

The First and Greatest Commandment

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on October 30, 1994, the 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time. Scripture Lessons: Ruth 1:1-18; Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:11-14; Mark 12:28-34.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

The Jewish lawyer listened intently to a discussion between Jesus and some religious leaders. Jesus impressed him with the way he fielded their tricky questions. There was a depth to his teaching and a shrewdness to the way he avoided traps set for him. The lawyer interrupted to ask Jesus his own question. "Which commandment is first of all?" And Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is the only Lord; love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.'"

In recent years the church has tended to lose sight of that first commandment and has put all its emphasis on the second - "Love your neighbor as yourself." Some branches of the church have become almost humanistic in their disregard of God and theology and the means of grace, insisting that the *only* relevant form of Christianity is one that's involved in political action and community service.

Love for neighbor *is* important. Next to love for God it's the *most* important thing in our Christian faith. But it's not *the* most important thing. In fact, I think that a look at history will show that unless our love for neighbor grows out of our love for God it won't be long before our love for neighbor will go the way of all flesh and we'll be left with nothing but love for self.

We need to put first things first. The first and greatest commandment is a whole-hearted love for God. Let's take a look at the words that Jesus used to describe how we're to love God. In Hebrew thought forms the heart involved, not only the emotions, but the mind and will as well. So when Jesus tells us that we're to love God with all our

heart, or wholeheartedly, it *includes* loving God with our mind, our emotions, and will.

First, God wants us to love Him with our minds. The 18th century founder of Methodism, John Wesley, once received a letter from a pious person who declared, "The Lord has directed me to write you that, while you know Greek and Hebrew, he can do without your learning." Wesley replied, "Your letter received, and I may say in reply that your letter was superfluous, as I already *know* that the Lord could do without my learning. I wish to say that, while the Lord *does not* direct me to tell you, yet I feel impelled to tell you on my own responsibility, that the Lord does not need your ignorance either."

Some Christians disparage the mind. They feel that if you think too much you're liable to lose your faith. But the church has always captured some of the brightest minds for Christ. Think of C.S. Lewis! What an intellect he had. He loved God with all his mind. He used his mind to explain the Christian faith to millions of men and women through his books and lectures.

We don't have to be scholars like Lewis to love God with our minds. The first duty of all of us is to love God with our minds. Use your mind to discuss the sermon with someone! I'm actually complimented when somebody comes up to me and says, "I didn't agree with your sermon and here's why." That indicates to me that your thinking. Buy a simple commentary and read it along with the Bible! Read C.S. Lewis's, *Mere Christianity!* Attend Sunday School classes! Ask questions about the world, science, ethics, and politics as they relate to Christian faith! Young people, think about the lyrics to the music you love to listen to! Relate those words to your Christian faith! Those of you of voting age - use your mind when you vote! Vote intelligently! Examine and discuss

position statements
the beliefs and voting records of the various candidates!

Our God is a God of truth. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life." Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13 that "Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth." We don't need to fear the truth. In a world that revels in relativism we believe that there really is true truth. We believe that we can know the truth. We believe that some beliefs about God are false and some are true and that it's our Christian duty to seek to know the difference between truth and falsehood. A whole-hearted love for God involves our minds.

Secondly, God wants us to love Him with our *emotions*. In Biblical thinking the *soul*, not the heart, is the seat of the emotions. A whole-hearted love for God includes our feelings. Imagine a young man on his knees before a beautiful young woman. "Will you marry me?" he begs. She responds, "Why?" He calmly replies, "A computer matched us perfectly." God is not an intellectual idea. God is a living God. God is the loving God. God desires our love. Deep love for someone makes us laugh and cry. Love raises our blood pressure and throws our deepest feelings into turmoil. True love is emotional. True love feels deeply. True love issues in poetry and song.

God want us to love him with our emotions. ~~Of course, we don't manufacture the emotion of love.~~ It's a response to the One who's altogether lovely. Leonard Griffith of St. Paul's Anglican Church in Toronto tells the story of a Roman Catholic priest who told his congregation that he was going to preach about the love of God. Stepping down from the pulpit, he took a lighted candle from the altar and walked over to the great crucifix. Without saying a word he held the candle so that all could see the nail-pierced feet of the dying Savior. Then he lifted it to the wounded side without saying a word. Moments

later he held the candle to the pinioned hands. Finally he let the flame fall on the agonized face and head crowned with thorns. The congregation wept. Their emotions had been stirred as God intends his love to stir our emotions.

Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

A whole hearted love for God moves our feelings.

Thirdly, God desires for us to love him with our *strength*. That means we love God with the strength of our wills and put our love to work. Here's where a whole-hearted love for God begins to overlap with love for neighbor. Jesus said that when we show love to one of the least of his brothers or sisters we show love to him. When we receive a child in his name we actually receive him. When we love others in concrete ways we're loving God with our strength.

Loving God with all our strength works out in different ways with different people. You may visit shut-ins, run errands, volunteer at Ware Presbyterian village, help a refugee, or work for peace. You may spend your vacation using your vocational skill at some mission station around the world. A friend of mine is a nurse. She has gone to Honduras for two weeks, during her vacation, using her nursing skills to minister to the sick and poor. She's loving God with her strength. A whole-hearted love for God includes our strength and will.

Jesus said that the first and greatest commandment is to love God wholeheartedly. That includes loving God with our mind, our feelings, our will. But so often we love God with only a part of ourselves. That's like flying in a three engine jet with only one engine working.

Ian Pitt-Watson, a Scotsman who taught a class at Princeton Seminary, once told

us a story of a Scottish couple who were flying to the states for the first time. They were traveling on a three engine DC-10. When they were about half way over the Atlantic the voice of the pilot came over the loud speaker. "Ladies and gentleman, I regret to have to inform you that one of our three engines is no longer functioning. I want to assure you that this poses no threat to our safety. The DC-10 is designed to fly safely with only two engines. I do regret, however, that we'll be in the air longer than planned and will be arriving at Kennedy airport in New York one hour late."

About 20 minutes later the voice of the pilot again came over the loud speaker. "There's no cause for alarm, however, I want you to know that a second engine is no longer functioning. I want to assure you that this plane is perfectly capable of flying with only one engine. Since we must fly at a slower rate of speed, however, we will be in the air an additional 4 hours.

The Scotsman turned to his wife and said with some irritation in his voice, "I do hope that third engine doesn't go out on us. We'll be up here all night if it does."

The point of this is that some of us are trying to love God with only one engine. Sometimes we Presbyterians try to keep our love for God airborne on the engine of the intellect alone. I'm proud of our Presbyterian tradition which emphasizes the intellect. But if my love for God isn't felt deeply and acted out in the way I live, I'll have only a cold, dry, fossilized orthodoxy that will be little comfort to me in life or death.

Or sometimes we try to keep our love for God flying on the one engine of feeling. Our whole religion is one of feeling. We go to church when we feel like it. We pray, but only when we feel like it. We give when we feel like it. We base our beliefs on how they make us feel rather than if they're true. God wants us to love him with the full range of

our emotions: love, fear, anger, sorrow, joy – all our feelings are to be used in the service of God who comes to us in Christ. But feelings aren't enough. Our feelings are so fickle. If we try to love God with our feelings alone we'll crash-land when our feelings fail us. A church simply won't fly long on the one engine of feeling.

Or sometimes we try to keep our love airborne on the engine of the will alone. We run ourselves ragged in feverish religious activities or community involvement. We work hard at overcoming sin and temptation in our lives. We work hard to stamp out evil and injustice in the world. And that's all good. But if that's the only engine that's keeping our love for God soaring, we're led back to the works of the law, to legalism, and self-righteousness.

God wants our love for him to soar on three engines; as individuals and as a church. A whole-hearted love of God involves our mind, our emotions, and our will. The Psalmist said it all when he wrote,

Bless the Lord, O my soul
And all that is within me, bless his holy name.

Put first things first in our lives! Begin today! We all have important decisions to make – about our families, our community, our church. Perhaps you haven't filled out and returned your pledge card yet – How will your pledge express your wholeheartedly love for God who comes to us in the crucified and risen Christ? What a difference it would make in our families, community and in this church if all God's people would love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

Let us pray: Take Thou our minds, dear Lord, we humbly pray; give us the mind of Christ each passing day; Teach us to know the truth that sets us free; Grant us in all our thoughts to honor Thee. Take thou our hearts, O Christ, they are Thine own; Come Thou within our souls and claim Thy throne; Help us to shed abroad Thy deathless love; Use us to make the earth like heaven above. Take Thou our wills, Most High! Hold Thou full sway; Have in our inmost souls Thy perfect way; Guard Thou each sacred hour from selfish ease; Guide Thou our ordered lives as Thou dost please. Take Thou ourselves, O Lord, heart, mind and will; through our surrendered souls Thy plans fulfill. We yield ourselves to Thee – time, talents, all; We hear, and henceforth heed, Thy sovereign call. Amen.