

# THE FIRST AND GREAT COMMANDMENT

## A Sermon

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“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment.”—Mark 12:30.

Our Saviour said, “This is the first and great commandment.” It is “*the first*” commandment—the first for *antiquity*, for this is older than even the ten commandments of the written law. Before God said, “Thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not steal,” this law was one of the commands of his universe; for this was binding upon the angels when man was not created. It was not necessary for God to say to the angels, “Thou shalt do no murder, thou shalt not steal;” for such things to them were very probably impossible; but he did doubtless say to them, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart;” and when first Gabriel sprang out of his native nothingness at the fiat of God, this command was binding on him. This is “the first commandment,” then, for antiquity. It was binding upon Adam in the garden; even before the creation of Eve, his wife, God had commanded this; before there was a necessity for any other command this was written upon the very tablets of his heart—“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God.”

It is “the first commandment,” again, not only for antiquity, but for *dignity*. This command, which deals with God the Almighty must ever take precedence of every other. Other commandments deal with man and man, but *this* with man and his Creator. Other commands of a ceremonial kind when disobeyed, may involve but slight consequences upon the person who may happen to offend; but this disobeyed provokes the wrath of God, and brings his ire at once upon the sinner’s head. He that stealeth committeth a gross offence, inasmuch as he hath also violated this command; but if it were possible for us to separate the two, and to suppose an offence of one command without an offence of this, then we must put the violation of this commandment in the first rank of offences. This is the king of commandments; this is the emperor of the law; it must take precedence of all those princely commands that God afterwards gave to men.

Again, it is “the first commandment,” for its *justice*. If men cannot see the justice of that law which says, “Love thy neighbour,” if there be some difficulty to understand how I can be bound to love the man that hurts and injures me, there can be no difficulty here. “Thou shalt love thy God” comes to us with so much divine authority, and is so ratified by the dictates of nature and our own conscience, that verily, this command must take the first place for the justice of its demand. It is “the first” of commandments. Whichever law thou dost break, take care to keep this. If thou breakest the commandments of the ceremonial law, if thou dost violate the ritual of thy church, thine offence might be propitiated by the priest, but who can escape when this is his offence? This mandate standeth fast. Man’s law thou mayest break, and bear the penalty; but if thou breakest this the penalty is too heavy for thy soul to endure; it will sink thee, man, it will sink thee like a millstone lower than the lowest hell. Take heed of this command above every other, to tremble at it and obey it, for it is “the first commandment”

But the Saviour said it was a “*great* commandment,” and so also it is. It is “great,” for it containeth in its bowels every other. When God said, “Remember to keep holy the Sabbath-day;” when he said, “Thou shalt not bow down unto the idols nor worship them;”—when he said, “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain;” he did but instance particulars which are all

contained in this general mandate. This is the sum and substance of the law; and indeed even the second commandment lies within the folds of the first. "Thou shalt love thy neighbour," is actually to be found within the centre of this command, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God;" for the loving of God would necessarily produce the loving of our neighbour.

It is a great command, then, for its *comprehensiveness*, and it is a great command for the immense demand which it makes upon us. It demands all our mind, all our soul, all our heart, and all our strength. Who is he that can keep it, when there is no power of manhood which is exempt from its sway? And to him that violateth this law it shall be proven that it is a great command in the greatness of its condemning power, for it shall be like a great sword having two edges, wherewith God shall slay him. It shall be like a great thunder-bolt from God, wherewith he shall cast down and utterly destroy the man that goeth on in his wilful breaking thereof. Hear ye, then, O Gentiles, and O house of Israel, hear ye, then, this day, this first and great commandment: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength."

I shall divide my discourse thus—first, *What saith this commandment unto us?* secondly, *What say we unto it?*

I. And in discussing the first point, what saith this commandment unto us? we shall divide it thus. Here is, first, the duty—"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God;" here is, secondly, the measure of the duty—"Thou shalt love him with all thy heart, mind, soul, strength;" here is, thirdly, the ground of the claim, enforcing the duty—because he is "thy God." God demandeth us to obey, simply upon the ground that he is our God.

1. To begin, then. This command *demandeth a duty*. That duty is, that we should love God. How many men do break this? One class of men do break it wilfully and grievously; for they *hate* God. There is the infidel, who gnashes his teeth against the Almighty; the atheist, who spits the venom of his blasphemy against the person of his Maker. You will find those who rail at the very being of a God, though in their consciences they know there is a God, yet with their lips will blasphemously deny his existence. These men say there is no God, because they wish there were none. The wish is father to the thought; and the thought demands great grossness of heart, and grievous hardness of spirit before they dare to express it in words; and even when they express it in words, it needeth much practice ere they can do it with a bold, unblushing countenance. Now, this command beareth hard on all them that hate, that despise, that blaspheme, that malign God, or that deny his being, or impugn his character. O sinner! God says thou shalt love him with all thy heart; and inasmuch as thou hatest him, thou standest this day condemned to the sentence of the law.

Another class of men know there is a God, but they *neglect* him; they go through the world with indifference, "caring for none of these things." "Well," they say, "it does not signify to me whether there is a God or not." They have no particular care about him; they do not pay one half so much respect to his commands as they would to the proclamation of the Queen. They are very willing to reverence all powers that be, but he who ordained them is to be passed by and to be forgotten. They would not be bold enough and honest enough to come straight out, and despise God, and join the ranks of his open enemies, but they forget God; he is not in all their thoughts. They rise in the morning without a prayer, they rest at night without bending the knee, they go through the week's business, and they never acknowledge a God. Sometimes they talk about good luck and chance, strange deities of their own brain; but God, the over-ruling God of Providence, they never talk of, though sometimes they may mention his name in flippancy, and so increase their transgressions against him. O ye despisers and neglecters of God! this command speaks to you—"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul."

But I hear one of these gentlemen reply, "Well, sir, I make no pretensions to religion, but still I believe I am quite as good as those that do; I am quite as upright, quite as moral and benevolent.

True, I do not often darken the door of a church or chapel, I do not think it necessary, but I am a right good sort; there are many, many hypocrites in the church, and therefore I shall not think of being religious.” Now, my dear friend, allow me just to say one word—what business is that of yours? Religion is a personal matter between you and your Maker. Your Maker says—“Thou shalt love me with all thine heart:” it is of no use for you to point your finger across the street, and point at a minister whose life is inconsistent, or at a deacon who is unholy, or to a member of the church who does not live up to his profession. You have just nothing to do with that. When your Maker speaks to you, he appeals to you personally; and if you should tell him, “My Lord, I will not love thee, because there are hypocrites,” would not your own conscience convince you of the absurdity of your reasoning? Ought not your better judgment to whisper “Inasmuch, then, as so many are hypocrites, take heed that thou art not; and if there be so many pretenders who injure the Lord’s cause by their lying pretensions, so much the more reason why thou shouldst have the real thing, and help to make the church sound and honest.” But no; the merchants of our cities, the tradesmen of our streets, our artisans and our workmen, the great mass of them, live in total forgetfulness of God. I do not believe that the heart of England is infidel. I do not believe that there is any vast extent of deism or atheism throughout England: the great fault of our time is the fault of indifference; people do not care whether the thing is right or not. What is it to them? They never take the trouble to search between the different professors of religion to see where the truth lies; they do not think to pay their reverence to God with all their hearts. Oh, no; they forget what God demands, and so rob him of his due. To you, to you, great masses of the population, this law doth speak with iron tongue—“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.”

There are a class of men who are a great deal nobler than the herd of simpletons who allow the sublimities of the Godhead to be concealed by their carking care for mere sensual good. There are some who do not forget that there is a God; no, they are astronomers, and they turn their eyes to heaven, and they view the stars, and they marvel at the majesty of the Creator. Or they dig into the bowels of the earth, and they are astonished at the magnificence of God’s works of yore. Or they examine the animal, and marvel at the wisdom of God in the construction of its anatomy. They, whenever they think of God, think of him with the deepest awe, with the profoundest reverence. You never hear them curse or swear: you will find that their souls are possessed of a deep awe of the great Creator. But ah! my friends, this is not enough: this is not obedience to the command. God does not say thou shalt wonder at him, thou shalt have awe of him. He asks more than that; he says “Thou shalt love me!” Oh! thou that seest the orbs of heaven floating in the far expanse, it is something to lift thine eye to heaven, and say—

“These are thy glorious works, Parent of good,  
 Almighty, thine this universal frame.  
 Thus wond’rous fair; thyself how wond’rous then!  
 Unspeakable, who sit’st above these Heavens  
 To us invisible, or dimly seen  
 In these thy lowest works; yet these declare  
 Thy goodness beyond thought, and pow’r divine.”

’Tis something thus to adore the great Creator, but ’tis not all he asks. Oh! if thou couldst add to this—“He that made these orbs, that leadeth them out by their hosts, is my Father, and my heart beats with affection towards him.” Then wouldst thou be obedient, but not till then. God asks not thine admiration, but thine affection. “Thou shalt *love* the Lord thy God with all thine heart.”

There are others, too, who delight to spend time in contemplation. They believe in Jesus, in the Father, in the Spirit; they believe that there is but one God, and that these three are one. It is their

delight to turn over the pages of revelation, as well as the pages of history. They contemplate God; he is to them a matter of curious study; they like to meditate upon him; the doctrines of his Word they could hear all day long. And they are very sound in the faith, extremely orthodox and very knowing, they can fight about doctrines, they can dispute about the things of God with all their hearts; but alas! their religion is like a dead fish, cold and stiff, and when you take it into your hand, you say there is no life in it; their souls were never stirred with it; their hearts were never thrown into it. They can contemplate, but they cannot love; they can meditate, but they cannot commune; they can think of God, but they can never throw up their souls to him, and clasp him in the arms of their affections. Ah, to you, cold-blooded thinkers—to you, this text speaks. Oh! thou that canst contemplate, but cannot love,—“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart.”

Another man starts up, and he says, “Well this command does not bear on me; I attend my place of worship twice every Sunday; I have family prayer. I am very careful not to get up of a morning without saying a form of prayer; I sometimes read my Bible; I subscribe to many charities.” Ah! my friend, and you may do all that, without loving God. Why, some of you go to your churches and chapels as if you were going to be horsewhipped. It is a dull and dreary thing to you. You dare not break the Sabbath, but you would if you could. You know very well that if it were not for a mere matter of fashion and custom you would sooner by half be anywhere else than in God’s house. And as for prayer, why it is no delight to you; you do it because you think you ought to do it. Some indefinable sense of duty rests upon you; but you have no delight in it. You talk of God with great propriety, but you never talk of him with love. Your heart never bounds at the mention of his name; your eyes never glisten at the thought of his attributes; your soul never leapeth when you meditate on his works, for your heart is all untouched, and while you are honouring God with your lips, your heart is far from him, and you are still disobedient to this commandment, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God.”

And now, my hearers, do you understand this commandment? Do I not see many of you seeking to look for loop-holes through which to escape? Do I not think I see some of you striving to make a breach in this divine wall which girds us all. You say, “I never do anything against God.” Nay, my friend, that is not it: it is not what thou dost not do—it is this, “Dost thou *love* him?” “Well, sir, but I never violate any of the proprieties of religion.” No, that is not it; the command is, “Thou shalt *love* him.” “Well, sir, but I do a great deal for God; I teach in a Sunday school, and so on.” Ah! I know; but dost thou *love* him? It is the heart he wants, and he will not be content without it. “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God.” That is the law, and though no man can keep it since Adam’s fall, yet the law is as much binding upon every son of Adam this day, as when God first of all pronounced it. “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God.”

2. That brings us to the second point—*the measure of this law*. How much am I to love God? Where shall I fix the point? I am to love my neighbour as I love myself. Am I to love my God more than that? Yes, certainly. The measure is even greater. We are not bound to love ourselves with all our mind, and soul, and strength, and therefore we are not bound to love our neighbour so. The measure is a greater one. We are bound to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

And, we deduce from that, first, that we are to love God *supremely*. Thou art to love thy wife, O husband. Thou canst not love her too much except in one case, if thou shouldst love her before God, and prefer her pleasure to the pleasure of the Most High. Then wouldst thou be an idolater. Child! thou art to love thy parents; thou canst not love him too much who begat thee, nor her too much who brought thee forth; but remember, there is one law that doth over-ride that. Thou art to love thy God more than thy father or thy mother. He demands thy first and thy highest affection: thou art to love him with all thy heart.” We are allowed to love our relatives: we are taught to do so. He that doth not love his own family is worse than a heathen man and a publican. But we are not to love the dearest object of our hearts so much as we love God. Ye may erect little thrones for those whom ye

rightly love; but God's throne must be a glorious high throne; you may set them upon the steps, but God must sit on the very seat itself. He is to be enthroned, the royal One within your heart, the king of your affections. Say, say hearer, hast thou kept this commandment? I know I have not; I must plead guilty before God; I must cast myself before him, and acknowledge my transgression. But nevertheless, there standeth the commandment—"Thou shalt love God with all thy heart"—that is, thou shalt love him *supremely*.

Note, again, that from the text we may deduce that a man is bound to love God *heartily*: that is plain enough, for it says, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart." Yes, there is to be in our love to God a heartiness. We are to throw our whole selves into the love that we give to him. Not the kind of love that some people give to their fellows, when they say, "Be ye warmed and filled," and nothing more. No: our heart is to have its whole being absorbed into God, so that God is the hearty object of its pursuit and its most mighty love. See how the word "all" is repeated again and again. The whole going forth of the being, the whole stirring up of the soul, is to be for God, and for God only. "With *all* thy heart."

Again: as we are to love God heartily, we are to love him with *all our souls*. Then we are to love him with all our life; for that is the meaning of it. If we are called to die for God, we are to prefer God before our own life. We shall never reach the fulness of this commandment, till we get as far as the martyrs, who rather than disobey God would be cast into the furnace, or devoured by wild beasts. We must be ready to give up house, home, liberty, friends, comfort, joy, and life, at the command of God, or else we have not carried out this commandment, "Thou shalt love him with all thy heart and with all thy life."

And, next we are to love God with all our *mind*. That is, the intellect is to love God. Now, many men believe in the existence of a God, but they do not love that belief. They know there is a God, but they greatly wish there were none. Some of you today would be very pleased, ye would set the bells a-ringing, if ye believed there were no God. Why, if there were no God, then you might live just as you liked; if there were no God, then you might run riot and have no fear of future consequences. It would be to you the greatest joy that could be, if you heard that the eternal God had ceased to be. But the Christian never wishes any such a thing as that. The thought that there is a God is the sunshine of his existence. His intellect bows before the Most High; not like a slave who bends his body because he must, but like the angel who prostrates himself because he loves to adore his Maker. His intellect is as fond of God as his imagination. "Oh!" he saith, "My God, I bless thee that thou art; for thou art my highest treasure, my richest and my rarest delight. I love thee with all my intellect; I have neither thought, nor judgment, nor conviction, nor reason, which I do not lay at thy feet, and consecrate to thine honour."

And, once again, this love to God is to be characterised by *activity*; for we are to love Him with all our heart, heartily—with all our soul, that is, to the laying down of our life—with all our mind, that is mentally; and we are to love him with all our *strength*, that is, *actively*. I am to throw my whole soul into the worship and adoration of God. I am not to keep back a single hour, or a single farthing of my wealth, or a single talent that I have, or a single atom of strength, bodily or mental, from the worship of God. I am to love him with all my strength.

Now, what man ever kept this commandment? Surely, none; and no man ever can keep it. Hence, then, the necessity of a Saviour. Oh! that we might by this commandment be smitten to the earth, that our self-righteousness may be broken in pieces by this great hammer of "the first and great commandment!" But oh! my brethren, how may we wish that we could keep it! for, could we keep this command intact, unbroken, it would be a heaven below. The happiest of creatures are those that are the most holy, and that unreservedly love God.

3. And now, very briefly, I have just to state *God's claim* upon which he bases this commandment. "Thou shalt love him with all thy heart, soul, mind, strength" Why? First, because he is the Lord—that is, Jehovah; and secondly because he is thy God.

Man, the creature of a day, thou oughtest to love Jehovah *for what he is*. Behold, him whom thou canst not behold! Lift up thine eyes to the seventh heaven; see where in dreadful majesty, the brightness of his skirts makes the angels veil their faces, lest the light, too strong for even them, should smite them with eternal blindness. See ye him, who stretched the heavens like a tent to dwell in, and then did weave into their tapestry, with golden needle, stars that glitter in the darkness. Mark ye him who spread the earth, and created man upon it. And hear ye what he is. He is all-sufficient, eternal, self-existent, unchangeable, omnipotent, omniscient! Wilt thou not reverence him? He is good, he is loving, he is kind, he is gracious. See the bounties of his providence; behold the plenitude of his grace! Wilt thou not love Jehovah, because he is Jehovah?

But thou art most of all bound to love him *because he is thy God*. He is thy God *by creation*. He made thee; thou didst not make thyself. God, the Almighty, though he might use instruments, was nevertheless the sole creator of man. Though he is pleased to bring us into the world by the agency of our progenitors, yet is he as much our Creator as he was the Creator of Adam, when he formed him of clay and made him man. Look at this marvellous body of thine, see how God hath put the bones together, so as to be of the greatest service and use to thee. See how he hath arranged thy nerves and blood vessels; mark the marvellous machinery which he has employed to keep thee in life! O thing of an hour! wilt thou not love him that made thee? Is it possible that thou canst think of him who formed thee in his hand, and moulded thee by his will, and yet wilt thou not love him who hath fashioned thee?

Again, consider, he is *thy God*, for *he preserves thee*. Thy table is spread, but he spread it for thee. The air that thou dost breathe is a gift of his charity; the clothes that thou hast on thy back are gifts of his love; thy life depends on him. One wish of his infinite will would have brought thee to the grave, and given thy body to the worms; and at this moment, though thou art strong and hearty, thy life is absolutely dependent upon him. Thou mayest die where thou art, instant; thou art out of hell only as the result of his goodness. Thou wouldst be at this hour sweltering in flames unquenchable, had not his sovereign love preserved thee. Traitor though thou mayest be to him, an enemy to his cross and cause, yet he is thy God, so far as this, for he made thee and he keeps thee alive. Surely, thou mayest wonder that he should keep thee alive, when thou refuseth to love him. Man! thou wouldst not keep a horse that did not work for thee. Would you keep a servant in your house who insulted you? Would you spread bread upon his table, and find livery for his back, if instead of doing your will and good pleasure he would be his own master, and would run counter to you? Certainly you would not. And yet here is God feeding you, and you are rebelling against him. Swearer! the lip with which you cursed your Maker is sustained by him; the very lungs that you employ in blasphemy are inspired by him with the breath of life, else you had ceased to be. Oh! strange that you should eat God's bread, and then lift up your heel against him; Oh! marvellous that ye should sit at the table of his providence and be clothed in the livery of his bounty, and yet that you should turn round and spit against high heaven, and lift the puny hand of your rebellion against the God that made you, and that preserves you in being. Oh, if instead of our God we had one like unto ourselves to deal with, my brethren, we should not have patience with our fellow-creatures for an hour. I marvel at God's long-suffering towards men. I see the foul-mouthed blasphemer curse his God. O God! how canst thou endure it? Why dost thou not smite him to the ground? If a gnat should torment me, should I not in one moment crush it? And what is man compared with his Maker? Not one half so great as an emmet compared with man. Oh! my brethren, we may well be astonished that God hath mercy upon us, after all our violations of this high command. But I stand here to-day his servant, and from myself and from you I claim for God, because he is God, because

he is our God and our Creator—I claim the love of all hearts, I claim the obedience of all souls and of all minds, and the consecration of all our strength.

O people of God, I need not speak to you. Ye know that God is your God in a special sense; therefore you ought to love him with a special love.

II. This is what the commandment says to us. I shall be very short indeed upon the second head, which is, what have we to say to it?

What hast thou to say to this command, O man? Have I one here so profoundly brainless as to reply, “I intend to keep it and I believe I can perfectly obey it, and I think I can get to heaven by obedience to it?” Man, thou art either a fool, or else wilfully ignorant; for sure, if thou dost understand this commandment, thou wilt at once hang down thine hands, and say, “Obedience to that is quite impossible; thorough and perfect obedience to that no man can hope to reach to! Some of you think you will go to heaven by your good works, do you? This is the first stone that you are to step upon—I am sure it is too high for your reach. You might as well try to climb to heaven by the mountains of earth, and take the Himalayas to be your first step; for surely when you had stepped from the ground to the summit of Chimborazo you might even then despair of ever stepping to the height of this great commandment; for to obey this must ever be an impossibility. But remember, you cannot be saved by your works, if you cannot obey this entirely, perfectly, constantly, for ever.

“Well,” says one, “I dare say if I try and obey it as well as I can, that will do.” No, sir, it will not. God demands that you perfectly obey this, and if you do not perfectly obey it he will condemn you. “Oh!” cries one, “who then can be saved?” Ah! that is the point to which I wish to bring you. Who then can be saved by this law? Why, no one in the world. Salvation by the works of the law is proved to be a clean impossibility. None of you, therefore will say you will try to obey it, and so hope to be saved. I hear the best Christian in the world groan out his thoughts—“O God,” saith he, “I am guilty; and shouldst thou cast me into hell I dare not say otherwise. I have broken this command from my youth up, even since my conversion; I have violated it every day; I know that if thou shouldst lay justice to the line, and righteousness to the plummet, I must be swept away for ever. Lord, I renounce my trust in the law; for by it I know I can never see thy face and be accepted.” But hark! I hear the Christian say another thing. “Oh!” saith he to the commandment, “Commandment I cannot keep thee, but my Saviour kept thee, and what my Saviour did, he did for all them that believe; and now, O law, what Jesus did is mine. Hast thou any question to bring against me? Thou demandest that I should keep this commandment wholly: lo, my Saviour kept it wholly for me, and he is my substitute; what I cannot do myself my Saviour has done for me; thou canst not reject the work of the substitute, for God accepted it in the day when he raised him from the dead. O law! shut thy mouth for ever; thou canst never condemn me; though I break thee a thousand times, I put my simple trust in Jesus, and in Jesus only; his righteousness is mine, and with it I pay the debt and satisfy thy hungry mouth.”

“Oh!” cries one, “I wish I could say that I could thus escape the wrath of the law! Oh that I knew that Christ did keep the law for me!” Stop, then, and I will tell you. Do you feel to-day that you are guilty, lost, and ruined? Do you with tears in your eyes confess that none but Jesus can do you good? Are you willing to give up all trusts, and cast yourself alone on him who died upon the cross? Can you look to Calvary, and see the bleeding sufferer, all crimson with streams of gore? Can you say

“A guilty, weak, and helpless worm,  
Into thine arms I fall;  
Jesus, be thou my righteousness,  
My Saviour and my all!”

Canst say that? Then he kept the law for you, and the law cannot condemn whom Christ has absolved. If Law comes to you and says, "I will damn you because you did not keep the law," tell him that he dares not touch a hair of your head, for though you did not keep it, Christ kept it for you, and Christ's righteousness is yours; tell him there is the money, and though you did not coin it Christ did; and tell him, when you have paid him all he asks for, he dares not touch you; you must be free, for Christ has satisfied the law.

And after that—and here I conclude—O child of God I know what thou wilt say; after thou hast seen the law satisfied by Jesus thou wilt fall on thy knees and say, "Lord, I thank thee that this law cannot condemn me, for I believe in Jesus. But now, Lord, help me from this time forth for ever to keep it. Lord, give me a new heart, for this old heart never will love thee! Lord, give me a new life, for this old life is too vile. Lord, give me a new understanding; wash my mind with the clean water of the Spirit; come and dwell in my judgment, my memory, my thought; and then give me the new strength of thy Spirit, and then will I love thee with all my new heart, with all my new life, with all my renewed mind, and with all my spiritual strength, from this time forth, even for evermore."

May the Lord convince you of sin, by the energy of his divine Spirit, and bless this simple sermon; for Jesus' sake! Amen.