

Great Commandment Pt.1 - Loving God

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Preacher: Bill Love

[0:00] Brothers and sisters in Christ as we try to draw ever closer to our Lord.! In an effort to do that, let's first begin with prayer.

! May your word and your word only be spoken.

And may your word and your word only be heard. May all that is said and all that is done be to your honor and glory in the benefit of your church and your people. Come Holy Spirit, come with mighty power.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Okay. Well, again, this evening I understand we're resurrecting a past tradition of Holy Trinity Church, where in the past you all had had an annual retreat, parish retreat, and I guess with COVID and a few other things that happened, that's sort of been on pause for the last two or three years.

And tonight we're bringing it back. And again, Father Efe, thank you so much for inviting us to be a part of this glorious time together.

[1:38] The theme for our retreat this weekend is Rooted in Christ, the keys to being faithful to God.

Now, there are any number of things that we could speak on in terms of keys which help us to be faithful to God. But in the 31 years of ordained ministry that the Lord has blessed me with thus far, there are three things that I've come to believe that if we can, by God's grace, figure out how to live into them, we will, in fact, be living the life that he calls us to.

And those three things are, first, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength.

The second is to love your neighbor as yourself. And the third is to go out into the world in the power of Jesus Christ, making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them all that our Lord has taught us, remembering that as we do so, we don't go out in our own power, but we go out in the power of the Holy Spirit in the presence of our Lord who is with us.

Most likely, you recognize those three, not suggestions, but those three commands from our Lord. The great commandment, loving God first and foremost.

[3:16] The second is like it, loving our neighbor as ourself. And then finally, the great commission of going out and sharing that good news. of Jesus Christ, the love of God.

Again, I'm convinced that if we become intentional about truly ordering our lives around the great commandment and the great commission, and not simply paying lip service to it, that our personal faith and relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ will grow and take off in ways that we cannot even fathom.

Not only our individual lives, but also our parish life together, our corporate life together. If we can figure out, by God's grace, how to live into these things, I trust that the pews that are here at the Church of the Holy Trinity will not be enough to hold all the people that the Lord will draw to you as you share His love and mercy and grace.

It's easier, I know all of that, that Karen and I will be sharing with you tonight and tomorrow, it's easier said than done. And in our own power, in our own ability, we can't even begin to accomplish it.

But God does not command us to do that which He is unwilling to equip and empower us to do. So as we go forth, let us remember that we are going forth in His name.

[5:01] We're going to have four talks over the weekend, the first of which is right now. The second of which will be after dinner. where Karen will be developing the second half of the Great Commandment to loving thy neighbor as thyself.

And then tomorrow, we'll have two more talks and each of us will talk about the Great Commission and we'll come at it from a couple of different ways. In between time, we're going to have meal time together, we're going to have worship time together, and I pray that the Holy Spirit just bathes us in His presence and draws us ever closer to our Lord.

With all of that said, I'd like to go ahead and get on so that I can try to keep us getting to dinner on time. Since Father Ipe said that's one of the fixed times.

Okay. When asked by one of the teachers of the law in Israel, someone who actually was trying to test our Lord, he asked them the question, of all the commandments, which is the most important? And Jesus responded by quoting a passage from Deuteronomy, the Pentateuch, the Torah, and he ended up adding to it from a passage from Leviticus.

[6 : 31] But the first part is what I'm focusing on tonight, the love of God. Jesus said, the most important is this, hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is found in Mark's Gospel, the 12th chapter, 28 to 30, verses 28 to 30.

There is a similar version of this found in Matthew's Gospel, which is in the 22nd verse, or 22nd chapter, beginning with the 37th verse. Each one says essentially the same thing, however, Matthew added strength.

And I'm sure the Lord said it all. But, as, as, what I'd like us to do this evening is as we think and meditate on the great commandment, I want us to take a look at each phrase that is said and think about what the Lord is really saying to us in it.

Now, chances are, when I said we're going to be talking about the great commandment and great commission, you're thinking, okay, we've already heard this before, and we know that, and so, what's the deal?

[7 : 49] Well, the deal is, we may have heard it, we may have said it numerous times, but oftentimes, we don't really think about what it is that our Lord is commanding us to do.

Again, this isn't the great suggestion, this is the great commandment. So, as we go forward, he said, of all the commandments, which is the most important?

At that time, the Jewish people believed in, or, there were roughly 613 commandments that were recognized by the Hebrew people.

Some of those were of God, such as the Ten Commandments. Many of those were man-made, and the Pharisees really got into the man-made ones, and they were very, very intent on keeping all of those, tragically, in their attempt to live the letter to the law, and doing the man-made stuff, they lost sight of what God had actually commanded them to do.

And so, so there were roughly 613 of these commandments, and it was common among the Jewish people at that time to debate about which was the greatest, and to talk about them.

[9 : 14] And so, it wasn't all that much out of character for them to ask Jesus, because they were trying to test Him. What is the greatest of these? And, unfortunately, with all of those different commandments, again, many of which, if not most of which, were actually man-made, and not necessarily from God, we sometimes make our faith much more difficult than it actually needs to be.

And so, and as our Lord commands us, He doesn't suggest, He says, this is a commandment. So, the most important one is this.

In Matthew's account, Jesus goes on to say, if we kept reading, that all the law and all the prophets hang on these two commandments. It's Matthew 22, 40.

In other words, Jesus said, all the law, all the prophets, everything, in Holy Scripture, both the Old Testament and the New Testament, all of it, ultimately focuses on these two things.

Loving God, these three things, loving God, loving neighbor, and sharing that love, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, making disciples so that others can come into a living relationship with the one true God.

[10 : 43] Jesus clearly spells it out that this is, in fact, the most important. Nothing is more important. And then we move on and He says, Hear, O Israel, the Lord is one.

This particular time, the Jewish people lived amongst people that worshiped all sorts of gods. There were a multitude of different gods and one of the unique things about the Jewish people, about the Hebrew faith, was that they were monotheism, what is it, monotheistic, whatever, one, whatever that word is.

Yes, monotheism, monotheistic is what I was trying to say. They believe in one God, not a multitude of gods.

And so Jesus, in answering this question, He again refers back to the passage from Deuteronomy. He says, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

What He was actually quoting was the Shema. It means to hear that there is one God, not multitudes of gods. It means to listen, to pay attention.

[12:05] Again, these were folks who were surrounded by, or they lived in areas where the people believed in multiple gods, Baal being one of the chief gods.

He was symbolized by a bull and he was regarded as the god of strength and fertility. He was the god of agriculture. And then there was a female god, Asherah.

She was Baal's female consort. She was the mother goddess of the sea. And these were just two. There were multiple others. You might remember in 1 Kings 18 where Elijah had an encounter with the prophets of Baal that he, God, sent him to Mount Carmel where he was to take them on and to prove that there was one true God.

And they each offered their sacrifices. The prophets of Baal offered their burnt offering or what they hoped would be a burnt offering and then Elijah prepared his offering.

And despite all the prayers and everything that the prophets of Baal offered up to their god, Baal, who isn't a god at all, nothing happened.

[13:34] But when Elijah, after tormenting them quite a bit about Baal's failure, then he actually called upon the one true God and fire from heaven fell down and consumed all of this as proof that his God, the God that he spoke of was the one true God.

So this was one encounter that we might remember in Jewish history. But in our generation, we're not that much unlike the people of the past.

We may have different names for the gods, but the reality is many people in this generation, in fact, worship a whole slew of gods, all of which are false gods.

They wouldn't think of them as gods, but in reality, if they control us, if they have power over us, then in essence, we have allowed them to be gods in our life.

Such things as the god of finances, the god of money. How many of us are controlled by our finances, our money, our investments?

[14:49] The god of power, the god of social status, climbing that corporate ladder, or that social ladder. The god of material goods, believing that we should have whatever we want from a material standpoint, and dedicating our lives to acquiring more and more and more stuff.

The god of career, the god of body, how many people spent countless hours in the gym, not trying to be healthy, but trying to have the perfect sculpted body, which I haven't mastered yet.

The god of sports, the god of multiple other world religions and faiths. The problem is none of these are true gods.

None of these will fulfill or bring satisfaction to us. They might bring temporary pleasure, but it won't last.

There is only one true god and only one savior. God the father, God the son, God the holy spirit. So as we move on in Jesus' response, he said, you are to love the lord your god.

[16:16] We're not talking about that diluted down love that we so often times get confused with in this society. And there's all sorts of definitions for love and everything, things, but we sometimes talk about our love for barbecue.

I really enjoy barbecue, by the way. So, how would you know? Or we talk about we love our car or we love our job or we talk about our love for all sorts of things that can't love us back.

Karen will talk tomorrow about our grandson who will give some keen insight on what you love and what you don't. I will not say anything more than that.

All right. Well, it's a nice end. So you don't have to wait in anticipation for quite so long. All right. Or oftentimes that love which oftentimes is confused with lust and disguise.

We fall for someone and have all sorts of sexual desires for them, which is not true love. We're allowing our sexual appetites to take control of in those relationships.

[17:47] others. But rather the love that God is talking about, the love that our Lord is talking about, is a genuine affection, a love which springs from admiration and veneration, and which chooses its object with decision or an act of will, and devotes a self-denying and compassionate devotion to love.

Love in its fullest conceivable form. Love is a choice. It's not appealing, it's not an emotion.

Obviously, that's part of it, but ultimately we choose whether or not we are going to love.

It's also a verb. If you love, then you act on that love. So that's what Jesus is talking about in that sense of genuine love for God.

God, when we truly love someone, we want to be with them, to share our lives with them, to share our thoughts and our dreams, our worries and concerns, to listen to them, to be able to speak to them.

That's what the Lord wants in our relationship with him. He wants us to be in relationship with him. He wants us to share our lives with him, every aspect of our lives.

[19:14] Now, oftentimes remind people that are in preparing for confirmation that Jesus doesn't want to be Lord of part of our life.

He wants to be Lord of all of our life. He doesn't want any part of our life to be separated from him. He wants us to trust him enough to invite him into every aspect of who we are.

when we think about our relationship with the Lord and what type of love is reflected, do we, in fact, spend time with God?

Do we spend time in prayer? Do we spend time studying his word? How do we express our love for the Lord?

Lord? Now, Jesus said, if you love me, keep my commandments. This is in John 14, 15.

[20:15] And then he goes on to say a little bit further down, that anyone who loves me will obey my commandments. John 14, 23.

If we use this passage as the standard of measurement when examining our lives and the depth of our love for God, what do we discover?

How well are we living the commandments of our Lord? He said, if you love me, you will do what I ask. You will do what I tell you.

How are we doing with that? Chances are, some aspects, we're doing quite well. In other aspects, we may be doing okay, but not great.

In some areas, we may be failing miserably. What that points out to us is that unlike God's love for us, which is total, unconditional, all-sacrificial, tragically, our love falls far short of that for one another and most especially for God himself.

[21:30] the good news is God doesn't give up on us. He realizes that this side of heaven, we can never fully love him to the degree that he commands.

And yet, by his grace, we are to continue to try to live into that, becoming more and more like him, trusting more and more, inviting him more and more into our lives.

as we go on down, Jesus said, you are to love the Lord your God with all your heart. We think about the heart, we're not just talking about the organ within our body that beats, that keeps the blood flowing and keeps us alive, but rather we, first of all, when we talk about all, before we get to the heart part, then again, it's just as the word itself implies.

All, everything, the whole of, the totality of, the totality of our person, as opposed to divided loyalties. Divided loyalties caught between the mind of Christ and the outlook of the world, those things in this world that are drawing our attention away from God, between obedience to the Lord and our own self interest, our own self-desire.

others. Again, God's love for us is total unconditional, all sacrificial. Unfortunately, our love oftentimes falls short of that.

[23:08] But now as we think about heart, the heart in this reference is the seat or the center of our physical and spiritual life.

The seat of feeling, the seat of impulse, the seat of affection, desire, consciousness, the inner part of our being. How do we express our love for God with our heart?

How is it manifested or revealed? As you think about the worship service in your church, what does it say about your love for God?

God? Is it spirit-filled and joyful or is it something else? In the book of Revelation, Jesus spoke to the apostle John about the seven churches, speaking not only about their strengths, but also warning of some of their failings.

to the angel of the church in Laodicea, he said, I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot.

[24:22] I wish you were either one or the other. So because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I'm about to spit you out of my mouth. It's Revelation 3, 15 to 16.

God doesn't want lukewarm disciples, lukewarm children of God. He wants us to be on fire for him. And again, I realize that we can't always be on top of the mountain and everything, but he wants us to the degree possible with his Holy Spirit, by his grace, he wants us to live our lives in such a way that he is always at the focus, that whatever we're doing, we're doing it for God, whether it's at work, whether it's within our families, whether it's at school, whether it's here as we gather together as brothers and sisters in Christ.

He wants us to live our life in recognition that he's with us, and he loves us beyond our wildest imaginations, and he wants us to be open to that love, to be transformed by that love, to live into that love.

With all your soul, Jesus said you're to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. The soul, we think about the soul, we talk about our very life, our very inner being, that seat of the sensibilities, affections, emotions, desires, appetites, passions, our moral being, which, unlike our body, is not dissolved by death, but designed by God for everlasting life.

[26 : 24] When we die, our soul will continue living. The question is, where will it live? Will it live as God intends and desires in his heavenly kingdom?

Or will we have turned our back on him and rejected him and end up living apart from him in the hells of fire? One or the other we will end up.

The Lord doesn't want to lose any of us. We can't save ourselves. He's already made that possible, but we have to cooperate.

We have to choose to be with him. When you think about our innermost desires and appetites and passions, what does that say about the state of our soul, our love for God?

What is it that really excites us, that we spend so much of our time and energy focusing on? Jesus said you're to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.

[27 : 48] Talk about our mind as that faculty of understanding and thought, our intellect. What do the thoughts that occupy our minds say about our love for God?

What does it say? Are we willing to trust God even when we don't understand what he is doing or why? Why he allowed certain things to happen in our lives, such as personal loss or tragedy?

Are we willing to believe in miracles even when they seem impossible from a human standpoint or a world standpoint? Do we truly believe that God is almighty as we proclaim and the apostles in Nicene Creed?

Or do we place limits on him due to our own lack of imagination or our own lack of trust? Jesus said you're to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.

Our strength, our might, our vigor, our ability. What does our giving to the church say about our love for the Lord? The giving of our time, the giving of our talent, the giving of our treasure, recognizing that in reality our time, our talent, and our treasure really isn't ours.

[29 : 14] It's a gift from God. It belongs to him. He's entrusted it to us to use as we see fit. Are we being good stewards of that which he has entrusted to us?

Is our faith in Jesus Christ at the forefront of our life, or is it nicely boxed and placed on a back shelf, only to be brought out when it's convenient or when we're going through some type of crises?

Again, Jesus doesn't want to be stuck up on a shelf somewhere. He wants to be part of our whole life.

Our strength is found in him, is found in his Holy Spirit that lives and dwells within us. tragically, we so often times live our life thinking that somehow we've got to do it all on our own.

God didn't design us to do it all on our own. Our Lord promised to be with us, to help us do that which he commands us to do. Are we open to his presence?

[30 : 32] Do we invite him in? Do we allow him to be strong? Do we allow him to help us be strong? In essence, when Jesus said we are to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, with all our strength, he is saying that we are to love God with the whole of our being.

Everything that we are, everything that we have, with no divided loyalties. This is the type of love that he expects. This is the type of love that he commands.

God is a jealous God. Not jealous in the negative sense that we so often times associate with jealousy, but jealous in the sense that he wants only the very best for us.

The problem is that if we fail to love him as he commands, then we're settling for something far less than the best.

And our relationship with God in all of creation will be impaired. God doesn't want us to settle for the false gods of this world, to be controlled by the false gods of this world.

[31 : 59] He wants us to trust in him, to enter into relation with him, to respond to him. And when we talk about love, we can't love God on our own.

In essence, we are responding to his love. It's an amazing thing to think that he knows every aspect of our being, warts and all, our deepest, darkest, most horrible secrets that we hope no one else ever never hears about.

He already knows it. And the reality is, despite all of that, he loves us. So much so that he sent his son, Jesus Christ, to come into the world, to become one of us, to take our humanity upon himself, to live amongst us, to teach us, to minister to us, ultimately to offer himself as a sacrifice for us, to die for us, to rise to new light for us, inviting us into that new resurrected life.

Do we love God enough to say our prayers faithfully, spending time each day sitting at the feet of our Lord? Lord, Jesus doesn't expect us to be on our knees 24 hours a day in a state of prayer. He does expect us to set time apart each day to be in active prayer in that sense, but he also, he expects us to be, by his grace, to be open, to be conscious of his presence, to be talking to him, to be listening to him.

[33 : 54] In whatever we're doing, wherever we are, you might remember the story of Martha and Mary, two sisters that were very close to our Lord.

Their brother was Lazarus, and one day Jesus came over to their home, and Martha was so busy getting ready for him to be there, and preparing the meal, and all of this stuff, and she got so ticked off with her sister Mary, because Mary, unlike helping Martha with all the stuff, the busyness, she was in there sitting at the feet of our Lord, being blessed by his presence, listening as he spoke to her.

And Jesus said, Martha, after Martha came and said, Lord, tell her to get up and help me. And Jesus said, Martha, Mary has made the wiser choice.

we sometimes can get so wrapped up in the busyness of life, even the busyness of our worship corporate life together, that we fail to truly take time to sit at the feet of our Lord, to be bathed by his love and mercy and grace, to listen as he speaks to our heart and soul and mind, to bear our own heart and soul and mind to him.

Do we love God enough to read and study his word each day, to memorize scriptures, scripture passages, to help us during those difficult times where we're trying to deal with a particular situation?

[35 : 34] Again, going back to the Pentateuch, to the book of Deuteronomy, God talks about, in fact, this is the very passage that Jesus was referring to in answering that call, answering the question about the great commandment.

He says, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts.

Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home, and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.

Write them on the doorposts, the door frames of your house and on your gates. In other words, his word was so important that we need to just soak ourselves in it.

One of the things that Karen and I both were very excited about, about Holy Trinity Church, is the number of Bible studies and things that you guys have got going on here.

[36 : 51] And we applaud you for that and give thanks to God for that. It's important to have that time, but on a daily devotional, do we take time just to read God's word?

We don't necessarily have to read huge chunks, but to take time to allow the Lord to speak to us through his word, to meditate on what he is trying to share with us.

Again, when we talk about the Bible, and this is one of the frustrating things for so many people, is they think of the Bible, they think of some historic document that was written over 2,000 years ago by a lot of folks back then, to people back then, and it might have some good teaching in it, but it's not for our generation.

The reality is nothing is further from the truth. God's word is his living word. He did speak to the people way back then, but the reality is if you think about it, as we look at human nature, human

nature hasn't changed.

Times have changed, places have changed, circumstances have changed, but human beings are essentially the same in the sense of our need to be fed and nourished by God and his word.

[38:20] What a wonderful gift he has given us. do we fully appreciate that gift? Do we take time to be blessed by that gift?

Do we attend church faithfully each week? You know, Jesus actually set the example for us. We're told in Luke's gospel that on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue as was his custom.

Now, let's think about that for just a moment. This is Jesus. This is the only perfect human being that has ever walked the face of the earth. Not just a perfect human being but actually the Son of God.

And yet it was so important to him to spend time in community with other believers, with other followers of God.

we can often I'm speaking to the choir in one sense because you all came out on a Friday evening after a long hard day or a week at work and everything and you're here but so often times folks fail to appreciate again the gift that we have as the body of Christ and that opportunity to be there for one another to support and encourage one another together.

[39:50] as we worship together. Jesus didn't allow all the annoying things that we so often allow get in the way of our worship time.

He dealt with it. He wasn't consumed by that. Or rather he came to worship the one true God, his Father. God do we love God enough to be obedient to his commands?

Again, Jesus said, if you love me, will you obey what I command? If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching.

And God calls us to love him perfectly. We can't do that this side of heaven. But we need to continually strive towards that. We need to continually ask the Lord to help us love him even more. To help us trust him even more. To help us invite him even more into our lives. Do we trust in his provision for us?

[41:02] Enough to share a portion of that which he gives us back so that it can be blessed and multiplied and used for the building up of the kingdom of God.

Do we trust him enough to tithe? I don't have enough time now but to share a story where I was at a turning point in my life.

Karen and I, after many years of marriage, had finally reached a point where we were able to tithe. And we're very thankful for that. And then all of a sudden, our son, Chris got ready to go off to college.

And we were faced with having to decide if we could continue tithing or whether we needed to hold some of that money back and put it aside to go towards his college.

And it was a real struggle for me. I'm not sure about Karen, but it was for me. But fortunately, by God's grace, I finally decided, Lord, you're going to provide. I don't know how you're going to do it, but you've called us to tithe to you, and we're going to do that.

[42:11] And he honored that in such a miraculous way that we could not even have imagined by providing a full scholarship for Chris to go to the college of his choice.

Full ride. It doesn't get any better than that. But that was one way where we were being tested, and by God's grace, we were able to say, Lord, we don't know how this is going to work, but we trust you, and he blessed us in ways that I can never forget.

Do we love God enough to forgive? To forgive one another when we get hurt by them? To forgive ourselves when we fall short of our own expectations?

Not only to forgive loved ones, but are we willing to forgive those people that we may never have even met or know, but have hurt us or injured us in some way.

The Lord calls us to, and tomorrow afternoon, we're going to be focusing on that importance of forgiveness as we come together for our closing healing service.

[43:26] Do we love God enough to invite us into our brokenness, into our woundedness, to proclaim his truth and goodness to all those that we meet?

Do we love God enough to entrust, to introduce him to our friends and neighbors and loved ones? Again, in the passage from Deuteronomy, God was saying, you are to talk about me, to talk about my word, to share your faith with all those in your lives, your family, your children, your neighbors.

others. How often do we talk about God other than when we come together in a safe place in church and talk about him in terms of our time with our kids, our time with the neighbors?

The Lord calls us to share our faith with others, not to keep it a secret, not to cop out and say, well, my faith is private.

Well, there is that essence of private, but our Lord calls us not to keep it private, but to share it, that others too may be blessed.

[44 : 40] Well, I think that's about all I can share this evening, if we are going to stick to our schedule for eating dinner. But, again, the great commandment is something that's very familiar to all of us.

But I hope that we can not only read it, but by God's grace, actually try to live into it, to be guided and led by it.

Thank you so much. Thank you, Father E. Faith. Thank you.