

## THE FIRST AND GREAT COMMANDMENT

### INTRODUCTION

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind. This" said Jesus "is the first and great commandment". And this is the commandment that we shall consider carefully and explore at some length here this morning.

If I were to ask you this question, Do you love God with all of your heart and soul and mind? just what would your answer be? I have a feeling that some of you might answer the question in this fashion, "To be quite honest with you, I don't. I don't think I've ever felt that way toward God. I don't think I've ever felt anything toward God that's comparable to love". Some other of you might answer the question in this way, "Do I love God? Occasionally I feel that way about God, but certainly not all of the time. I try to, but I've never gotten that far". And then to there may be another person who might say something like this in response to this question, "I really don't know whether I love God or not because I'm not at all sure as to whether I know exactly what it means to love God. I'm not use to talking about him and thinking about him in that way."

And if we were to give this third person an opportunity to say more to us on this subject, he might come up with something like this, "Now if you were to point to that person over there and ask me whether I love him or not I could answer you without any hesitation. I might say No, I don't love him. I don't particularly care for him; I don't enjoy his company; I have very little in common with him. No, I don't love him. Or if you were to point to another person, I might say yes, I do love that person. I care for that person a great deal; we have a great deal in common; we enjoy each other's company. You see I can say all of this without any hesitation and in all honesty, but when it comes to this matter of loving God with all of my heart and soul and mind and strength, I'm not sure.....I don't know what to say....I'm not use to talking about Him and thinking about him in that fashion"

### DEVELOPMENT

When you really stop to think about this great matter of loving God, you begin to realize that you can never talk about your relationship with God as easily as you can talk about your relationship with another person for the simple reason that God is not a person, another person, like yourself. You can't hear him or see him or touch him in the way that you can hear, see and touch another person. He doesn't live in any one particular place. He has no local address where you can always reach him. No day of death; no anniversary of his birthday like today happens to be the birthday of Benjamin Franklin.

As a matter of fact, God is not a person at all. A person is passing; he comes and goes, but God is permanent. A person is imperfect. Even the finest person you know has some flaws and imperfections. But God is perfect. A person is dependent upon things and powers outside himself, but God is independent and self-creating. A person is a creature of need, constantly reaching out all the time to find those things he must have in order to exist. But God is the creator who supplies every need. God is not a person, mind you, but he is personal. That is to say that he has all of the qualities that you and I associate with human personality - will, intelligence, love, and purpose. He is not a person like the president of our country magnified many, many times and therefore your relationship with him is not like your relationship with any other person in the entire world.

Having said that however, I would now come around and say this to you, although God is not a person, although our relationship with Him is unlike our relationship with any other person in the world, yet when it comes to talking about God and our relationship with Him we can only talk about Him in the same sort of way that we talk about our relationship with those who mean the most to us in life, that is, if we are to really reach the heights and depths of this matter.

For instance, if you have ever been through the valley of the shadow of death and felt an invisible presence supporting you, like a shepherd with his rod and staff; or if you have ever really been up against the hard and difficult experiences of life and felt something like the Everlasting Arms holding you up; or if you have ever known what it is to cry out in thanks and praise to the God of all existence for the things that have come into your life; or if you have ever sinned and known that you have sinned against the Almighty and yet felt his loving and forgiving spirit.....if you have ever been through any of these experiences then you'll probably tend to do what so many others have done down through the centuries of time. You will begin to use the language of personal relationships. Perhaps you'll begin to talk about obeying God. That's the word of course that we use to describe anyone who is master over us. Perhaps you will talk about meeting him, in a certain time and place. You may begin to talk about fearing him in the sense of standing in the presence of one who shakes you to your foundations so that you stand in awe of him. You will perhaps begin to talk about hearing him, and following him, and in the long run, you may find yourself talking about loving him. And Jesus said "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all of thy heart and soul and mind."

Loving God.... What does it mean to love God. Mind you these are not easy things to talk about. Perhaps one or two illustrations will help to shed light upon this question. For instance, when a man says that he loves the stars, we know pretty much what he means. We know, I think, that he is trying to say something like this, "The stars have always been of great interest to me. I've spent hours studying them and watching them. My interest in them has been something more than just the satisfaction of my intellectual curiosity. The stars stir something very deep in me. Something in me responds to them - not only my mind, but my feelings and emotions. Their beauty. Their apparent size. The speed at which their light travels through space. All of this fascinates me". He using, you see, a personal word in order to describe his relationship with the stars. He loves them. No less a word will grasp and say what he wants to say.

Another illustration of this same sort of thing is hardly necessary, but I can't resist bringing this one to your mind. For example, when a person says that he loves music, you know right away what he means. He's trying to say that music is more than just a passing interest to him. It's more than just a way of making a living. It's more than just an intellectual pursuit of certain sound effects, and it's more than entertainment and pleasure. The person is trying to say that music is his entire life, that he'll pursue it through thick and thin, even when it's to his disadvantage to do so because it will not let him go. He not only enjoys it; he's a slave to it and he responds to it with all of his being.

And so you see when a person talks about loving God, and here I think we come to the very heart of this matter, he is trying to say something like this. He's trying to say that he is drawn to this creative, intelligent, benevolent force that's at the heart of all life the way a flower is drawn to the sun. In other words, he's suggesting that the passing parade is not enough. He wants to go a little deeper; behind the scenes so to speak. And this too, I think he's trying to say that he feels the care of God around him all the time, even when he has to struggle through some of the difficult moments of life which all of us are subject to. There are no exemptions as far as I can see. He may not be able to explain it, but as he looks back over the years of his life, he feels that that care and concern has been undergirding his life every inch of the way, and he responds to it with joy and gratitude and obedience. This too, he has come to know that his own resources are not quite enough and that there are resources beyond his own and with these sources of strength he can always do a great deal more than he thinks he can. He is trying to say that his love has found expression in a practical way, in a deep and steady and loyal commitment to a way of life, a way of life that he feels to be God's way and he's willing to give everything he can, every bit of himself to strengthen that way of life. He is trying to say that in spite of all of the discomforts and disasters of life, he is somehow not on edge. He is strangely at peace inside himself. These, I think, are just some of the things he is trying to say when he says that he loves God.

#### TWO QUESTIONS

There were two questions that came to my mind this past week as I was working with this great text, and I'd like to spend the remainder of our time this morning considering both of these questions. The first question is this: how can Jesus command a person to love God? Granted, we know what it means to love God, but even so how can Jesus command a person to love God. You might say that it's something like commanding a person to love the 4th Symphony by Brahms. I happen to enjoy that particular piece of music more than any other piece of music, but I can't go up to someone and say to him: "I command you to love the 4th Symphony by Brahms". You see what I'm driving at. The person may not care for it at all. He may prefer something else - rock and roll, or Lawrence Welk. There's very little that you can do about this except to listen to it again. And so a person hearing this commandment may be tempted to raise this question: How can I be commanded to love someone. I don't feel it and how can someone tell me that I must.

I have two suggestions to make. Mind you, these are not answers to the question, but rather suggestions. The first is this: our capacities ought to become our commandments. Turn that over in your mind for a moment. Our capacities ought to become our commandments. In other words, if a person has the capacity to be something, that he has the obligation to become. If you as a human being have the capacity to reach up to the very being of God, that you have the obligation to do. You cannot be less than your capacities and still be content. It's true not only here but in so many areas of life. Our capacities ought to become our commandments. And the other suggestion would be this: our commandments often indicate our capacities especially when they come from the highest and the best that we know. They come to put us under orders and to encourage us with the assurance that we can do what we have been asked to do. As Emerson said, "When duty whispers low, thou must, the youth replies, I can". When Christ says to us, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, we reply we can. And perhaps this should

be added, if we don't, if we miss this, then we are apt to miss everything. If our relationship with God is not right, if it's all askew, then everything else will be out of joint.

The second question that came to mind was this: how can I feel and experience the love of God? For me, if I may speak this word of personal experience, the answer is to be found in the man from Galilee, in Jesus of Nazareth. Perhaps a simple illustration will bring out the thing I want to say to you at this point. While I was attending seminary in Boston a few years ago, I use to make a point of faithfully attending at least twice a month the Friday afternoon concerts of the Boston Symphony. Often as I sat there and listened, I would look at the conductor. This was especially true whenever Leonard Bernstein was conducting. This, of course, was before he became permanent conductor of the symphony of our city. Occasionally he would substitute for Charles Munch. Anyway as I sat there listening I would watch the conductor. The conductor, in a sense, is the one who makes the music. By his movement he tells the men in the orchestra what to do and how to play and also by his movement he helps one to understand the meaning of the music. As I watched him from my seat, I could see his back and if you have ever watched Bernstein conduct you know what a powerful and eloquent instrument his back can be. You can tell when the music is powerful and strong and when it is quiet and soft and tender by watching the movement of his body and his back as well as by listening to the music. However there were one or two occasions when I was in a position of being able to see Mr. Bernstein's face, and then you get something entirely different. All of the warmth and human feeling that no back of any human being can express would radiate from that face; sometimes agony, sometimes ecstasy, sometimes almost a pleading, sobbing sadness that would wring the music out of the players. This for me added an entirely new dimension to the whole picture.

And so to complete the illustration. I can see God in the world around me everywhere I look. And yet it is always as if I were looking at him from behind. I can see his mighty movements in the storms and in the seasons, in human lives; I can read his meaning with some degree of accuracy in the pages of the history book, I think, and you can too. But when I see Jesus, I see the face of God; and that makes all the difference. In that face I see the warmth and meaning, I see the life and passion and intention of God for my life as he is trying to draw it out of me and make me play it as well as I can. And as I go back and read and re-read the Gospels and ponder over the things he said and did, believe me I begin to feel this thing that we call the love of God. It begins to shine through and come alive, at least for me. Speaking for myself, and speaking for so many of you, we feel and find and experience this love of God in this man from Galilee.

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind. This" said Jesus, "is the first and great commandment". There is a second like unto it, this we shall consider together next Sunday morning, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself".

LET US PRAY: We know, Our Father, that there have been times when we have fallen short in our love for Thee. And we are coming to realize more and more that when we do fall short, we are the losers, and that thou art the answers to all of life's deepest needs. May our devotion increase, may our trust in thee be deepened and our loyalty to the teachings of thy Son be renewed once again in these moments of quietness. We ask this in his name. Amen