

The Greatest Commandment

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Preacher: Rev Alan Jonas

[0:00] Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Are you a person who readily gives thanks and praise, a person who easily forgives? Whatever the harm is done to you, you forgive. Who encourages others, who is committed to making a difference, who readily gives sacrificially?

This person, a person who gladly offers hospitality, a person who is intrinsically humble. It's quite a picture, isn't it? Quite a picture. And it is, of course, the person of love in Paul's beautiful poem in 1 Corinthians 13.

It is the person filled with the fruits of the Holy Spirit, as Paul wrote in Galatians 5. And it is the person that the New Testament writers again and again and again encourage us to be.

[2:09] And it is a person who is fulfilling their life purpose. A person who is becoming like Jesus in mind, character and attitude. And that person is a person of love.

Our Gospel reading today in Mark 12 takes us to the core of becoming this person, where Jesus sums up in one commandment what we are to do, how we are to go about this life.

It is a commandment with three inseparable parts. Love God. Love neighbour. Love self. Great, wonderful joy to focus on this text, because it is the centre of what our faith is about.

But it is what all the other sermons we hear every week, all of our words, all of our reading, our questions, our discussions, all of our doctrines are to lead us to this one place.

To love, to love, to love. And really, there are at least three sermons worth in this short passage. But with limited time, I'm just going to focus on the first part. To love God with all that we are.

[3:10] The fundamental essential of how we are to live. Love God. Yahweh. The God of the Bible. Love Jesus. Meeting his love.

Being overwhelmed by his love. So that love for neighbour and self will simply spill over. Because you're so filled in countering his love, that you love your neighbour with all of that love for other people that you're asked to do.

And you love yourself too. It becomes what we do, who we are. Without that starting point of love for our God. I reckon we'll always struggle to truly know and experience what real love means.

You probably can tell that I'm old enough to know that I grew up in the 1960s and 70s. And it was really almost the national anthem of that time was All You Need Is Love.

It was a Beatles song. Do people remember it? I'm not going to sing it for you, but it was almost an anthem of the time. And of course, there's also in my record collection a song by George Harrison, I Dig Love.

[4:11] I don't have to explain who George Harrison is, do I? You know who George Harrison is. Fine, good. And the words of this song go something like this. I dig love.

We're all about to be honest. We're all about to be honest. And so you might argue the materialism and self-centredness of the following decades occurred. So, let us go to the Bible.

Go to the text of today. You've got it open there on page 1018. See Jesus emphasising this greatest commandment, our nice purpose of love, and see how we can grow in this love.

As you have seen, we have seen together over these last weeks, the religious leaders of Jesus' time are questioning, interrogating him, trying to catch him out. In verse 28, one of the teachers of the law seems impressed by Jesus, the good answers that he gives.

So the teacher wants to go right to the heart of the matter. Of all the commandments, which is the most important? In the Torah, the first five books of our Old Testament, there are apparently, I haven't counted them myself as I read this, there are around 365 prohibitions and 248 positive commandments.

[5:44] That is in the first five books of the Old Testament. A whole mass of laws and regulations, but whatever their intrinsic value was simply, acutely, poignantly, to help us to love.

A simple truth that so easily gets lost through the ages, it's the work of the devil, how it gets lost. And to this day, apparently there are over 140,000 men in Israel this week, studying the Torah, seeking to interpret the mass of prohibitions and commandments.

Oh, that they would simply hear Jesus' summary, that the greatest commandment is love. Love for your neighbour in Gaza. Love for all.

As St Paul might say, you can know all the laws, know all the verses of the Bible, know all of the Torah, but without love, it is pointless. And it's there, in the Torah, of course, it's there.

Jesus' reply is a combination of two Old Testament commandments. Deuteronomy 6, verses 4-5. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one.

[6:52] Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And then the other part, Leviticus 19, 18. Love your neighbour as yourself.

So there's the fundamental, essential starting point. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And in verse 32, the teacher of the law there is impressed by Jesus' reply.

And he adds on, there is no other but him. There is no other but this God, our God. The vital, ultimate truth of our existence. No other but him. The first principle of how to truly love.

To acknowledge that God is God. To know him as God. To know him as Jesus. To recognise, accept, as we heard in last week's sermon, the authority of God.

To have no other gods but him. To be singularly focused on him. And when you do, when I do, when we, each of us, turn to our God, we discover something very, very wonderful.

[7:50] We discover that as John, his apostle, who was maybe the apostle who was closest to Jesus, he wrote in 1 John chapter 4, God is love. When we turn to God, we encounter supreme, wonderful love.

Atheists would have us believe that this world, the cosmos, is just random, meaningless accident. No, our existence is miracle, empowered by love.

By God who is love. And this God who loves, the love that he has for all of us is, the Bible describes as agape. Self-giving, self-emptying love.

Our God loves his creation from the beginning of time through to today, through to the end of the time, without pouring of himself, ongoing, self-giving, offering of himself in love.

It is, of course, the love. Think of the life of Jesus. He embodied and demonstrated throughout his life, agape, giving of himself again and again to other people in service of the God he loved.

[8 : 55] And that is the love we are to have for God. We are to have agape, self-giving love to him and for our neighbour and ourselves. To love God with every part of who we are.

Our heart, our soul, our mind, our strength. Whole giving of ourselves. So how, how do we do this? How do we do this when we go home today, when we wake up tomorrow through this week?

How do we focus and set ourselves to truly love God with all that we are? I just want to suggest four ways briefly to you. Firstly, truly, get rid of the other gods in your life.

Cut them out. We know as Christians, but often forget that so much that can bother and concern us don't actually matter. And they become gods. They get in the way of the God who loves us.

We give our emotions, our affections, our being, which is love, isn't it? Our body, our mind, our thinking, our spirit. The things that don't matter. And so let me tell you a few things that I just came up with that don't matter, that may bother you, that actually concern you.

[10 : 01] I've got to tell you the size of your house, the make of your car, the level of income you earn, whether you've been a success in your work, whether you're attractive, witty or clever. None of it matters.

What people think of you, tradition or change, new or old, the weather, sex, politics, even football. And I have to tell myself every week this moment when I see the Spurs result, it doesn't matter.

These are false gods. Don't give your emotions to them. None of it really matters. Simply love matters. Focus on God. Being devoted to him matters.

And then secondly, to fully love God. We don't make gods of the things that he's given to us, but we enjoy them freely and liberally as we can.

You know, in a relationship, when somebody loves you, they give things to you. They make an environment for you. They want you to be with them. Same with God. He has given this absolutely wonderful world for us to enjoy.

[11 : 01] And so we respond with our love by enjoying this life. And reflect on the life of Jesus. He did it. He lived it. He lived a life with such great zest. Zest for everything.

Partying. Out with friends. Breakfast on the beach. Walking in the hills. He enjoyed this life to the full. Knowing God's love in the ordinary things of life.

So, set about enjoying what you have where you can. Enjoy these wonderful bodies you've been given if you can. And be engaged in mind and spirit.

Sing. Sing. Wake up tomorrow. Rejoice. Give thanks. See the glory of creation. Value friendships. Art. Music. Literature. All reflections of the glorious living creativity of God.

God. And God in his love. Giving those to us. We love God by loving what he has given to us. And then thirdly. To truly love God.

[11 : 59] Just let God love you. He wants in his love you to be there with him. And receive his love. So learn how to just be and receive his love.

There's a wonderful poem by a lady called Elizabeth Gately. And I know I may be pushed a little bit for time. But I'm going to read it to you. Because I think it's so wonderful. And you may Google it to get this at home if you want to.

Let your God love you. By Edwina Gately. Not Elizabeth. It says this. Be silent. Be still. Alone. Empty.

Before your God. Say nothing. Ask nothing. Be silent. Be still. Let God look upon you. That is all. God knows.

God understands. God loves you with an enormous love. And only wants to look upon you with that love. Quiet. Still. Be. Love your God.

[12:55] Love you. Oh gosh. Yeah. I'm kind of emotional with that. I did. Let God love you. Just let God love you. And he knows you through and through. Our God who understands.

Our God who loves you. With such enormous love. And maybe it's just a moment of quiet. I mean Jenny turned. Tommy just turned off the television the other night. That was a great thing to do. Because we just lit a candle.

And just in the stillness. In the quiet. Just knew that God was there. And he loved us. Loves us through and through. He understands us. With such enormous love. And of course we need times.

A dedicated time in the day. Make prayer. That prayer of silence. Part of your daily prayer. And I've got out of the habit. Perhaps because I haven't needed it. Since I've retired as a vicar. But I used to go on a regular retreat.

And actually I do need it. Just to be silent. And let God love me. And then. Yeah. To be in and return his love. To do that. And then. Fourthly.

[13:51] Of course. We give ourselves in worship. Intercession. And service. We are here. Of course aren't we. Each Sunday. Because that is part of our love for God. We pray through the week.

We intercede. We intercede for Gaza. Ukraine. For God's broken. Fallen world. And we work out. How we're serving. The God who loves you. And study.

Study to know our God. The God of the Bible. Yahweh. Jesus. So. Four suggestions. Of how. Tomorrow. This week. You may love God.

With all that you are. Set yourself straight. Don't give your soul. To things that don't actually matter. Enter into enjoying. All you can. Of this wonderful life.

That God has given you. Set aside time. To just be. In the love of God. Worship. Pray. Serve. All of that. Will mean. That you're setting about.

[14:43] Engaging your whole. Self. To love him. With all that you are. And surely. It will happen. As we meet God. In his self-giving love. We will be able.

Find. We are just being the person. That we are. We are able to love. Our neighbour. Literally. Our neighbour. The next door neighbour. Our friends. Our parents. Our children. Grandparents.

Our spouse. We will just be giving. Self-giving love. To them. As we encounter. God's love. To love our neighbour. As ourself. All of us. Means our attitude. Changes everything.

To the migrant. The refugee. The person in need. And indeed. That is of course. A sermon for another time. There's not time. To go into that second part. That Jesus says. Is the greatest canellas.

But note. As we come to an end. That of course. We all fall short. We all fall short. In love. None of us. Fully love God. With all that we are. and we certainly don't love our neighbour as ourselves. And so all of us vitally need a saviour. We need Jesus, the embodiment of love. We need his glorious sacrifice, given in ultimate love, that we can be at peace with God ourselves, one another. And that presumably is why Jesus says to the teacher of the law in verse 34, you are not far from the kingdom of God. Because this teacher of the law can see that love is actually what it's all about. He could go and cut out all that debate over the Torah and all that and try to interpret all the regulations and all that.

[16:14] He could simply go back to them and say, you know what, it is actually about love. But then there is still just another step to take to truly be in the kingdom of God, to know that to be that person of love, we need Jesus as our saviour, a step the teacher of the law, it seems, is yet to make.

And with all of this, you cannot argue with love, can you? People can bash us and argue about your faith and what do you believe and all of that. But actually, you can never argue with love. And at the end of today's reading, from then on, no one dared ask him any more questions. Our life's calling to be fulfilled in love. And so may we reflect on what I gave you, reminded you at the start of the sermon about 1 Corinthians 13, Galatians 5, all the teaching through the New Testament, sacrificial giving, all of it there. May we reflect on that as the person we're being moulded and growing to be over our lifetime. It's our lifetime's purpose. May we truly learn to do this and learn to turn to the Lord our God. Get rid of the other gods. Enjoy this life. Let God love you. Worship, pray, study, serve our God. Know our need for Jesus, the saviour. The greatest commandment, what this life is about, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Love your neighbour as yourself.

Amen.