

Loving God

What is the greatest commandment in the Bible?

A) The Pharisees once asked Jesus this same question. Jesus answered with a verse from the Old Testament (OT) book of Deuteronomy: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment” (Matthew 22:37–38, ESV; Deuteronomy 6:5). It means that we should love God with every part of our being and to the greatest of our ability.

B) The Pharisees only asked about the greatest commandment, but Jesus continued by giving them another from the OT book of Leviticus: “And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39, ESV; Leviticus 19:18b). Loving others is closely related to loving God. John tells us, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20–21, ESV).

C) Jesus concluded his answer to the Pharisees with this statement: “On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:40, ESV). The phrase “the Law and the Prophets” refers to the OT, which was the Bible of Jesus’ day. Jesus’ point is that everything God requires of us can be summarized by these two commands.

What does it mean to love God?

A) When you are saved, God sends the Holy Spirit to live in your heart (Romans 5:5). The Spirit enables you to love God and have a relationship with Him (Galatians 4:6). You are then responsible, by God’s grace, for nurturing that love and keeping it strong and vibrant (Revelation 2:4–5). The Bible tells us that those who love God:

- (1) are faithful to Him alone.
- (2) obey Him with gladness.
- (3) desire to please Him.
- (4) seek their happiness in Him.

(5) work to build a closer relationship with Him.

B) Notice that everything in the list is a function of our will. This is because love, although truly a feeling, is also a commitment. Strong, enduring relationships require lots of hard work!

Loving God means being faithful to Him alone

A) When God spoke audibly to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai, the first thing He said was, “I am the LORD your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt, the place of your slavery. You must not have any other god but me” (Exodus 20:2–3, NLT).

B) When we think of other “gods,” we typically think of idols made of wood, stone and precious metals. But gods can also have a more subtle form—money, material possessions, power, relationships, etc. Having another god (idolatry) means allowing anything to take God’s rightful place of supremacy in your life.

C) How does this relate to loving God? Moses told the people of Israel: “Suppose there are prophets among you or those who dream dreams about the future, and they promise you signs or miracles, and the predicted signs or miracles occur. If they then say, ‘Come, let us worship other gods’—gods you have not known before—do not listen to them. The LORD your God is testing you to see if you truly love him with all your heart and soul. Serve only the LORD your God and fear him alone. Obey his commands, listen to his voice, and cling to him” (Deuteronomy 13:1–4, NLT). Loving God means being faithful to Him alone.

D) Being faithful to God involves sacrifice. Moses went on to say, “Suppose someone secretly entices you—even your brother, your son or daughter, your beloved wife, or your closest friend—and says, ‘Let us go worship other gods’...Do not give in or listen. Have no pity, and do not spare or protect them. You must put them to death! Strike the first blow yourself, and then all the people must join in” (Deuteronomy 13:6a, 8–9, NLT). This teaches us how seriously God takes our faithfulness to Him. We must do whatever it takes to maintain our commitment to Him alone.

E) The sacrifices we make to be faithful to God will not go unrewarded. When the apostle Peter told Jesus how much he and the other disciples had given up to follow Him, Jesus said, “Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life” (Matthew 19:29, ESV). This wonderful truth helps us make the tough decisions that are required if we are to be faithful to God alone.

Loving God means obeying Him with gladness

A) Think back for a moment to your life as a sinner. You probably believed that you were “doing your own thing” and “living your own life.” But nothing could be further from the truth—in reality, you were a slave of sin (Romans 6:6). Paul said, “Don't you realize that you become the slave of whatever you choose to obey? You can [either] be a slave to sin, which leads to death, or you can choose to obey God, which leads to righteous living.” (Romans 6:16, NLT).

B) What is the connection between obedience and loving God? Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15, ESV). The apostle John said, “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3, ESV). These passages teach us that love for God expresses itself in obedience to His commands.

C) What is it that God commands? That we should love God and love others. That is all God requires of us—nothing more or less. Now inevitably the question is asked, “How do I love God and love others?” The answer is found by reading God's word. As you study it, you will learn how to live out these two commands. For example, if you love others you will forgive them, be kind to them, pray for them, etc. (Ephesian 4:32; 6:18–19). If you love God you will read His word, spend time in prayer, participate in a local church, etc. (Psalm 119:11; Mark 1:35; Hebrews 10:25).

D) Is it enough to simply obey God? No—your attitude is also very important. Psalm 100:2 says, “Serve the Lord with gladness! Come into his presence with singing!” (ESV). This

means that we should obey God without grumbling or complaining (Philippians 2:14). Instead, we should serve Him with a cheerful spirit, grateful for His love and mercy. God told the people of Israel: “If you do not serve the LORD your God with joy and enthusiasm for the abundant benefits you have received, you will serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you. You will be left hungry, thirsty, naked, and lacking in everything” (Deuteronomy 28:47–48, NLT). God’s blessings should motivate us to obey Him with gladness!

Loving God means desiring to please Him

A) We all know from personal experience that when you love someone, you want to please them. It’s the same in our relationship with God—our love for Him causes us to desire to please Him in everything we do. Paul’s testimony was, “We make it our goal to please him” (2 Corinthians 5:9, NIV). This is the motto of those who truly love God.

B) How can we please God? Paul told the Colossians, “We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.” (Colossians 1:9–10, ESV). This passage contains two important truths:

(1) First, we must be “filled with the knowledge of his will” in order to be “fully pleasing to him.” We gain this knowledge by reading God’s Word and following the leadership of the Holy Spirit (Romans 10:17; James 1:21–22; Galatians 5:25).

(a) The Bible is the revelation of God’s will. If you want to know what pleases Him, read and study His Word. Do this with humility, asking God to open your heart and mind so you can understand His truth (1 Corinthians 2:11–13).

(b) God’s will is also revealed through the leadership of the Spirit. For example, God may lead you into a certain career, relationship, job, church or place. You should regularly seek His will for the decisions you face. Remember—the Spirit will never lead you contrary to Scripture. His guidance is always in harmony with God’s Word.

(2) Second, God cares about every aspect of your life. The phrase “fully pleasing to Him” means pleasing Him in all things. In other words, Paul is praying that the Colossians would know how to please God in every area of their lives—work, home, marriage, family, entertainment, ministry—everything.

C) Love for God is demonstrated by a desire to please Him in every area of your life. This is more than just following a list of rules. You can obey a list of rules without loving the rule-maker. However, if you love the one who made the rules, you will not only obey Him gladly, you will also desire to please Him in everything you do.

Loving God means seeking our happiness in Him

A) Everyone wants to be happy—it is the basic motivating force behind all our decisions. Is there anything wrong with this desire? Not at all! In fact, our problem is that our desire for happiness is not strong enough!

(1) C. S. Lewis once commented that God “finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”¹

B) Did you know that God wants you to be happy? Consider the following verses from the OT:

(1) “Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you” (Deuteronomy 5:16, ESV)

(2) “Keep the LORD's commands and statutes I am giving you today, for your own good” (Deuteronomy 10:13, HCSB).

(3) “How blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, Who walks in His ways. When you shall eat of the fruit of your hands, You will be happy and it will be well with you” (Psalm 128:1–2, NASB).

C) God calls us to obey Him by appealing to our desire for things be well with us, that is, our desire for happiness. This implies two things: first, God designed us to seek happiness, and second, true happiness is found only in a life of obedience to Him.

D) We seek our happiness in God by:

(1) Recognizing that “the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:17, ESV). If we remind ourselves of this truth on a daily basis, it will be easier to resist the passing pleasures of sin (Hebrews 11:24–26).

(2) Being willing to deny ourselves in the present so we may gain everything in the future (Philippians 2:5–11). This is the way Christ lived—He left us an example that we should “follow in his steps” (1 Peter 2:21).

(3) Saying with Paul, “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content” (Philippians 4:11, ESV). It is biblical to do what you can to improve your life (1 Corinthians 7:21). But when you encounter circumstances that you cannot change, contentment is the God-given ability to say to yourself, “It is enough” (Hebrews 13:5).

(4) Rejoicing in Him—His attributes (love, mercy, justice, etc.), His saving grace, His many blessings in our lives (Psalm 32:10–11; Philippians 4:4). We should “give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess 5:18, ESV).

E) If we do these things, we will find happiness and joy in this present life, and eternal happiness in the life to come. God made us to be happy in Him—we cannot find lasting happiness anywhere else.

Loving God means working to build a closer relationship with Him

A) A strong, loving relationship is like a good garden. It's a beautiful thing, but it doesn't happen by accident—it takes dedication and hard work. We need to be working each day to cultivate a closer relationship with God. We do this by:

(1) Reading, studying and meditating on His Word. We need to be reading all of God's Word on a regular basis. This helps us keep a balanced perspective of God. We also need to be studying the Bible—working to truly understand what it means and how it applies to our life (2 Timothy 2:7). Lastly, we need to be memorizing and meditating on His Word (Psalm 119:15). This is how we transform our minds so we can learn to think like Christ (Romans 12:2).

(2) Talking to Him. We need to be spending time each day in prayer. Remember that talking to God is more than just giving Him a list of requests. Take time to praise Him for who He is and what He's doing in your life. Share the ordinary things with Him—the events of the day, your thoughts and feelings, any irritations and difficulties you've had, etc. God is interested in every part of your life!

(3) Spending time with His people. We are part of the body of Christ—the Church. God wants us to support, encourage and build each other up in the faith (Hebrews 3:13; 10:25). The Church deepens our relationship with God by showing us what He's doing in other people's lives and by giving us the accountability it takes to stay faithful to Him.

(4) Resisting temptation. Nothing will hinder your relationship with God like sin. We need to be asking God each day for the grace to say 'No!' to the temptations of the world, the flesh and the Devil (1 John 2:16; 1 Peter 2:11; 2 Corinthians 2:11). And "if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1b, ESV). We should confess our sins, and "he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9, ESV; James 5:16).