

THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

The religious establishment of Jesus' day, the Pharisees and Sadducees, envied Jesus and His popularity with the common people. They were constantly trying to trip Him up. In **Matthew 22** we read of three of these tests. Firstly the Pharisees tried to trip Him up on the matter of whether to pay taxes and then the Sadducees tried on the matter of the resurrection. Both times Jesus outsmarted them.

The third test came from a lawyer amongst the Pharisees. We pick up the story in **verse 34** where we read: "But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. Then one of them, a lawyer, asked *Him a question*, testing Him, and saying, 'Teacher, which *is* the great commandment in the law?' Jesus said to him, 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is *the first and great commandment.*"

Here Jesus quotes from **Deuteronomy 6:5** and says that we are to love God with all of our heart, all of our soul and all of our mind. In this article today I'd like to explore this verse a little further and what it means to love God with all of our heart, soul and mind.

What I'd particularly like to focus on in this article is that when Jesus says that we are to love God with three different things. Those three things are to love God with:

- 1] All of our heart
- 2] All of our soul
- 3] All of our mind

Let's look at these three things individually.

1] We are to love God with all of our heart.

When the Bible uses the word heart here it's not a reference to the physical heart that pumps blood through our bodies but is a reference to our emotions and feelings. Do we love God only with a mild feelings or do we love Him with great passion? On a scale of 1 to 10 how would you rate your own passion for God?

I once did this with all three of these things, rating on a scale of 1 to 10 my love for God with my heart, my mind and my soul. Loving God with my heart and feelings was the one that came out lowest. Let's be honest here. It is kind of hard, isn't it, to have passionate feelings for someone who we have never seen and never heard speak. I know in my own personal case I have the extra obstacle of not having been raised with a father who should model the kind of love that God the Father shows for us.

For God to be more real to us there needs to be a system of feedback where we share with Him our innermost feelings and desires and He shows Himself to us through big and small answers to our prayers. The more we share our innermost feelings and desires with Him and the more answers to our prayers we receive back from God the more real God can become to us and more we can love Him with all of our heart.

Another key that can help us to love God with all of our heart is found in **Ephesians 5:18-20**. Starting in **verse 18** we read: "And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

If we count our blessings and be thankful for them our feelings and love for God will grow. Even in the midst of trials we have so much to be thankful for from the food and shelter we have compared to those in poorer countries, to our senses and all the things we can see and listen to, our friends and family to the precious truths of the Bible and the truly awesome calling and future that God has in store for us.

How often do we not only give thanks but praise and complement God on the wonderful and kind Being that He is? The more expressive we are of a person's good points, whether a lover or God Himself, the more we will feel for that person. As Paul mentions it's good to read the psalms and even go through the hymns in our hymnal to help us to learn to complement and express our love and praise for God.

2] We are to love God with all of our soul.

The second thing we are asked to love God with is all of our souls. The word used for soul here means our physical bodies and our life. To love God with our soul means serving God with our life and the actions we do using our bodies and physical talents.

Paul writes in **Ephesians 5:17** that "the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish." The desires and impulses of our bodies often push us to do things which are not right in God's eyes and to put our own selfish desires ahead of the needs of other people.

The Greek word that is used when Jesus says we are to love God with all of our heart, mind and soul is the word "agape". Agape is a love of total commitment. Agape means "selflessness." When Matthew writes what Jesus said here he did not use the other common Greek word used for love in the New Testament – philia. Philia is the natural love of friendship or brotherly love. The word Matthew records is agape.

It means selflessness. It puts the needs and will of the other person completely ahead of the self and its desires. This is what Jesus did in the garden when knowing and fearing what He was about to endure committed Himself to the Father's will and said "Not my will but yours be done."

Agape is not a natural love. The highest form of love we can attain is a gift that comes from God. Paul wrote in **Romans 5:5** that "the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy [Spirit] which is given unto us". This love comes from God through His spirit. To grow in it we must seek and ask for it from Him. We will grow in it as we practice it and follow the lead and promptings of His spirit to do God's will in our daily lives with all the many choices we have to make in life, both big and small.

Character and christian maturity is best seen when someone is selfless enough to defer to the will and good of others when it conflicts with what they would prefer to do. You don't really know someone deeply until they have to make those kind of tough choices. This is how you can get a good idea of just how mature someone is, whether they are a friend or a potential lover. It's also a good barometer of just how much we love God with our souls.

3] We are to love God with all of our mind.

The use of the word "mind" in this verse means that our belief in God and the Bible is to be an intelligent faith based on evidence, not just simply a blind faith. Have we truly proven to ourselves with good evidence that God exists, that the Bible really can be trusted and proven the core teachings of the Bible?

To love God with all of our minds and have a passion for learning about God and the Bible is something that can be a real challenge for our young people today with all the entertainment distractions that they have to choose from. It can be so much easier to watch tv or a movie or play on the X-Box than to pick up a Bible or read the church's literature and learn more about the things of God. All of us, including our young people, should have a genuine enthusiasm to learn more about the things of God and to love God with all of our minds.

In their book "The Sacred Romance" John Eldridge and Brent Curtis write the following about our relationship with God:

"The Scriptures employ a wide scale of metaphors to capture the many facets of our relationship with God. If you consider them in a sort of ascending order, there is a noticeable and breathtaking progression.

"Down near the bottom of the totem pole we are the clay and He the Potter. Moving up a notch, we are the sheep and He the Shepherd, which is a little better on the food chain but hardly flattering; sheep don't have a reputation as the most graceful and intelligent creatures in the world.

"Moving upward, we are the servants of the Master, which at least lets us into the house, even if we have to wipe our feet, watch our manners and not talk too much. Most Christians never get past this point, but the ladder of metaphors is about to make a swift ascent.

"God also calls us His children and Himself our Heavenly Father, which brings us into the possibility of real intimacy – love is not one of the things a vase and its craftsman share together, nor does a sheep truly know the heart of the shepherd, though it may enjoy the fruits of His kindness. Still there is something missing even in the best parent-child relationship.

"Friendship levels the playing field in a way family never can, at least not until the kids have grown and left the house. Friendship opens a level of communion that a five-year old doesn't know with his mother and father. And 'friends' are what He calls us.

"But there is still higher and deeper level of intimacy and partnership awaiting us at the top of this metaphorical ascent. We are lovers. The courtship that began with a honeymoon in the Garden culminates in the wedding feast of the Lamb. 'I will take delight in you,' He says to us, 'as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so I will rejoice over you,' so we might say in return, 'I am my beloved's and his desire is for me'...

"Our romance is far more ancient than the story of Helen of Troy. God has had us in mind since before the Foundations of the World. He loved us before the beginning of time, has come for us and now calls us to journey toward Him, with Him, for the consummation of our love" (p.96-97).

There is so much that we could draw from each of these metaphors. I just want to draw out one single point – a common thread, a common lesson that runs through each of these analogies and that is that we should be responsive to God. We are the clay in His hands. He made us and we owe our whole existence to Him. He wants us to be pliable and not resistant as He fashions us into the high quality people that He wants us to be. Jesus also said, "My sheep know my voice and they follow me." We are to follow Him wherever He leads us.

At the top of the metaphorical table our Saviour has been courting us. He bled and died for us to save us from our sins and He offers us an incredible future which is beyond our wildest dreams. What lover has given so much to win the heart of someone he loves? How can we not respond with deep gratitude and love for our Creator and Saviour?

Now there is one final thing that we should notice about the greatest commandment in the answer that Jesus gives us. It is that when Jesus was asked what is the greatest commandment He answered by giving not just one commandment but two.

In **Matthew 22:39-40** after telling us the first and greatest commandment Jesus says: “And *the second is* like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Why did Jesus answer the question by giving not just one commandment but two. I suggest that it’s because the two are inextricably linked together. You can’t truly love God unless you love and care for the people that He deeply loves and cares for as well.

Remember what Jesus in said in **Matthew 25** about those who fed the hungry, who helped the thirsty, who welcomed the stranger and visited the sick? He said, “Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren you did it to me?” (**verse 40**). How you look after other people in these kind of very practical ways is something that God takes very personally as if you were doing it to Him. The love you show for those that He loves is an expression of your love for Him.

In conclusion, let’s all be responsive to our Creator who has given so much to each and every one of us. Let’s love Him with all of our heart, mind and soul which is truly the first and great commandment.