

THE GREATEST THING!

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Texts:

"²⁸ One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" ²⁹ "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'" There is no commandment greater than these." Mark 12: 28 - 31 (NIV)

"³⁴ Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵ One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶ "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" ³⁷ Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." Matthew 22: 28 -30 (NIV)

"¹ These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, ² so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. ³ Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you. ⁴ Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ⁵ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." Deuteronomy 6: 1-5 (NIV)

Key Text:

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Introduction: The Lead-In to Communion

This is The LORD GOD speaking to Moses: "¹ These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, ² so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the

Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. ³ Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you. ⁴ Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ⁵ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." Deuteronomy 6: 1-5

You see the 10 Commandments that GOD gave to Moses that day were divided into 3 sections. The first were the non-negotiable commands of GOD, the ruling principles upon which our soul must function, an order or charge from GOD. The second were the decrees of GOD, the third were the laws of GOD.

So, the first commandments given were to "Love the LORD your GOD". We are commanded to love GOD and no other, and also to love GOD with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength.

This section of scripture the beginning of what is known in Judaism as The Shema. The Shema (Deuteronomy 6: 4-9, see Post Notes) expresses that God must be loved above all else and obeyed at all times.

Love has lost its meaning in today's society. To understand the true meaning of love we should revisit 1 Corinthians 13: 4 - 7 which describes for us what love truly is. "⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

Loving GOD is not easy. It is not short-term. It is a lifelong commitment. We must set our heart and put all of our soul into the effort. We must be careful to obey the Shema every waking moment of our life!

GOD is our source. HE is the creator of everything we are, and we are to go to HIM to become all that we are meant to be.

GOD is our force. HE should be what moves and occupies our minds. We should be immersed in the Living Word of GOD continually and using it to guide our life and opinions. It is a living and dynamic force that should be cementing our very attitude towards life and situations.

GOD is our course. We should be looking to HIM to guide our path and set our destination.

With GOD as our source, force and course, we cannot fail! It is not easy, but we must keep our should centred on GOD as our only source, force and course for living this life. It will prepare us and lead us to our final destination, living in glory with HIM!!

The Hook: To Love GOD with Everything!

"²⁸ One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most

important?" 29 "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" There is no commandment greater than these." Mark 12: 28 - 31 (NIV)

Now as Jesus is not just any ordinary teacher, and HE was not put off by the question. HE gave a very good answer to the question. Yes, good things always happen when Jesus is around!

This great commandment that Jesus mentions here is the all-embracing rule of life is so very important!

A commandment is a divine rule that is to be observed strictly and honestly. The word commandment is translated as *mitzvah* in the Hebrew, means "a command" or a ruling principle of the soul. Here we are commanded to love GOD with everything, and above all! Loving GOD in this way will engage us everything by which HE is pleased!

It is extremely important that we all recognize that our passage this morning is not promoting love in general, but rather Jesus is referring very specifically to Love for GOD. That is the greatest commandment. We are to make the love of GOD the key feature of our life. We are to eliminate any competing loves such as the world, success, fame, etc. which take us away from GOD.

The church is losing this concept of keeping GOD in the centre of our focus and devotion. Mark 12: 30, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.", tells us that we are to be passionate about the wonder of who GOD really is. In the Old Testament they referred to this as wholehearted devotion to GOD. In the New Testament it is called enthusiastic zeal for GOD. We should "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord." Romans 12: 11.

However, we now live in a very distracted age. This digital age has come with a huge price! Hearts are being desensitized. Many are losing their passion for GOD because they have neglected the fuel that drives it.

Instead, Love of Self, "3 But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. 2 People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, 3 without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, 4 treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—" 2 Timothy 3: 1-4

Hersey, "Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly." 1 Timothy 4: 7

Doctrines of Demons, "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons." 1 Timothy 4: 1

Apostasy, "2 Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. 3 They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. 4 For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving," 1 Timothy 4: 2 - 4

Religious leaders leading with consciences seared, "Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed." Ephesians 4: 19 & "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." 1 John 4: 1

False Teachers, "Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord." Jeremiah 23: 16

False Prophets, "My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and utter lying divinations. They will not belong to the council of my people or be listed in the records of Israel, nor will they enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Sovereign Lord." Ezekiel 13: 9, "For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect." Matthew 24: 24, "3 For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear." 2 Timothy 4: 3 and Fake News, "4 They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths." 2 Timothy 4: 4. Satan loves to use this one. Bombardment of fearful events have made many hearts cold, fearful and unrestful.

We are here, in the 21st century, to love GOD above all else. To love GOD is to spend time with HIM, and to spend time with HIM is to love HIM all the more.

Background:

This is the first and greatest commandment in all antiquity, older than the 10 commandments. This was one of the commandments of HIS universe. It was binding upon the angels before the creation of Adam. It was approximately 1446 B.C. when GOD last spoke like this in the garden of Eden, when there was no necessity for any other commandment. This was the only commandment that was issued there to Adam and Eve.

It's the first commandment again, not only for antiquity, but for all dignity. This command which deals with GOD, The Almighty, must ever take precedence over every other commandment. Other commandments deal with man toward man, but this is command deals with man and his Creator! Other commandments are ceremonial, but this one is the King of Commandments! It is the emperor of the law. It must take precedence over every other princely command! Why? Because Jesus said so!!

It is the first commandment for its justice. It comes to us with divine authority! Man's law may and can be broken, and one may fear the penalty for doing so, but if this divine commandment is broken the penalty is too heavy for any soul to endure! It would sink one like a millstone to depths unknown!

Our Saviour said this commandment was the greatest commandment. It is the greatest because in it are contained all the bowels of the others. Revering the Sabbath, not worshipping idols, not taking the name of GOD in vain, and loving your neighbour as yourself, are all contained in the sum and substance of the Torah. They are all based on focused love for GOD!

It is a commandment because of its comprehensiveness, for the intense demand it places on you and me! We must love GOD with all our mind, all our soul, all our heart and all our strength! Not with just lots of it, but with ALL of it! GOD demands it all! Who should keep such a commandment? There is no person or power in all of humanity exempt from its sway! No-one is exempt for it is great in its condemning power. It has an edge like a sword! This commandment is not an option! It is not a theory to be discussed. It is not some saying to be analyzed by rabbis and holy men. It applies to all: to every one of every age, in all the ages! "Love The LORD" must be our thirst! It guides us as to what we should love and the internal qualities one needs to do it with all of our being!!

Let's review the Gospels for a minute. The Holy Spirit's genius is so evident because four Gospels were written, not to repeat everything, but rather were written for four different people groups.

St. Matthew's Gospel was written for the Jewish people. This is the gospel of the past, which sees in Christianity as the fulfillment of Judaism. It is the gospel of the discourses (the sayings) of the Christ and represents Jesus as the true Messiah of the Jewish people. This gospel records Jesus calling them to "Come to Me."

St. Mark's gospel is the gospel for the Romans. It is the gospel for the present, the gospel of the incident. This gospel represents Christ as the Son of GOD and the LORD of the world!! This is the record of Christ's plea for them to "Love ME."

St. Luke's Gospel is the gospel for the Greeks. It is the gospel of the future. It tells the gospel of Christianity, the universality of GOD's grace in the gospel, the historic gospel, and the gospel of Jesus as the great physician and the Saviour of mankind. This is the only gospel containing the story of the prodigal and demonstrating the far-reaching power of GOD's grace.

St. John's Gospel is preeminently the gospel for the church. It is the gospel of eternity, the true spiritual gospel. It is the gospel of Christ as the Eternal Son and the Incarnate Word. It is a gospel which flies in the face of the Gnostics who believed they each were the truth. It defines the truth as Christ! Jesus Christ is the Eternal Truth!!!

Hope stands at the heart of our text this morning. "28 One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" 29 "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." Mark 12: 28 - 31 (NIV)

There is hope that the weakest characters in this drama of humanity and continue to stand up to seemingly insurmountable odds and overwhelming evil, because we can love GOD above the odds.

There is hope that amidst the realities of alienation, marginalization, and despair, there is a GOD who cares! and HE desires that we should love HIM!

Within this text there springs the great redemptive hope that you and I can be the repository of Divine Love.

The Book 1: It's the Truth!

It is the Summa Cum Laude of all thought!

Why? The book of Deuteronomy was given to the Jewish Nation through Moses. This struggling nomadic people with their 12 tribes, scrounging around in the hot winds of the desert plains, were one day given this incredible truth! 4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." Deuteronomy 6: 4 & 5 (NIV). The declaration rang out of the silence and Israel was the light to the nations because The Living GOD chose to speak to them.

The pagan, heathen nations heard nothing but the internal throbbing of an ego-maniacal, self-serving, power-hungry government. Leading a fear inducing kind of worship, these foreign nations practiced sacrifices to idols. They would put their infants in fires as sacrifices to appease their gods, Marduk, Beelzebul and Molek. "I myself will set my face against him and will cut him off from his people; for by sacrificing his children to Molek, he has defiled my sanctuary and profaned my holy name. " Leviticus 20: 3. These were horrible, barbaric, heart-breaking practices of sacrificing children made "to be passed through the fire".

But in the midst of the Jewish people Jehovah Shammah, The LORD Who is There, shares this fantastic thought. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." Deuteronomy 6: 5 (NIV).

Then, some 1,478 later, guess what? With these Jewish leaders still in their midst, right in front of them, stands the Jehovah Shammah, who calls to them again, "4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." Deuteronomy 6: 4 & 5 (NIV). This is absolutely stunning! This astonishing, eloquent, thrilling statement breaks forth out of silence again when Israel is surrounded by false gods and all the false philosophies the world could produce, and here HE is in the very flesh saying it again, orally! Oh, what monumental and momentous truth that teemed out of heavens corridors once again!

This transcends all human ingenuity. This evokes a peerless, towering, unparalleled, unrivalled transforming thought for the value of human life. This does not allow one to troll around on the earth trifling with philosophies with vain practices. This is the eternal unvarnished truth from the Most Holy ONE Himself!!

The Book 2: Jesus Calls It Great!

This is so beautiful! This is grrrrrrrrreat, better than eating Frosted Flakes every morning!! This is great because Jesus says it is great!!

Going to Africa to build an orphanage, that's good. Rewriting manifestos for mission work, that's good. Selling everything you have and giving the money to the poor, that's good, but it's not great.

But what is great is loving GOD with everything you've got! Now that's truly great!! The rest is good, but without the motivation of the love of GOD, that's all it is, just good. Loving GOD is great!!!

It's great because GOD puts HIS stamp of approval on it!! That is what is truly great!!

Make this the year you go from good to GREAT! Why scrape by on table scraps while GOD invites you to something so celebrated, so immense, so titanic, so distinguished, so eminent, so lofty, so noble, so outstanding, so regal that Jesus, the True, Only Begotten Son of The Father, full of grace and truth, calls it great!!

Do you believe this today? Will you do this today? Loving GOD with all you've got is what Jesus calls great! Are you ready to step out in greatness today?

Many people today are living as if GOD does not exist. They are hiding from GOD. This is a problem that has plagued mankind over the centuries. In Revelation 2: 4 GOD addresses this issue. "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first." This means that you, who have tasted salvation, don't want to lose that zeal and excitement that you felt when you first gave your heart to GOD! I never want to lose that fervor that I felt on that first day when Christ rescued me! I never want to lose that first love!!!

""Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem: "This is what the Lord says: "I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown."" Jeremiah 2: 2

If you have lost your first love, if you have let your ardor for the LORD cool, don't just sit there and feel guilty about it! Don't just wistfully waste your time with good intentions! Go to your Saviour now! HE is waiting! HE is calling to you! HE wants you to return and cry out to HIM for mercy! HE is calling, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." Mark 12: 30 (NIV). HE is waiting to restore you!!

What Jesus said here in response to that esteemed lawyer is not a prestigious symbol of Christianity. It is not a mere vestige of the past, reminding us of the great commandment as if it should still reside at Mount Sinai.

Today it is easier to be identified as an agnostic than a Believer. Today unbelief is self-explanatory whereas belief is challenged, denounced, and accosted. When you stand up and defend your faith, you immediately become a target!

The problem today is silent apostasy! There exists a darkness today as people live as though GOD does not exist. They live as though they don't care that HE is ignored and replaced! There is a withering of faith in North America and across Europe. The Schisms are affecting every denomination across the globe. There is the recklessness of saying farewell to GOD as did Charles Templeton.

"In western Europe," says Rev. David Cornick, General Secretary of the United Reformed Church in Britain, "we are just hanging on by our fingernails."

Others have called faith in GOD a "spiritual inclination" versus anything serious and demanding.

Gracie Davie, a sociologist at the University of Exeter says, "If you ask the average European the basic credo or statements of the Christian Church, most don't know what or who they are or were."

Cardinal Dionigi Tettamanzi, the Archbishop of Milan (2002-2017), said at a news conference, "The parishes are telling me that there are children who don't know how to make the sign of the cross." He went on to say, "At the elementary schools they don't know who Jesus is."

In the 1960's Tozer said, "Self is the opaque veil that hides the face of GOD from us." That was the beginning of "The Me Generation". Today we are called "the Selfie Generation"!

I asked my friend, Leo, about the state of the church in Germany, and do you know what he told me? "They are fine. As long as you give them beer and sausage the place is packed!" Is that what it has come to? Just give them beer and sausage! Is that what Jesus said?

NO! Jesus said, "Love The LORD, your GOD!"

The Took: GOD is inviting us to love HIM!

Is HE yours today? Is HE? Is Jesus yours by faith? You can know HIM! You can love HIM!

I like John Wesley, but I don't love him. I like St. Augustine, but I don't love him. I like many of the fathers of the church, but I don't love them.

I went to a funeral recently. There were 300 people there. As I spoke to them, it was very apparent that although most of them professed faith in GOD, 99% of them did not know Jesus!

You see, I don't like GOD, I love HIM!! People need to meet HIM, know HIM and love HIM!!!

We need to clarify the love verses like, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." Deuteronomy 6: 5 (NIV). This is the fidelity of the grand, eternal truth. This is faithfulness in relationship with a loving GOD by loving HIM with your whole being! People do not realize GOD put loving HIM as an ongoing binding demand!

This is the axis of the greatest heartbeat of the world, the point around which the vitality of our soul revolves. This is the conversion of the greatest exchange in man's destiny, love of the world or love for GOD! What is your choice? What are you going to love? Who will you love?

If you only like GOD, you haven't gone far enough! Give HIM your heart! Give HIM your whole life and live this year as you have never lived before, with HIM! "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." Deuteronomy 6: 5 (NIV). Amen!!

Post Notes:

The Shema: *"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."* **Deuteronomy 6: 4-9** *New Revised Standard Version*

Torah: or towrah in the Hebrew, means a special law or codes of law, directions or instructions, both human and divine (body of prophetic teaching, body of legal directives, body of priestly direction or instruction), custom or manner, and even the Deuteronomic or Mosaic law. The word for law can, and contextually should be, understood as being inclusive of commandments, judgments, and statutes given to us by the Creator through Moses. However, the context will also dictate when the word for "law" is referring to commands or direction from men and not God. Both uses of the word are correct in different areas of the Bible.