



Sermon Notes: Trevor Ackman, “Greatest Commandments”

11 February 2024

Readings: Deuteronomy 6:1-9, Matthew 22:34-40

What is the greatest commandment?

It seems rather an odd question to us. But it encompasses years of Jewish agonising over how to keep themselves in God’s good books.

A side concern was how to protect the Jewish way of life from the impact of Greek/Gentile culture.

The Pharisees were a political/religious group who emerged a couple of centuries before Jesus. They developed strict and detailed rules to cover every possible situation. They managed to find **613** different commandments that were all based on the Old Testament.

248 were positive (i.e., "Do this; do that"); and **365** were negative (i.e., "Don't do this; don't do that").

It is easy to dismiss these guys as right-wing legalists, but there is a certain appeal in having clear guidelines. Think of it like driving a car. Imagine driving with your seat belt on, mobile phone safely in the glove box, keeping assiduously to the speed limit when you come across this.... [a policeman with a speed radar]

After instinctively breaking, (because we all do it!), you can be reasonably confident he won't pull you over.

There are clear benefits in keeping the rules.

Or consider the difference, the strict application of the rules has made to tennis.

Recall in the Australian Open there used to be constant complaints over line calls – think of John McEnroe and his famous tantrums.

But now, with constant electronic monitoring, we know within millimetres, whether a ball is in or out. There is a certain appeal in knowing exactly what is required.

In a society (like that of the Pharisees) where rules dominated, it is not surprising that there would be disputes over the relative importance of commandments.

Some taught that observing the Sabbath was the most important commandment. Devoting a special day to God each week is not necessarily a bad thing.

Others valued circumcision, that special sign they belonged to God.

Or there are all those laws around sacrifices, where you admit you have blown it, with the assurance of God’s forgiveness. So, when a lawyer (a hired gun) asks Jesus “Which is the greatest commandment in the law?” (Matthew 22:36), he is probably hoping for a “gotcha moment”.

There is nothing new or controversial when Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6:5. “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.*” Some people see this as a summary of the first four commandments – have no other Gods, don’t worship idols, don’t blaspheme my name, keep my Sabbath special.

There's nothing wrong with obeying the law. That is totally consistent with NT teaching.

For instance, John 14:21 – **if you love me, you will obey my commandments.**

When Jesus highlights love, he is changing the emphasis from obedience to motivation.

We may have warm feelings of gratitude to God when we consider all he has done for us, but it is not warm feelings that God requires from us. Did you notice how the word, 'all' is repeated three times in this first commandment: we are to love God with '**all**' our heart, '**all**' our soul and '**all**' our strength.

Heart, soul and strength. Let's have a closer look at each of these.

First the bad news:

Jeremiah 17: 9 -10, *'the heart is deceitful above all things, and beyond cure. Who can understand it?'* Or Hebrews 3: 7-8 *'our hearts are hard because of rebellion'*.

Then the good news. God knows we need help. In Psalm 51:10 David asks God to create in him a clean heart. In Ezekiel 36:26 God promises to give his people a new heart, to replace their heart of stone.

This sure hope of God's assistance underpins passages like Acts 8:22, which speaks of repentance in the hope God will forgive the wicked thoughts in our heart. Or James 4:8 which encourages us to purify our hearts. It seems we have some say in what our hearts look like!

The Christian life is more than obedience - **do this, don't do that.** Rather, in response to his love for us, we choose to live God's way. Motivation rather than compulsion. Isn't that how love is supposed to work?

Love God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength.

What is your soul? Is it the same as your Spirit? In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus told his disciples: *My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.*" Matthew 26:38 Contrast that with what happens on the cross *Matthew 27:50: Jesus cried out in a loud voice and gave up his Spirit.*

Spirit literally means 'God breathed". It is the life God has given us, the eternal 'god breathed' part of you that lives forever. While your soul is ... how do I put this...it's you! It's the essence of who you are – it is your self-awareness, your emotions, your perceptions, your desires. From the word for soul we get Psyche and Psychology. Your soul is what makes you ...you!

So how do we love God with all our soul? Jesus gives us a clue in the sermon on the mount when he said: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Matthew 5:6) Let me illustrate what hunger and thirst looks like in terms of my granddaughter. [Picture of screaming child]

When (granddaughter) Madi is hungry – nothing else matters. That's what it means to love God with all your soul. It involves your emotions, your perceptions, your desires. This suggests this loving thing is all encompassing.

So, we come to the final exhortation – love God with all your strength. Strength of mind refers to how we allocate or use our resources. How do you prioritise all those options we encounter in our busy lives?

I can almost visualise a strategy meeting taking place in your mind – the place where your knowledge and memory and conscience is stored. What shall we do today? How should I respond to this challenge? Does anyone here remember the sign on the wall of Teague's bakery, opposite Central station more than 60 years ago

What you eat today walks and talks tomorrow.

Just as the food we eat impacts our body, what we feed our mind impacts our thoughts.

Anxiety and doubt and selfishness arise from our mind. So too does love and commitment.

Proverbs 3:5 tells us not to rely on our own understanding but to acknowledge God in everything we do with the assurance he will direct our paths.

In Philippians 4:8 we are encouraged to think on those things that are true, right, noble, loveable, praiseworthy.

Loving God with all your strength involves a combination of Proverbs 3 and Philippians 4. Like our heart and soul, this love thing is all encompassing.

Before I turn to some implications of loving God, let me turn briefly to Jesus' second commandment which is also from the Old Testament Lev 19:18: - **love your neighbour as yourself.**

Like the first great commandment, some see this as a summary of the remaining six commandments: honour Mum and Dad, no murder, no adultery, no stealing, no giving false evidence or longing for other people's property. Galatians 5:14 confirms we are covering some big issues here by telling us **the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbour as yourself."**

I do not intend to repeat the lesson from the good Samaritan about who is my neighbour. Rather, did you notice the standard of love we should show? Love others **as much as you love yourself.** While there is much, I could say about that, of more interest is how Jesus describes this second commandment – **which is like the first**

Jesus is saying, loving God is closely connected to our love for others. A little later, the apostle John will expound on this when he says, **"If anyone says he loves God but hates his brother, he is a liar."** (1 John 4:20). Pretty strong words, wouldn't you agree?

We often think God demands so much from us – our money, our time, our effort, our submission, and so forth – when what God really wants is our love. If we focus on obedience or act from a sense of duty, or hope for reward – we risk becoming box tickers, like the Pharisees.

If we love God with all our heart, soul, and strength, then living his way is not a duty or a burden but a reflection of an enjoyable mutual relationship.

Which then leads to the million-dollar question – how can we love God?

Glad you asked that, because I have a couple of sure-fire tips – which involve a couple of "Do's and Don'ts. But that's OK because rules make everything certain!

Fortunately, if you haven't drifted off, you would realise that Jesus already told us a better way.

He wasn't being especially radical when he quoted from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. The radical bit was when he declared **the second commandment is like the first**. By saying that, he is putting love for our neighbour on par with our love for God.

When I quoted from 1 John a moment ago

"If anyone says he loves God but hates his brother, he is a liar" this is only half the story.

The verse goes on to explain the logic behind this assertion:

"For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen."

How do we love other people? I'm going to give you 20 seconds to think about it. But as you do, don't think in terms of some hypothetical stranger.

Rather think about a really good friend. How did you two become so close?

I'm not going to pry into your relationships, but I suspect it was a gradual process – and included spending time together, perhaps involving shared experiences, possibly some heart-to-heart chats, a bit of self-revelation, perhaps some home truths and quarrels as you learned to trust each other.

How can we learn to love God? Perhaps some of the tools you just recalled might be appropriate. Let me conclude by repeating something I said earlier.

We may have warm feelings of gratitude to God when we consider all he has done for us, but it is not warm feelings that God wants from us. The Gospel doesn't replace external compliance with an inward/spiritual lifestyle.

Rather, love supplies both the motivation and the resources we need. We don't love so that God will love us - we love because God has loved us.

Let us pray ...