

## Love the Lord Your God

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'" (NIV, Mark 12:28-30)

Jesus said loving God is the most important of all the commandments. But what does loving God really mean? Here are six ways that Jesus taught us to express and demonstrate our love for God:

- Know and Obey God's Commandments
- Trust in God and Jesus
- Put God Above All Else
- Be Committed
- Be Humble before God and Men
- Make Time for Prayer

Know and Obey God's Commandments

"..., blessed are those who hear the word of God, and observe it." (NAS, Luke 11:28)

Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him. (NIV, John 14:21)

In both testaments, the words for obey also carry the idea of hearing. The two concepts are inseparable. The Hebrew shama means both "to listen to" and "obey," as does the Greek word hupakouo. The biblical concept is, then, of a hearing that takes place and the need to comply with what is heard... Obedience is the supreme test of faith in God (1 Samuel 15:22-24), or, as the NT puts it, "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:14-26). Thus obedience and faith are always very closely linked in the Bible (Young, p. 396).

Jesus repeatedly called for obedience to God's commandments and to His own teachings; we are called to put our faith into action. The commandments we are called to obey are best summarized by the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17), Jesus' Great Commandments to Love God with all your heart and soul and love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:28-31), and the teachings of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1 - 7:29).

It is abundantly clear throughout the Bible that this is not an area where we are free to live by our own feelings of right and wrong. The principles that must guide our lives every minute of every day are set out in no uncertain terms. Perfect obedience must be our constant goal.

In Matthew 7:21, Jesus says that simply calling on Him is not sufficient to enter the kingdom of heaven; we must also do God's will. In the Parable of The Wise and Foolish Builders (Luke 6:46-49), Jesus compares a man who hears His words and puts them into practice to a house built on a solid foundation or rock; it will weather any storm. On the other hand, a man who hears His words and does not put them into practice is like a house built without a foundation; the first storm will cause it to collapse and be destroyed.

Despite our best efforts, however, we are only human and will fail again and again to live up to the ideals set forth by Jesus. Fortunately, God is always willing to forgive and forget our sins and failures as long as we are sincerely sorry and are willing to also forgive those who sin against us.

For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (NIV, Matthew 6:14-15)

"... heaven will be happier over one lost sinner who returns to God than over ninety-nine others who haven't strayed away! (TLB, Luke 15:7)

Related verses: Matthew 5:14-16, Matthew 5:18-19, Matthew 5:48, Matthew 6:24, Matthew 7:15-20, Matthew 7:21-27, Matthew 12:46-50, Matthew 13:2-23, Matthew 23:27-28, Mark 3:31-35, Mark 4:1-20, Luke 6:46-49, Luke 8:4-18, Luke 10:38-42, Luke 11:27-28, Luke 11:33-36, John 8:51, John 14:15, John 14:21-24, John 15:9-10, John 15:14, John 15:17

Trust in God and Jesus

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. (NIV, John 14:1)

Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." (NIV, John 6:28-29)

We live in an age of rational thought, scientific knowledge, secular government and cultural diversity. Can there be any room in our lives for simple faith? Yet, simple child-like faith is exactly what Jesus calls us to. Just as a small child trusts completely in his or her parents, Jesus calls us to trust completely in Him and His Father in heaven:

And they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it at all. " And He took them in His arms and began blessing them, laying His hands upon them. (NAS, Mark 10:13-16)

Rationality, logic, and science are useful tools for understanding and controlling the material world. Faith is different. It operates in the spiritual realm, not the material realm. Things of the material world cannot invalidate the truths of our faith, nor does our faith invalidate the truths of the material world. There is no conflict between the two realms as long as we understand that true faith is a freely given gift from God; it is not derived from science, logic, or rational thought.

Everywhere around us there is war, prejudice, crime, exploitation and all kinds of suffering. How can we maintain our faith in the face of such overwhelming evil? Jesus simply calls us to trust God and maintain our faith in spite of all the incomprehensible evils of the world. We can (and should) try to make our world a better place for all of us to live. However, bringing it to perfection is a job only God can do, and it will happen only on His timetable. Speaking of the trials and evils to come, Jesus said:

At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. (NIV, Matthew 24:10-13)

We are called to simple, sincere, freely chosen faith. God will not give any miraculous sign that would force us to believe against our own will:

The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven. He sighed deeply and said, "Why does this generation ask for a miraculous sign? I tell you the truth, no sign will be given to it." (NIV, Mark 8:11-12)

Maintaining our faith in the face of all of life's disappointments, suffering, and cynicism is a daily challenge. But, if we can meet that challenge, we can rise above all those evils. Then we can be at peace with God, with our fellow men, women and children of the world, and with ourselves.

Related verses: Matthew 4:18-20, Matthew 5:14-16, Matthew 6:25-34, Matthew 7:7-8, Matthew 9:18-19, Matthew 9:20-22, Matthew 9:23-26, Matthew 9:27-30, Matthew 12:38-40, Matthew 16:1-4, Matthew 18:1-4, Matthew 21:16-22, Mark 1:16-18, Mark 9:17-27, Mark 10:13-16, Luke 5:4-6, Luke 5:18-26, Luke 7:36-47, Luke 10:38-42, Luke 12:22-31, Luke 17:5-6, Luke 17:11-14, Luke 18:15-17, John 1:40-41, John 1:47-49, John 6:28-29, John 6:66-69, John 8:28-32, John 10:11-12, John 10:30, John 10:38, John 11:25-26, John 11:32-45, John 12:44, John 14:8-11.

Put God Above All Else

"No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." (NIV, Luke 16:13)

There is nothing evil about owning the things we need. However, when we strive to collect wealth or possessions beyond our need, we may neglect our duty to God, to our families, and to mankind.

Jesus said that serving God and serving wealth are incompatible goals. It is all too easy to become obsessed with wealth and possessions. Because technology has provided such an abundance of consumer goods, the quest for possessions may be an even stronger temptation now than in Jesus' time. We may work long hours at stressful jobs so we can afford a luxury car, a larger house, designer clothing, and countless other items.

When a rich young man asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life (Matthew 19:16-24, Mark 10:17-25), Jesus probably knew the man was obsessed with wealth. He told the man to sell his many possessions and give the money to the poor. Sadly, the man could not bring himself to give up his great wealth, even for the promise of eternal life from Jesus, Himself!

An obsession with wealth is not the only thing that can come between God and us. Any desire that becomes too important in our lives can cause us to lose sight of God's love. While speaking to a group of religious leaders, Jesus mentioned a number of things that can separate us from God:

And then he added, "It is the thought-life that pollutes. For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts of lust, theft, murder, adultery, wanting what belongs to others, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, pride, and all other folly. All these vile things come from within; they are what pollute you and make you unfit for God." (TLB, Mark 7:20-23)

To keep Jesus' commandment to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength," we must always keep the things of God foremost in our minds.

Related verses: Matthew 4:8-10, Matthew 5:3-11, Matthew 6:19-21, Matthew 6:24, Matthew 16:26, Matthew 21:33-43, Matthew 23:37-39, Mark 8:36-37, Mark 12:1-10, Mark 13:31-37, Luke 6:24-26, Luke 9:25, Luke 10:41-42, Luke 11:23, Luke 12:13-34, Luke 13:34-35, Luke 20:9-18.

## Be Committed

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." (NAS, Matthew 16:24-26)

Jesus had little patience for half-hearted or hypocritical followers. He was totally and passionately committed to fulfilling His earthly mission, and He expected the same of His followers. We can never fully live up to Jesus' example, but we can do our best to live our faith every hour of every day.

Not only must we be committed, we must be committed to the right cause. We must be sure, through study and prayer, that we are following God's agenda and not our own. We must be sure to follow the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17), Jesus' Great Commandments to Love God with all your heart and soul and love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:28-31), and the teachings of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-48, 6:1-34, 7:1-29).

We may find commitment to be inconvenient and difficult. We could suffer loss of wealth, power and prestige. It could even be dangerous. Jesus promised the burden will never be too great to bear, though:

"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. "Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. "For My yoke is easy, and My load is light." (NAS, Matthew 11:28-30)

Commitment to carrying out God's plan may be may be inconvenient and may conflict with our own desires. However, the peace of mind, purposefulness of life, and eternal rewards will be immeasurably great.

Related verses: Matthew 7:13-14, Matthew 10:37-38, Matthew 8:18-22, Matthew 13:1-23, Matthew 16:24-26, Mark 4:1-20, Mark 10:29-31, Mark 12:41-44, Luke 8:1-18, Luke 9:23-24, Luke 9:61-62, Luke 12:35-48, Luke 14:26-27

## Be Humble before God and Men

... the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (NIV, Matthew 18:1-4)

Humility before God means realizing that all we have and all we are is a gift from God. We are God's children and should show Him our complete faith and trust. It also means realizing that God has a plan for each of us, and it is our job to follow that plan, not to follow our own agendas. Each of us has been given unique talents that we can (and should) use to improve our lives and the lives of others.

Humility before men is a quality of being courteously respectful of others. It is the opposite of aggressiveness, arrogance, boastfulness, and vanity. It is the quality that lets us go more than halfway to meet the needs and demands of others. Jesus said that wealth, power, status and pride will count for nothing in the kingdom of God. Faith, humility and service to others are the qualities of true value:

The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (NIV, Matthew 23:11-12)

In our age of instant communication, jet travel, and massive migrations of people, we are becoming more and more a worldwide society rather than a number of isolated groups as in the past. Our different beliefs and cultures often clash with one another. How should we deal with people of different faiths? Jesus calls us to spread the good news to all peoples. However, we are not called to impose our faith, beliefs and values on others. (Forced faith is no faith at all!) Rather, like a light shining on a hill, we should let the goodness of our lives demonstrate the validity of our faith:

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden... Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. " (NAS, Matthew 5:14,16)

Being humble means focusing more on God and others than on ourselves. Acting with humility does not in any way deny our own self-worth. Rather, it affirms the inherent worth of all persons and our trust in God. Some would consider humility to be a psychological malady that interferes with "success." However, wealth, power or status gained at the expense of others brings only anxiety - never peace and love.

Related verses: Matthew 5:3-11, Matthew 11:28-30, Matthew 18:1-5, Matthew 20:25-28, Matthew 23:11-12, Mark 9:35-37, Luke 14:10-11, Luke 17:7-10, Luke 18:9-14, Luke 20:46-47

### Make Time for Prayer

"Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. "For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened. "Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone? "Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him! (NAS, Matthew 7:7-11)

Prayer is loving communication with God. Prayer may be long or short, alone or in a group, silent or aloud, but should be a true communication with God and not done for public recognition. Important aspects of prayer include: (Lockyer, pp. 866-7)

Expression of faith and trust in God

Worship and adoration of God

Confession of sins

Praise of God's mighty deeds

Thanksgiving for all the good things we have received

Dedication to service to others

Requests for our needs and the needs of others

God promised to answer our prayers and give us everything we need and more. But a wise parent will not give a child everything he or she wants. Similarly, prayer is not a magical trick to get anything we want or a "quick fix" for problems that we should be solving ourselves. God answers prayer requests in His own way in His own time, and will not grant requests that are against His holy and wise purposes, are selfish in nature, are not in our best long-term interest, or those made with impure motives. Often, we must be persistent in prayer. The answer, when it comes, may be in a form radically different than we expected, and we must be alert to that possibility. Sometimes, the answer must come from within ourselves and persistent prayer will help us find that answer. We may need a new attitude or a different way of looking at things, or we may need to make amends with somebody.

Jesus spent a lot of time praying. He often went to a solitary place and prayed for hours at a time, especially at difficult times in His ministry. The famous Lord's Prayer is Jesus' model of the perfect prayer:

"This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,  
(NIV, Matthew 6:9)

First, we call God by the affectionate term "Father," and praise His holy name.

your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. (NIV, Matthew 6:10)

We ask that God's will be done on earth and in our lives.

Give us today our daily bread. (NIV, Matthew 6:11)

We ask to be given the things we need, but we don't ask for things we merely desire.

Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. (NIV, Matthew 6:12)

We ask forgiveness of our sins and acknowledge that we must also forgive those who sin against us.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.' (NIV, Matthew 6:13)

Finally, we ask for the strength to resist the temptation to follow the path of evil.

Prayer is the expression of our inner spiritual needs. Through prayer we can find strength of spirit, guidance and wisdom, joy and inner peace.

Related verses: Matthew 5:44, Matthew 6:5-15, Matthew 14:23, Matthew 26:36-41, Mark 1:35, Mark 11:24-25, Luke 5:16, Luke 6:12, Luke 6:28, Luke 9:18-20, Luke 9:28-29, Luke 11:5-13, Luke 18:1-14, Luke 22:40.