

# With All Your Heart!

Deuteronomy 6:1-9, Mark 12:28-34 (ESV)

April 13, 2003

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” The good news is concentrated into these eight, central words: “The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” The earlier “Hear, O Israel” is a summons. It grabs our attention. It gathers us together. It constitutes us as a people. The subsequent “Love the Lord your God” is a command, an implication of the gospel. That is the main point here. That is the direction all this is headed. We will get to that in a moment. But in between the summons and the command we have eight words of life-giving good news: “The Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

Of course, the commandment to love God and neighbor springs also from the here unspoken but always prior good news that God loves us. I will get to that in a moment, also. But here is something even more basic, more fundamental, and more profound: “The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” God is singular. God is without duplicity. God is without competition. In the face of the multiple forces that try to tear our lives apart, here are words of defiant hope: “The Lord is one.” Against the scattering forces of decay and decline, against the debilitating powers of sin and evil, against the devastating might of sin and death, we proclaim this good news: “The Lord is one.” Against the competing demands of life, family, work, and society, we can cling to this gospel: “The Lord is one.”

There is one creator of the world and all that is in it. There is one sustainer of life and breath. There is one judge to whom we all must answer. There is one redeemer of the lost, one healer of the broken, one who binds up our wounds, one who regathers the fleeing stardust and the scattered fragments of the universe. And this creator, this sustainer, this judge, and this redeemer is one and the same God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Here is the anchor that will hold us secure through all the storms.

There are some who fear there is no God. To them we offer these words of comfort: “The Lord is one.” There are some who gladly teach there is no God. To them we extend these words of challenge: “The Lord is one.” There are many whose lives are torn by competing loyalties, shredded by diverging demands, tossed to and fro by the multiple gods of the economy and the state. To them we extend this rock steady good news: “The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” There are some overwhelmed by the reality of evil, unsure of the prospects, fearful of the outcome.

To them we say that there is one God, not two; the victory was won long ago, and the contest was never equal to start with. There is one God, now and forever. There may be many pretenders, but this good news unmasks them. There may be great confusion, but this one truth shines clearly. There may be great distress, but this is our comfort: “The Lord is one.”

The reality, the singularity, and the unity of God form the basis of life and of hope. We are not mere chance gatherings of atoms and energy but are instead the product of divine purpose and intention. We do not have to answer to many masters, but to one. And this one to whom we answer is also the one who loves us so much that he created the universe as an arena within which for us to be in fellowship with him and with each other. This is the one who loves us so much that he created us free, running the risk that we would turn away. This is the one who “so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16 ESV). This is the one who loves us so much that he shall hold us safe as his very own. This is at least the beginning of what we mean by these eight words of gospel: “The Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

Now, given this foundation of the reality, the singularity, and the unity of God, we can move forward to the life-giving affirmation of the love of God for us. The Old Testament passage we have read today from Deuteronomy, which Jesus quoted as the first half of the great commandment, is a restatement and expansion of the first of the Ten Commandments, which we also read today, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3 ESV). What is not restated in today’s reading but which does appear in the Ten Commandments, immediately prior to the first commandment, is this: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exodus 20:2 ESV). That is to say, “I am your God, and therefore you are my people. I have rescued you, I have delivered you, I have saved you, so you are my very own.” It is this self-identification which tells us that God loves us. It is this always prior love of God for us that provides the basis for the Ten Commandments and for the great commandment.

The same thing happens in the passage we have read from the New Testament. Jesus does not articulate the basis for the great commandment, but he provides that basis throughout his life, ministry, teachings, healings, suffering, death, and resurrection. The presence of God with us in Jesus Christ, the perfect sacrifice of his life on the cross, the forgiveness of our sin, and the promise of the resurrection all teach us and reassure us of the always prior love of God for us. And this provides us the basis for the great commandment for us to love God and neighbor. It is the prior context of salvation, in both the Exodus and the cross, that not only gives us an understanding of the commandment but also gives us the compelling motivation and desire to want to obey and fulfill it.

Now, having heard the good news of the reality, the singularity, and the unity of God, and having heard the good news of the always prior saving love of God, let us turn our attention to the content of the great commandment itself. We are to love God and to love neighbor. The intent and purpose of the gospel is not to lead us to a hollow or empty faith or a mere assent to a certain perception of the world but is instead to lead us to a full faith and to a way of life that includes loving God and neighbor.

Having said this, it is imperative for us to realize that the commandment instructs us in both the object and the manner of our love. The manner of our love, the form of it, is to be with our whole being: with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength. We are commanded to love with a comprehensive love. It is not only emotional, though it includes that. It is not only spiritual or religious, though it includes that. It is not only mental or intellectual, though it includes that. And it is not only physical or financial, though it includes that, too. It is all of these together. We are to love with all that we are and with all that we have. This form of love calls for the best from our hearts and the best from our souls and the best from our minds and the best from our strength. This is the form, or the manner, of our love.

And yet, there has to be more to right love than form and manner. There is some thought in our society that what matters in life is simply that you love something with all your heart. You recognize the language. The form and manner right are right. The secular world has taken over at least that part of the commandment. But the problem arises with the reluctance and even the refusal to specify the object of such love. Instead, it is said that the object of such love does not matter at all. It could be a person, it could be a thing, it could be an idea it could be an illusion. You see the problem here. It is important to love the right thing. Loving the wrong thing is wrong. Loving the wrong thing absolutely is deadly.

Yes, it is important to love with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength. That is the form or manner of the love to which we are commanded. But that is only the form. Precisely because the manner of this love is comprehensive, the object of our love, the content of the commandment, is vitally important and makes all the difference. We do not want to be reduced to the inhumanity of centering our lives on anything less than worthy of our full attention and our entire selves. We do not want to be reduced to centering our lives on ourselves, our families, our nation, or even our world alone. Human life is too grand and too important for such narrow constrictions. Those cramp the heart and soul and mind and strength. We were created for, saved for, and therefore commanded to, the love of God, the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, whom we worship here every Sunday, and whose praise we sing throughout the service. He alone is

appropriately the ultimate object of our love. That is why God is specified as the content of the great commandment to love.

There is a second part of the great commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Christ put this in parallel with the first and made it inseparable from the first. Any attempt to love God without loving neighbor would be cold and false. Any attempt to love neighbor without loving God will result in a narrowing of the definition of neighbor. The standards are high for this second part of the commandment: we are to love others as much, as fully, and as surely as we all love ourselves. And the scope of this second part of the commandment is broad: “neighbor” includes everyone near and far, friend and foe. We are not to restrict our love to the neighbors whom we like. We are not to restrict our love to the neighbors with whom we agree. We are not to restrict our love to the neighbors who think like us, or look like us, or vote like us. We are not to restrict our love to the neighbors who love us. Our understanding of neighbor is universalized. And we are called upon, and commanded, to love our neighbor as ourselves.

This is a tall order. Loving God is one thing. Loving each other is another. Loving each other right here in church is one of the most important things we can do in our Christian faith, life, and obedience. Here is where it starts. We either love each other with the love of God and of Jesus Christ, or we betray God and Jesus Christ. If we refuse to love each other here, if we fail to love each other here, we might as well lock the doors, because what we would have then would not only be of no use to the world but would also be offensive to God and to his Christ. But if we learn to love each other here, then we can reach out to the city and to the country and to all the world with the gospel of love and hope.

Jesus said, “The most important [commandment of all] is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” “And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.” Instead, they crucified him.

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

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