual and physical powers, with both body and spirit devoted to the same allegiance and the same loyalty.

Jesus also commanded us that we should love the Lord with all our strength. Strength is granted to us day by day -- a little at a time as we need it. We cannot expend tomorrow's strength today; but since each day's strength is a little more than we need for the necessities of that day, we may turn today's strength into goods or money, and thus save some of today's strength for the needs of tomorrow. To love the Lord with all our strength, therefore, is to devote to him not only today's strength, but whatever reserve of strength we have, as represented by our accumulation of goods and money and physical possessions.

The commandment is that we should love the Lord, and serve him, with all. Some people love him with the emotions, but not with the intellect. Some love and serve him with the spirit, but not with the body. Some love and serve him with the mind, but not with the heart. Some praise him with voice, but withhold their money. Such piecemeal love will not do. We must love the Lord with all. If we love him with all, the second commandment -- the commandment to love thy neighbor as thyself -- will follow naturally. For if we love God with all we shall love all of his creation. We shall love him too much to grieve his heart by dealing selfishly, unjustly, or unfairly with any other creature he has made. We shall respect every personality that was made to know and to reciprocate his love.

Jesus said that we must love our neighbor as ourselves. This seems to say that we must love ourselves first. How do we love ourselves? Is not self-love forbidden and frowned upon by the Christian code of ethics? There is a low, selfish, narrow form of self love which is not Christian; but the goal of Christianity is the fulfillment and enrichment of the self, so that we can respect ourselves, and live with ourselves in peace and contentment.

Every man who is worthy of the name of man respects himself as a personality. He inherently demands freedom to express that personality, to make his own choices and decisions, to control his own property and his own affairs. He resents being ignored as a personality. He resents being used as a tool or instrument for the pleasure or enrichment of someone else. In other words, he demands to be regarded and treated as an end in himself, and not as a means of attaining the ends desired by someone else. Take away a man's dignity, his sense of worth, his right to believe in and respect himself as a person, and you have destroyed his most priceless possession.

Now, what happens if we fail to love our neighbor as ourselves? As we refuse or fail to recognize the inherent and sacred worth of his personality by trying to use him as a means of inflating or serving our own ego, we alienate him from ourselves, so that he will no longer love or respect us. But the principal damage will not be to the neighbor's ego, but to our own; for we cannot ignore the dignity and worth of any other human being, and maintain our respect for ourselves. Consciously or subconsciously we will despise ourselves. To maintain a healthy respect for ourselves and for our own personality is therefore to have respect and regard for the dignity, the worth, the happiness, and the well being of every other creature of God.

The first great commandment is, "Love the Lord thy God with all." And the second is in essence the same commandment, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." -- for he who respects and loves God will love all the works of God, and the personality of every human being whom God has created, in order that he may continue to respect himself.