

# 52 STORIES OF THE BIBLE

by

Dr. Bill Mounce

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# 35. The Greatest Commandment

## I. Introduction

After three and half years of public ministry we now come to the last week in Jesus' life and the tension has been increasing between Jesus and the religious leaders. Jesus has been pronouncing judgment on them by cleansing the Temple and cursing the fig tree and telling the parable of the talents, but they have also been challenging Jesus' authority and they have tried to embroil him in political and theological turmoil. And this is the context for our passage, the story about the greatest commandment, beginning in Mark, Chapter 12:28 we read:

## II. The Greatest Commandment

"And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another and seeing that Jesus answered them well asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" And Jesus answered, "The most important is 'Hear O Israel, The LORD our God, the LORD is one and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength and the second is this, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment [singular] greater than these.' [plural]. And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher, you have truly said that he [meaning God] is one and there is no other besides him and to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength and to love ones neighbor as oneself is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." And when Jesus saw that he had answered wisely he said to him, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." And after that no one dared to ask Jesus any more questions."

Jesus answers the question by quoting the Shema, a passage out of Deuteronomy Chapter 6, a well-known passage in Judaism. It starts by affirming monotheism...that there is only one God...and then it says that our primary response to that one God is to "love him", and to love him passionately, with ALL of your heart and ALL of your soul and ALL of your mind and ALL of your strength. To love him with everything you have and are without reserve. Since this is the greatest commandment, since if we only do one thing this is what we should do, then it is really important to understand what it means.

What does it mean to "love God"? There obviously are many, many points that I could make, but I want to make two this morning.

### A. Emotional Love

One is that love is emotional. It involves what the Puritans called "our affections". But if we are to love God it is also personal; that we are called not to love things about God but we are called to love God himself. If we are to love God it will be emotional and it will be personal. Let me talk about those two points.

First of all, is your love...is my love for God emotional? Does it move you even like a good song moves you? Does your love for God draw you closer to God? Does your

relationship with Jesus affect you at the very deepest places of your soul? Is your love emotional?

Now, I know we are different people and we show our emotions differently. Some wear theirs out on their sleeve; some bury it deep inside. We all show emotions differently, but for love to be love it MUST move our affections.

If your children were perfectly obedient and yet there was no emotional attachment to you as their mother or father, is that love?

If your spouse were perfectly [I don't want to use the word "obedient"], if he or she did absolutely everything that you expected of them and yet there was no deep, affected, emotional relationship connection with you, can you possibly call that love?

And the answer is "No, you can't." You can't take the personal emotional element of love out and still have love. It just doesn't work. Love, among other things, is emotional.

So what does "loving God" look like in terms of its emotional content? That is a very difficult question to answer.

In many ways it looks like the love...loving God looks like the love that I have for my wife...hopefully your love for your spouse as well. It is deeply emotional. You want to spend time... You want to understand the other person. You want to understand what makes her "tick".

## B. Informed Love

In other words, the love, while it is emotional, is informed. It is based on fact and you want to understand this. That is part of the emotion of love, but then the emotion of love drives me to act, doesn't it? If I just said "I loved my wife." And it was deeply emotional and it didn't affect my actions, that too is not love, because true love always moves to action and so I encourage her, I try to speak only kind words to her, I work to provide for her, and when she is away, my heart aches for her.

This is emotional love that moves to action and my love is highly emotional and it drives me to act in a certain way; not because I HAVE to, but because I WANT to because I love my wife. It is emotional and it drives me to act.

Loving God looks something like that. But in many ways it also looks like God's love for me. God delights in me. God delights in you. Did you know that? Just read the Psalms and it is all over the place; places like Psalm 18:19 "He rescued me [Why?] because he delighted in me." God delights in me.

Psalm 32:10 "Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one [that's me] who trusts in the LORD."

God loves me. He delights in me and that love drives him to action. If John 3:16 were translated properly in your Bibles it would say "God loved the world this way; he gave his only son." You see, God loves the world and it drives him to act on your behalf and on my behalf and so he GAVE his only son.

You can look at passages like Psalm 9:16 "I will sing of your strength, I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning. [Why?] For you have been to me a fortress and a refuge in the day of my distress."

You see God loves me! He delights in me and it drives him to act on my behalf.

What does loving God look like? What does it look like for me to love him? It is somewhat like how I love my wife, it is somewhat like how God loves me. It is emotional. It means that I want to...not have to...know him. I want to enjoy being in his

presence and when I sin and there is a wall that comes down between us, I ache when we are apart.

There are passages all the way through the Psalms that try to make this kind of point. Psalm 42:1 & 2... "As the deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." Psalm 43: first part of verse 4: "Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy [that's David's title for God...my exceeding joy]." Psalm 63:1: "Oh God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you. My soul thirsts for you. My flesh faints for you as in a dry and weary land where there is no water."

What does loving God look like? It looks somewhat like the love that I have for my wife. What does loving God look like? It looks somewhat like the love that God has for me. What does loving God look like? It is emotional. I want to know him. I want to desire him. I want to be in his presence.

And then, that love drives me to act and I DO spend time and I WILL read his letter to me and I WILL talk to him as much as I possibly can and I will tell others about him. Love is emotional; deeply emotional, and it drives us to act. Yes, our love for God does drive us to obey. Passages like John 14:15: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." But please hear this: loving God and obeying God is not the same thing. It is very easy to make the mistake of equating those two concepts; of thinking that if you obey God, therefore you are loving God.

Now, I can imagine going to some people and saying "Do you love God?" and I wouldn't be surprised to hear the answer "Well, yes. I do what I'm supposed to. I go to church."

Love is the basis for obedience but it is not the same thing. Please hear that. It is easy to make that mistake, but loving God and being obedient are not the same thing. If I only shoveled the walk and mowed the grass, would I love my wife? Or would I be the gardener? They are not the same thing.

If we love God then yes, we will obey him, but there is so much more to love than mere obedience. Loving God means that he is our greatest joy. Loving God means that he is our deepest desire.

And out of this highly informed, emotional commitment to God, out of his love for me and my love for him, then I act in obedience. But they are NOT the same thing.

By the way, the greatest commandment is not to 'like' God. It is to LOVE God, with ALL of our heart and ALL of our soul and ALL of our mind and ALL of our strength. God demands preeminence in the life of his disciples. "If you love father or mother more than me you are not worthy of the Kingdom of God" Jesus says. God requires love! He demands preeminence in the life of his disciples.

The greatest commandment is to love God, not like him. Highly emotional; informed, but emotional, touching the deepest recesses of our being.

Love God. If you do nothing else, love God.

But the second thing is that we are to love God. And the question is, "Is our love of God personal?" Because the greatest commandment is to love God, it is not to love good things about God.

I believe that our tendency is not to love the person of God, but rather to love the more tangible things, good things, that relate to him. And the danger is that we can equate loving these good things with loving God and when you love good things more than you love God, then those good things have become idols. And I think that is just part of human nature; to want to attach ourselves to what we can see and feel and touch and

taste and experience and I think we do that with God and so I need to stress that when we love God, it is GOD that we love and NOT good things ABOUT God. Many examples; let me just give you two.

Loving the Bible is NOT loving God! They are not the same thing. Now obviously knowing the Bible is good. How can we be like Jesus if we don't know what he is like and without Biblical knowledge our love is ignorant emotionalism, and we don't want that. But loving the Bible does not mean that you love God. Reading its pages doesn't mean that you are listening to the author.

The Pharisees "loved" the Old Testament. They spent their whole life studying it and yet what does Jesus say about the Pharisees and their "love" of scripture? John, Chapter 5 starting at verse 37:

"God's voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, and you do not have his word abiding in you."

Loving the Bible is NOT the same thing as loving God.

I have a test. I use it on myself and I will share it with you. When you read the Bible, do you and I stop with the words, or do the words, which are the words of God, do those words carry you into an encounter with the author. An encounter in which your life is changed?

You see, if you and I stop with the words and say "Well, that is interesting" and if we put it into the intellectual part of our brain and we amass knowledge but we never meet God and we never allow His word to change us, then I think it is a fair question to say "Do I love Scripture or do I love its author?" They are not the same thing. Certainly it wasn't with the Pharisees. Loving the Bible is not loving God.

A second example is: loving worship is not loving God. You know, some people love to worship worship, but they neither love God nor worship him. They love to come to church whenever the door is open. They love the fellowship,, and these are all good things, and they love the physiological effect that music has on their bodies, but if the focus remains on the "unholy trinity" - me, myself, and I - and not on God; if the focus remains on how I feel and not whether God has been praised or glorified, if I come out of church feeling good about MYSELF and not having ascribed goodness to God, then I have to ask the question "Do I love God or do I love worship?" and they are NOT the same thing.

I often hear two comments about our church. "Why do you go to that church?" We really enjoy the worship. We really enjoy the preaching, and other things. That's really good. Don't walk out of here thinking that I want you to dislike the worship and hate the preaching. That is not the point. But you know what I would really like to hear?

"Why do you go to church?" Because the people love God. That's what I want to hear. The people love God. They do first things first. They may mess up on other things, but they do the first thing first. They are people who love God and when I am there I am encouraged to love God.

I am encouraged to express my love in worship; I am encouraged to be informed with Biblical preaching, but when I go to church I am in the midst of people who LOVE GOD; who, by the power of the Spirit are following the first commandment, "You shall love the LORD your God with all of your heart and all of your soul and all of your mind and all of your strength."

### III. A Singular Commandment

That is the hallmark that a church should have. It is obedience to the first and the foremost and the greatest commandment. It is emotional and it is intensely personal. But, it is interesting in this account. The scribe asked a singular question. He said "Which commandment is the greatest?" But Jesus cannot stop at the one greatest commandment and he goes on and gives the second greatest commandment, because you can't love God without at the same time having that love spill into action and end up loving your neighbor. In essence it is two sides of the same coin, and you can't have a one-sided coin.

Look at verse 31; look how Jesus concluded that, "There is no other commandment [singular] greater than these." You can't have one without the other. You can't have the greatest without the second. You can't love God without loving your neighbor. It is impossible.

Jesus knows that our tendency, I believe, is to love in the abstract, but all true love moves to action and if you and I do not love our neighbor we do not love God.

Now, the word "neighbor" is an unfortunate translation; there is no other English word for it. The Greek actually means "the other person". So this pertains to more than just the people who live up and down your street. This pertains to whoever you are with; to whoever is next to you in any context. That is "the other person" and our love for God must overflow in love for the very people for whom he died on the cross. Loving the other person.

Love for God necessarily leads to love for others. 1 John 4:20 & 21: "If anyone says 'I love God' and hates his brother, he is a liar for he who does not love his brother [and that is the other person, especially those within the context of the church] he who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, 'whoever loves God must also love his brother [the other person].'

Love for God necessarily leads to love for others. Love for God necessarily overflows into loving actions to other people.

In 1st Corinthians 13 that talks so much about love says, starting at verse 4: "Love is patient. It is kind. Love doesn't envy. It doesn't boast. It is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice at wrong-doing but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

Our love for God overflows in our love for others, not in any abstract, theoretical way, but in concrete ways! It affects what my feet do. It affects what my hands do. It affects what my eyes do. It affects what my tongue does.

My Dad told me the story of a pastor that he knows, or at least heard of in South America, a pastor named Juan Carlos Ortiz and he got up in front of his church one morning and he said "The text for this morning is "love your neighbor". [And he sat down.] Five minutes later he got up and he said "Let me emphasize, let me repeat the text. The text this morning is: "Love your neighbor." [And he sat down.] And he didn't get back up to the pulpit. He went and sat down next to a lady who sat on the front row who had cleaned his house for years and years and he realized that he knew her name and nothing else. So he sat there and he talked to the lady. He found out that her husband had epilepsy and wasn't able to hold down a job, and they lived in a cardboard shack. So Juan Carlos Ortiz, the next day, went down and bought a bunch of

wood and gave it to his “neighbor” so that they could live in the rain in a wooden shack. The text for this morning is “love your neighbor”.

Do you love God? Ask the person sitting next to you whether you love God. Do you love God?

Listen to how you and I speak about another person, especially when they are not present. Is our tongue full of love and grace or is it full of criticalness and judgment? Because we cannot at the same time love God and speak in critical, demeaning, negative ways about each other. And I could use many other examples, but the tongue is always one of the most powerful.

The greatest commandment is to LOVE GOD! It is the MOST IMPORTANT thing that you and I will ever do in the course of human history.

That love must necessarily move my affections; it must be deep.

My love must be directed to the PERSON of God and not good things about him.

And my love for God must overflow into my life and my neighbor's and my brother's, and my sister's. It must affect my feet, my hands, my eyes, and my tongue.

If we do nothing else as a church, may we love God and may that love be visible in how we treat and how we talk about one another.