

# Jesus the teacher - the greatest commandment

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[ 0 : 00 ] But I will give you a helper to be with you forever. So we're carrying on in our series on Matthew. I'm going to read the passage from Matthew.

Because it's Pentecost, I'm just going to read a little bit from John's Gospel as well about the Holy Spirit. And actually that ties in very nicely with the theme of the passage this morning. So, I don't know who planned the road to, but I seem to get all the nice juicy passages, which is great. So we're carrying on in Matthew chapter 22, beginning to read at verse 34. And it's entitled, The Greatest Commandment.

So I'm sure it's a passage that lots of you know well. Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question.

Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law? Jesus replied, Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

[ 1 : 13 ] This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it. Love your neighbour as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments.

And then I'm just going to read a bit from John 14. Where Jesus said, If you love me, you'll obey what I command.

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another counsellor to be with you forever. The spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him because it neither sees him nor knows him.

But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I'm just moving slightly later in the chapter. Jesus talks about, I've spoken this while with you.

The counsel of the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. So I'd just like, first of all, really to encourage you with those words from John's Gospel, where Jesus is talking to his disciples and saying that the Holy Spirit will be in you.

[ 2 : 33 ] He talks about the Holy Spirit coming, but he's not just a friend that we have a relationship with from a distance. Jesus says that the Holy Spirit is within you. And that's true for each of us here who have a relationship with Jesus this morning.

So please be encouraged and take that away with you. When we used to go to Spring Harvest many years ago, there was a guy called Alec Buchanan. He was a lovely old guy.

But he said he often used to go into meetings and he'd say, you know, how many think you've got the Holy Spirit inside you? And lots of people put their hands up and then he'd say, you know, and how many people think you're showing the fruit of the Spirit in your life?

And everybody would be like, hmm, keep their hands down. And his response was, you know, what's he been doing inside you, twiddling his holy thumbs? You know, and maybe it's a little bit flippant, but it's a good reminder that when the Holy Spirit is in us, he is working in us.

We might not always see that or recognise that. Sometimes it's harder to recognise in yourself than in the people around you. But Jesus promised the Holy Spirit and that he would help us and lead us into all truth.

[ 3 : 38 ] So that's your bonus sermon for the morning this morning. Two for the price of one. But I'll try and fit it into the time slot of one sermon. So as I said, we're carrying on in Matthew but dipping into the Pentecost theme too.

Just to recap, we've had a few sermons recently where various groups have been coming up to Jesus and trying to trip him up basically. So we had the Pharisees and then we had the Sadducees. And now it's the Pharisees' turn again. You would think that having had limited success in trying to challenge Jesus and trying to catch him out, they might know better by now, but clearly not.

They still wanted to try and trap him. So we have the question about taxes, the Sadducees asked him about marriage. And back come the Pharisees again. There are two broader themes that I'd like to bear in mind as we consider this passage and before we sort of get into the nitty-gritty of what Jesus said.

Firstly, there is a difference between honest questions and those that are used as an excuse for not following Jesus. So we have Nicodemus who came to Jesus in all sincerity and wanted to know how he could be born again.

[ 4 : 53 ] He was an earnest seeker. Jesus doesn't mind us asking questions if we're asking them with the right attitude. But similarly, there are those such as in the parable of the wedding guests who all gave their excuses and said, no, I don't want to come to your wedding.

I've got to go and bury my father. I've got to go and check my field is okay and so on. And sometimes we can use questions as an excuse for not following Jesus. We can get into the what about that and what about that.

And if you know people who are sort of maybe on the edges of Christianity but reluctant to commit, often they have questions that become an excuse for not following Jesus. So it's okay to approach Jesus with genuine questions.

That's how we learn more about him, get to know him better. But we need to make sure that the questions we're asking aren't an excuse to not do what he's asked us to do or to draw closer to him. The second thing that I think is a good message from this little passage, an overall message, is there's a challenge to us not to get bogged down in legalism.

So note, Jesus didn't say, you only need to worry about these two commandments. The rest of them aren't important at all. But he did pick the two that were foundational.

[ 6 : 06 ] Tom Wright says that there were 613 commandments that the Jews had to follow. I haven't counted them up, but I'm happy to take his word for it. 613 is an awful lot of things to remember.

Okay, but so what Jesus was saying, rather than, you know, get involved in all the nitty-gritty of every single one, this is where your focus needs to be. On loving the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.

And loving your neighbour as yourself. And we can, if we're not careful, it's easy to get bogged down in, well, I haven't done this right, or I haven't done that right. And forget those overarching commands that Jesus gave us.

So it's an encouragement not to get sort of stuck in legalism. Jesus' response was really simple. The religious leaders of the day like to make things really complicated.

And if we're honest, we like to make things quite complicated sometimes, don't we? But Jesus zones in on what really matters. I like the way it's phrased in the NIV, which is a passage I read for, and it says, the whole of the rest of the law hangs on these two commandments.

[ 7 : 10 ] It's like if you put your coat rack up in the hall and you hang everything else on it, but if you don't get that hung up correctly, it all just falls down anyway. So we need to remember that these are the foundational commandments.

So Jesus starts by quoting Deuteronomy 6.5, which is a passage that would have been really familiar to the listeners. And it's the bit that's part of what's called the Shema prayer for Jews. They recite morning and evening, and often at other times as well. It talks about, hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one, and so on. And then it goes on to say, love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul.

I think it says with strength in Deuteronomy, but Jesus put it as mind as well. But it was something that's really foundational to the listeners, so they would have been instantly connected with this commandment that Jesus quoted back at them.

So let's just unpick that first commandment a bit, the love the Lord your God bit. First of all, looking at the word love. I'm not an expert on Greek, but I did do a little looking around at the words.

[ 8 : 22 ] If I get them wrong, John or Andy will correct me later. But the word for love there is the word *agapeo*. It's love in the sense of commitment, a commitment of devotion directed by the will.

It's not just *phileos*, which is a sort of affectionate love or brotherly love, but it's an all-encompassing love. When I looked on Strong's, it said it's to love, to wish well to, take pleasure in, long for.

It denotes the love of reason and esteem. It's about an all-encompassing love that we give to God. So first of all, with all your heart.

The word here is *kardia*, which refers to thoughts or feelings. Sometimes it means from the middle. If we think about the things we do in life, we generally see being wholehearted as a good thing. Jesus is saying here, let's be wholehearted about our love of God. Let's involve all of our thoughts and feelings. Sometimes feelings can be a bit wobbly, but you know, if you've ever been in love with somebody, obviously the sort of commitment to the relationship is important, but also the feelings are important.

[ 9 : 37 ] If you never have any feelings for the other person, you know, you might get a bit fed up and find it really hard to keep going. So our feelings are important too as well. And there's also, there's a sense of commitment, like in the marriage vows.

Not being detached. If you've ever seen a couple who've sort of stopped talking to each other, you know, and you can see there's like, like a block of ice down the middle. They're detached from each other.

That's not God's design for us, but it's not his design for our relationship with him either. So we need to make sure that we're not detached from God. This isn't something that we do at a distance. This is something we can draw close to. So for us, it means being wholehearted. There's a lovely verse in Colossians chapter three that talks about whatever he's doing, do it with all your heart. So you're doing it for God and not for humankind. We need to be wholehearted in our love of God, in our pursuit of him. We need to remember, anyone seen that advert, a dog is for life, not just for Christmas?

[ 10 : 44 ] Okay. Well, Jesus is for life, not just for Christmas. Sometimes we sort of try and set that bit of our life aside and say, you know, I'll focus on Jesus on a Sunday or at Christmas or at Easter or when I'm feeling in a mess, but we don't allow him into the everyday.

And it's really important that we remember our relationship with Jesus, our love for God, is meant to be an ongoing thing. It's meant to be a 24 hours a day thing. Even when you're sleeping, you can love God in your sleep.

And we need to acknowledge our emotions as well. Sometimes we think, you know, I need to be respectable when I come to God. I need to make sure I'm presentable. You know, I need to, you know, all those feelings that I don't really want to admit that I've got, you know, the feelings of irritation, the feelings of anger, I need to sort of push those down when I come to God.

But we're allowed to acknowledge our emotions before God. We're allowed not to hold back from him. It's not a transactional relationship. It's not a, please God, will you do this for me? Right, and go away. It's an all-encompassing relationship.

We can get into that, can't we? You know, come with a shopping list of prayer. And it's good to ask God for things, but it's not just about him answering our prayers or not. It's about building relationship with him, loving him wholeheartedly.

[ 12 : 02 ] Secondly, Jesus says to love the Lord your God with all your soul, which is psyche. That's our breath or our spirit. When we respond to the call of God on our lives, we respond from our spirit.

It's our soul that responds to God's call on life. It often talks about spirit to spirit in the Bible. There's lots of instances of people in the Bible responding to God's voice, not in a logical way or an analytical way, but because something's stirred inside them.

You've got the disciples on the road to Emmaus chatting about this dreadful thing that had happened, about Jesus being crucified, and they'd really thought he was going to sort of rescue them all. And Jesus comes alongside them, and they don't recognize him at first.

And then once he reveals himself to them, they say, oh yes, our hearts were strangely warmed, weren't they, when he was talking to us? Their spirit was responding to the spirit of Jesus, even though they didn't understand in their minds exactly what was going on.

There was something inside them that responded. And I hope we've all had those instances where something clicks inside us, and it's not something that we've worked out with our brains or something we've read in a book, but it's the spirit of God speaking to our heart.

[ 13 : 20 ] We've got John Wesley, who I think gave a similar testimony, that his heart was strangely warmed when he encountered the living Jesus through the spirit moving in him. We've also got, if you read the story right at the beginning of Luke about the Annunciation, and then Mary goes to see Elizabeth, and Elizabeth says, my baby leapt within my womb when I heard your voice, because my Lord has come to visit me.

And as an aside to that, I remember particularly when I was expecting our Lizzie, not so much with the other two, but if we sat down and people prayed for me and prayed specifically for her, even if she'd been very settled, she'd suddenly start wriggling around a lot in my womb.

And it was quite remarkable how often that happened. She still wriggles a lot, but it was noticeable how, when the spirit of God was present, she was responding.

So for that, for us, that means that we need to learn to listen to God's voice. I don't know about you, but I find it very easy to miss out on God's voice because I'm busy listening to all the stuff that's going on around me.

There's always noise, there's always distractions, there's always news on your phone you can look at or whatever things distract you. But we need to learn to listen to God's voice.

[14:46] Often for us, that's a setting of time aside so we can listen to him. But God knows our situation. He knows what you do for a job. He knows your home situation. And he will meet you in there if you come with that expectant heart.

So sometimes it's hard actually just to sit down and be quiet. When I was a young woman, it was really hard to sit down and be quiet without going to sleep. Sometimes still is like that. But God will meet us where we are when we ask him to speak to us.

And even in the midst of our busyness, we can have that focus on God and learn to listen to him and expect him to speak. Again, it's really easy to say, well, I'll set this sign aside, but I don't really think God's going to say anything because he never does.

That's probably about my listening, not his speaking. So let's come expecting God to speak. We need to choose to trust in God.

There's those very famous verses in Proverbs 3 about trusting the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. Somebody gave me those verses when I was baptized many years ago, and they're ones that I keep coming back to.

[15:54] I like to work things out in my head, but actually God says, trust me. He doesn't say, work it out all out first and then come to me. He says, trust me where you are with your situation.

And in that, it's important that we remember to allow for the mystery of God. Our world really likes to get everything sorted out, and they'll say, well, I'm not going to believe in Jesus because X, Y, and Z, and I can't make sense of that.

Actually, faith is meant to be a mystery. If we knew all the answers, it wouldn't really be faith, would it? So we need to remember to allow for that sense of mystery. Just because we don't understand how God is moving doesn't mean that he isn't.

Just because we can't see God at work inside us sometimes doesn't mean that he isn't. So we need to allow for that mystery, that wonder of God moving in the ways that we don't understand, God moving in mysterious ways.

Don't try and rationalize spiritual experience. And then Jesus goes on to say, love the Lord your God with all your mind.

[17:03] The word here is *dianoia*, and it's about deep thought or deep thinking and exercising of our mental abilities and our faculties. That's not a contradiction to what I've just said about allowing for mystery.

We do need to allow for that mystery, but God gave us each a mind, and we're allowed to use it. Encouraged to use it. Disciple means one who learns.

We're all here because we're disciples of Jesus, and we're all on a learning journey. We need to think about and meditate on our faith because that helps us to grow.

Spending time meditating on God's word, thinking about it, chewing it over, maybe reading commentaries or asking somebody really wise like John about it. Just put him under pressure.

But ask somebody else if you're not sure what it means. Discussing in life groups, listening to sermons, to talks and so on, can help us think more deeply about the things of our faith and can bring a fresh understanding.

[18:05] We also need to be careful of what we give attention to. If we spend all our time reading the news or listening to music or whatever, but aren't things that particularly focus our attention on God, it's easy to get distracted from God and to become more distant.

That's not to say that we should never read the news or we should never listen to secular music. All of those things can be good, and God gives us lots of things for our enjoyment. But we need to be careful of what we give attention to.

And if we listen too much to negative voices or voices that want to turn us away from Jesus, we'll end up following them rather than following Jesus. And so if we want to love God with all our mind, we need to be careful what we give our attention to.

We need to exercise discernment. Even in the Christian world, there's lots of voices out there, and some of them are really helpful, and some of them say some really bizarre things, to be honest. Let's exercise discernment.

So when we're reading or listening to things, exercise discernment. Seek to understand what's of God. We all say things sometimes that aren't of God, and that's because we're human.

[ 19 : 19 ] So let's exercise discernment in what we listen to, what we watch, what we read, and make sure that it is pointing us to Jesus and that we discard the bits that are not. There's a lovely verse in Philippians 4, verse 8, which you've heard lots of times before, but I'm going to read it again because it really draws on this loving God with your mind.

Paul says, Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things.

Yeah. And that's a real challenge to me sometimes. You know, do I spend time thinking about things that are praiseworthy and lovely and noble and pure, or do I spend time worrying about the fact that that BMW driver cut me up on the A64, or, you know, that the, you know, that I went to Sainsbury's to buy something and they haven't got what I wanted.

You know, do I fret over other things that don't really matter, or do I choose to focus my attention on the things of God, on things that are pure and lovely? Absolutely. So, and then Jesus went on to say, that's the first, most important commandment, but the second one is like it, love your neighbor as yourself.

Echoing Leviticus 19, which talked, where Moses instructed the Israelites, love your neighbor as yourself. And I'm sure we're all familiar with the story of the Good Samaritan, and somebody came to Jesus and said, well, who is my neighbor?

[ 21 : 00 ] And Jesus didn't just say the person who lives next door to you, or the person over the street, or your best friend, but Jesus gave an example of somebody loving and caring for a person that they might not have been expected to normally.

And clearly the message to us is, when we're loving our neighbor, it's not just the people we get on really well with, the people we like, the people we want to make a good impression on, but it's caring for the outcasts, people on fringes of society, people sometimes that we find difficult, but God expects us to try to love them.

Jesus was talking in the Sermon of the Mount, about people loving one another, and he said, you know, if you only love your friends, or the people who give something back to you, what good is that?

You know, even the tax collectors do that. Tax collectors, obviously, are really a despised group, but even they would get on with other tax collectors, probably. But Jesus said, you know, don't just love the people who can give you something back, the people who love you, but we need to be better than that.

We're not just, we should stand out from the world, because we love just not the people. We find easy to love, but we love everybody. We seek to love all of our neighbours, whether they are like us, or they're completely different from us, whether the person next door, or whether somebody further afield that needs a touch of Jesus.

[ 22 : 25 ] If you look at the newspapers and social media, on both sides of the political spectrum, they thrive on difference, and saying, can you imagine what so-and-so did, or this group of people is terrible, and whichever paper you read, you can see an element of that.

I think some of them more so than others, but it's easy to get sucked into that sort of othering of other people, where we think that they're different from us, and therefore inferior, or they don't matter, or we don't have to care for them.

We are called to be different. We are called to help, and love, and reach out to those in need, even if they aren't very different from ourselves.

We're not allowed to say, I'm not going to love so-and-so, because they have a completely different political view from me. And that's a challenge sometimes, which is for me. And importantly in this, Jesus said, love your neighbour as you love yourself.

And I think it's important to remind ourselves that we need to love ourselves too. That isn't a love that thinks, you know, we're the centre of the universe, and everything revolves around us. [ 23 : 34 ] But it's acknowledging that we have worth in God's eyes, that he loved us enough to send Jesus to die in our place, that he's given us his Holy Spirit. We need to remember that we have value and worth in the eyes of God, and to love ourselves in the same way that he's loved us.

Because if I don't love myself very well, if I'm always rude to myself and down on myself, that can very quickly spill over into the way that I respond to others. I need to acknowledge what God has done for me, that he takes delight in me.

And that helps me to see that he takes delight in others too. So there's three very different ways of loving God there.

It's important to seek balance in those. You know, if we just focus on all the time with loving God, with all our heart, and think about our feelings and thoughts and that, but we don't focus on our mind, we might get tripped up by some duff theology somewhere along the line, because we're not exercising discernment, we're not seeking to learn and to grow.

So if I just focus on my loving God with my mind, there's a danger that I get sucked into that, sort of analysing the scriptures and things, which is a good thing to do, but you just, Jesus said, you know, you diligently search the scriptures, but you don't come to me that you have life.

[ 24 : 55 ] And so when we're reading the Bible, when we're searching the scripture, when we're reading commentaries and so on, we need to remember that should be directing us to Jesus. So, how can the Holy Spirit help us with this?

In so many ways, it's a very simple passage. I'm sure it's one we've all heard before, but the more I read about it, the more I think, actually, there's a lot of depth and a lot of challenge in there. It's easy to sort of recite off, you know, love the Lord your God with all your heart, your mind, and your soul, and not really stop and think about what that means and how it affects my relationship with God. Sometimes, it can feel overwhelming when we recognize that maybe we've been half-hearted in our relationship with God. We haven't worshipped him and loved him with our whole heart. Or maybe we've spent too much time on social media rather than focusing on God's word.

This isn't meant to be a guilt trip, but it's just meant to be a reminder that we have to love God first above all else. And that needs to impact every area of our life.

And so it's really great that we're looking at this passage on Pentecost Sunday because Jesus said that he would send the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth. When we're struggling to know what it means to love God with all our heart, we can ask the Holy Spirit to help us.

[ 26 : 17 ] When we're struggling to understand something, the Holy Spirit will give us wisdom. When we feel like, you know, I know I need to love my neighbour more, but I just can't get on with that person, we can ask the Holy Spirit to help us and to give us God's heart towards that person.

None of this is possible without the help of the Holy Spirit within us. So we need to remember that he will lead us into all truth. He came to reveal Jesus to us.

Romans 8 talks about the Spirit living in us and guiding us. And it's good to keep remembering and coming back to the Holy Spirit and saying, you know, I really need your help to do this, to love God wholeheartedly and to love others.

Just wanted to read a couple of things just to sort of follow on that theme. I was looking at Tom Wright and on this passage. And he talks about the fact that, you know, actually we try to follow Jesus, but sometimes it's really hard and we get in a mess and we feel like we never get there. He said, even those of us who have spent our whole lives trying to follow Jesus, live by his grace and love, know that the heart doesn't seem to get renewed all in one go.

[ 27 : 34 ] Be nice if it did, wouldn't it? Many, many bits of darkness and impurity still lurk in its depths and sometimes take a lot of work, prayer and counsel to dig out and replace with the love which we all agree should be there.

But he goes on to say once more what Jesus says here about loving God and loving one another only makes sense when we set it within the larger gospel picture, the message of Jesus dying for our sins and bringing new life and that's when these commandments begin to come into their own. They're seen not as orders to be obeyed in our own strength, although we often try to view it that way, but as invitations and promises to a new way of life.

So, I just encourage you to take those things away and think about.

Ask God, how can I love you more with my heart, with my soul, with my mind? How can I love my neighbours, myself, other people that I'm avoiding loving because I really don't like them or I'm looking down with them or I've got a bad attitude?

[ 28 : 42 ] Help me to have your love for them. And we're going to close in prayer, but as part of that I'm going to read the Deuteronomy passage that I referred to and just the wider bit of it.

I think it's great that the Jews use this as a prayer every day, you know, morning and evening and I know some people have that sort of rhythm of prayer, not necessarily with this passage, but with other things that they read morning and night because it reminds them to keep focusing on God and if you want to do that, you could do worse than come back to this passage.

It says, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Hear, Whitby Christian Fellowship. The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength.

These commandments I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children.

Talk about them when you sit at home, 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 door frames of your houses and on your gates. Let's pray. Thank you.