

The Greatest Commandment

*Basic Scripture resources: Leviticus 19:18;
Deuteronomy 6:4,5; Mark 12:18-34;
Luke 10:25-37; Romans 13:8-10*

The Ten Commandments are a remarkably concise yet comprehensive code of conduct. But still this amazing list does not include the most important command of all: the command to love.

One day a man asked Jesus to single out the greatest of all the commandments. Probably he was expecting to hear one of the Ten Commandments named. But Jesus replied, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart." Without waiting Jesus identified the second greatest command as also requiring love, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Mark 12:30, 31; see Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18).

I. Love and Law

There is considerable confusion regarding the proper relationship between love and law. Some are convinced that law is necessary only where people are still immature and unenlightened. After all, didn't Jesus himself usher in a new age in which law has supposedly been replaced by love? Are not we who are guided by love mature enough to discard rules and regulations? Since we have now come of age, surely we are capable of determining for ourselves what is the most loving course of action in each situation!

The above views are not at all rare in our time. In fact, the idea that love is able to replace the law is one of the central teachings of modern situation ethics. For instance, Joseph Fletcher, in his popular book, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), states categorically that Jesus and Paul replaced the precepts of law with the living principle of love (p. 69).

There are dangerous fallacies in this way of thinking. In the first place, Jesus did not do away with law. Concerning the law, Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17, NAS). Jesus did fulfill the parts of the Old Testament law that pointed forward to Him. For instance, the sin offerings of the Old Testament were types of Christ's death on the cross, and as such they were fulfilled and set aside when He went to Calvary. But the fact that Jesus set aside certain intentionally-temporary laws does not mean that He set aside law itself. The moral law is by its very own nature eternally valid, as we pointed out in chapter one.

In the second place, it is true that Jesus emphasized the commandment of love (John 15:12), but He never intended this commandment to replace all others. He never intended love to replace law. Love is but the condensation of the law; the various commandments simply spell out how to put love into action.

When Jesus specified the two greatest commands as the commands to love God and neighbor, He said, "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:40, NAS). That is, the love commandments support all the others. Every action or

attitude demanded by God's spokesmen is but an expression of love. Love is *the* basic attitude from which all other virtues spring and of which all vices are a violation.

Love is simply the summary of the rest of God's law. The various commands embody the particular forms of love. They tell us what it means to love, or how a loving person acts. Love is like the trunk of a tree; the commands are the branches springing from it. Love is like a beautiful diamond; the commandments are its facets. One facet is "Be kind"; another facet is "Do not commit adultery." "Do not steal" means "Love does not steal." "Bear one another's burdens" means "Love bears another's burdens."

The apostle Paul leaves no doubt that love is the general attitude and the other commands are the particular expressions of it. Commenting specifically on neighbor-love, he says,

Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For this, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; love therefore is the fulfillment of the law (Romans 13:8-10, NAS).

Paul says in Galatians 5:14, "For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' (NAS).

II. God's Love for Us

Since love is the greatest command of all, we should be very eager to know more about its nature. Just what is love? We can learn this by looking to the example and pattern for love, namely, God.

God is love (1 John 4:8). Jesus expressly commands us to imitate the way the Father expresses His love to all mankind. "Love your enemies . . . that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven. . . . Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:43-48; see 1 John 4:11).

God's love for mankind is a distinctive kind of love that the New Testament calls *agape* (pronounced *ah-gah-pay*). What is *agape*? Basically it is good will toward others. It is caring about them; it is a deep concern for their happiness and welfare. It is compassion upon those who are in need.

"God loves us" thus means that God is genuinely concerned for our well-being and happiness. God cares about us; He sees us in our need and has compassion upon us. The supreme evidence and demonstration of His love (concern, compassion) is Jesus Christ. Because God cares, He gave His only begotten Son (John 3:16; 1 John 4:9).

Agape differs from other types of love in that it seeks to give and not to get. It seeks to satisfy not some need of the lover, but rather the needs of the one who is loved. This is clearly the case with God's love. He loves us not for what He can get out of us, but for what He can give to us.

Agape is unique because it is unconditional and universal. It is not based on some condition or quality in the one who is loved. It is not a matter of being attracted by the loveliness of a person. It is rather an overflowing concern directed to all people, even to the unloveliest and meanest.

This is truly how God loves. He is no respecter of persons; He does not favor some above

others. "He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45). God does not love us because we earn His love with our good qualities; He loves us in spite of our ugliness. "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

III. Our Love for God

Our supreme task is to love God. To know how much God loves us should make this task easier. As John says, "We love him, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Since this is the greatest commandment, we should be trying our very best to obey it. Yet how many of us actually, conscientiously seek to love God? How does one go about it? The following are some suggestions that should help us in our attempt to develop this most basic of all attitudes.

First, we must *think of God as a person*. Love is an interpersonal relationship. We cannot really love things; we can only love persons.

God is truly a person. He is all we think of in terms of personhood, and even more. It is wrong to think of God as some kind of animal or object, as many primitive people do. It is just as wrong to think of God as an impersonal force, as many modern "sophisticated" people do. God is a person who knows, thinks, wills, feels, and acts. Because He is a person, we can love Him.

(Actually God is *three* persons, known to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, though the three are one God. See Matthew 28:19. The implications of this profound Biblical teaching will not be discussed here.)

Second, we must think of God *as a person who loves us*. Many pagan people have conceived of their gods as persons, but often as persons who have absolutely no love or concern for mankind. Such gods may be admired or feared, but it is difficult to love them. But let us remember that the true God is a person who *loves us*. The proof of this is Jesus Christ (John 3:16). To know that God loves us makes it easier for us to love Him (1 John 4:19).

Finally, we must think of God as a person *whom we want to please*. Agape-love is just this: caring about the other person, wanting to please him, wanting to make him happy, not wanting to hurt him. What hurts God? Our sin hurts Him; therefore if we love Him, we will want to avoid sin. What pleases Him? Our obedience pleases Him; therefore we should try our best to obey.

At this point we can see that love for God is basically two different things. First, it truly is *commandment*; it is the law that summarizes and includes all other laws. Second, it is a *motive* for obeying all the other commandments of God. As Jesus said in John 14:15, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" (NAS). See also 1 John 5:3.

As Christians we must continually strive to increase our conscious efforts to love God. To this end we must meditate more upon Him and His love for us. We must think more about what He has done for us out of His great love. We must try to be more aware of His immediate, personal presence within us.