

**LOVE: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?
A CLOSER LOOK AT THE GREAT COMMANDMENT**

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Introduction:

In Matthew 22:37-38 Jesus answers the question one of the Pharisees asked him concerning the greatest commandment in the Law. He says:

‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments¹.

In many circles this is the command upon which we have based some of our purpose statements. I wonder however if we have really understood and communicated to our people what that command to “love” really means. In our society the term “love” has the definitions of: “1. An intense affectionate concern for another person, 2. An intense sexual desire for another person, (3) A beloved person. Often used as a term of endearment. 4. A strong fondness or enthusiasm for something”.² It boils down to having as its major meaning a subjective feeling. That is the main way our people and most readers of the Bible understand the Great Commandment. If they are to love, they see that as merely gaining a feeling toward God. Is that, however, really what “love” means? Is that what the people of Jesus’ day would have understood when they heard that command?

Background and Meaning of Love in the Great Commandment

Jesus’ answer to the Pharisee concerning the question about the greatest commandment consists in him quoting Deut. 6:5. That verse is part of the Jewish Shema³ and states, “**Love** the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength”. Jesus’ reference to the second greatest commandment also comes from the Law (Lev. 19:18) and states, “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but **love** your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD”. In both of these OT references the Hebrew term for love is אהב (‘hb). While Jacqueline E. Lapsley has persuasively argued that “love” (‘hb) in Deuteronomy does have “an affective dimension”⁴, that does not seem to be its main force. The term “love” (אהב) in

¹ All Quotations from the Bible are from the New International Version, Kenneth Barker, Gen. Ed., *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

² William Morris, ed, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company), 772.

³ The Shema’ usually consists of Deut. 6:4-9. Jesus may have originally quoted both verses 4 and 5 of Deut. 6 here, see the parallel passage in Mark 12:20-31.

⁴ “Feeling Our Way: Love for God in Deuteronomy”, *CBQ* 65(2003): 350-69. Especially noteworthy is the use of אהב (affectionate love, always with an affective dimension) in parallel with אהב in Deut. 7:7-8

Deuteronomy has a very strong meaning of loyalty or faithfulness⁵. Of this term and its use in Deuteronomy, William L. Moran states,

Above all, it is a love which must be expressed in loyalty, in service, and in unqualified obedience to the demands of the Law. For to love God is, in answer to a unique claim (6:4), to be loyal to him (11:1,22; 30:20), to walk in his ways (10:12; 11:22; 19:9), to keep his commandments (10:12; 11:1,22; 19:9), to do them (11:22; 19:9), to heed them or his voice (11:13; 30:16), to serve him (10:12; 11:1,13). It is in brief, a love defined by and pledged in the covenant—a covenant love⁶ (emphasis mine).

This love is used both of YHWH's love toward man (note Deut . 7:5,8; 23:5, etc) and man's love toward YHWH (Deut. 6:5; 11:1, 13, 22; 19:9, etc). This love is a covenantal love, a love of faithfulness and loyalty on the part of both parties. They have entered into a commitment to be loyal to each other. Since, as noted above, the "affective" or "feeling" element is not absent (just not dominant) in this term's meaning in Deut. 6:5, we have here the command to have a sincere "affective" loyalty or faithfulness to God. One is to love God with all one's heart, being, and strength⁷. This loyalty is to be unconditional and consist in one's total or "full devotion",⁸ as the three words "heart",

denoting God's love for Israel (Lapsley, 360). Lapsley also bases her conclusion on previous studies of emotion in ancient Israel, studies that show the word for hate (שנא) (love's opposite) involves emotions in the Biblical texts, the sociocultural background of love, and the call for Israel to love emotionally because of the prior cause of God's love (e.g., Deut. 10:18-19). Patrick D. Miller ("The Most Important Word: The Yoke of the Kingdom", *Iliff Review* 41(1984):27) would tend to include, although less strongly, this affective dimension saying, "In this context . . . love does not connote primarily affective dimensions . . . It does assume a personal intimate, trusting relation . . . it is not dependent entirely on a feeling of gratitude for its creation". This is contra S. Dean McBride, Jr. ("The Yoke of the Kingdom: An Exposition of Deuteronomy 6:4-5", *Interpretation* 27(1973): 298) who argues that "Love of God is not presented as a worthy emotion which the faithful should strive to attain". There has been some debate that love that involves emotions cannot be commanded (e.g., Rebecca Abts Wright, "The Impossible Commandment", *Anglican Theological Review* 83(2001): 579-80). That this love can be commanded does not negate the emotional side of it as there would seem to be no reason why emotions cannot be changed by the owner of those emotions. The exclusion of emotions in this term by some seems to be based on the modern misconception that emotions cannot be changed by man or God. Lapsley, 365, critiques this well stating, "The objections that feelings cannot be commanded relies on the modern notions not only that feelings exist within the private world of the individual, but also that they are uncontrollable", something that is foreign to the Torah. In addition, since נפש (being/soul) in verse 5 includes the meanings of "desire, appetite" or "longing" (Seebass, *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, sv. "נפש"), one sees here contextually that emotions are indeed commanded! One is to be loyal ("love") with one's emotions as well as the rest of his/her being

⁵ See my article, "The Shema': The Faithfulness of God as the Ground for the Faithfulness of Man: An Exegetical Exposition of Deuteronomy 6:4-9," at DenverChurchofChrist.org.

⁶ "The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy", *CBQ* 25(1963):78.

⁷ These three words, לבב (heart/mind), נפש (being/soul), and מאד (strength) each combined with כל (all) indicate not the modern psychological evaluation (Kalland, 64), but a total allegiance of one's being, "the absolute singularity of personal devotion to God" (B.K.W. and W. C. K., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, s.v. "נפש", and s.v. "מאד").

⁸ Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, in the Anchor Bible Commentary (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 3338-39. Earl. S. Kalland, *Deuteronomy*, in The Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 64, states concerning this phrase, "It is . . . a gathering of terms to indicate the totality of a person's commitment of self in the purest and noblest intentions of trust and obedience toward God."

“being”, and “strength” indicate. Effective loyalty will not just be external loyalty, but loyalty from the heart.

The Jews near the time of Jesus’ day seem to have also understood this command as indicating “loyalty”. Their recitation of the SHEMA’ was an acceptance of the rule of heaven, an acknowledgment of God as Lord , and a submission to his yoke of the Torah. The Talmud states:

If one desires to accept upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven in the most complete manner he should consult nature and wash his hands and put on tefillin and recite the Shema and say the tefillah: This is the complete acknowledgement of the kingdom of heaven.⁹

The Mishna also illustrates this when in Berakoth 2:5 it states:

A bridegroom is exempt from reciting the Shema on the first night, or until the close of the (next) Sabbath if he has not consummated the marriage. Once when Rabban Gamaliel married he recited the Shema on the first night. His disciples said to him, “Master, didst thou not teach us that a bridegroom is exempt from reciting the Shema on the first the first night?” He said to them, “I will not hearken to you to cast off from myself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven for a moment¹⁰ .

The connection with love and loyalty is also present in the New Testament. For example, note the following:

“Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me”
(Jn. 14:21)

“This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. This is love for God: to obey his commands”
(I Jn. 5:2-3b)

Covenantal affective loyalty is a main meaning of the concept of Biblical “love” as commanded in the Great Commandment. We as brothers and sisters in Christ are joined by him into one body through Christ and the New Covenant. We are responsible for each other, to be loyal to one another.

A Call to Loyalty Today

Brothers, let us recapture and embrace this concept of loyalty and bring it more fully to our churches. It is one of the major aspects of the meaning of “love” that is being neglected today in the hearts of many of our people. It is a concept and practice that we have nearly lost in our society. Loyalty largely today has been jettisoned from the meaning of “love”. Let us not jettison it from our fellowship! Let us share, teach, preach, instill it in our own hearts, and hold one another responsible for being loyal (in both heart and actions) to one another. Let us challenge each other to pledge our loyalty to one another and to God. Loyalty means we will “be there” for each other ***both in heart and in body***, in good times and bad times. It cannot just be an external physical loyalty, but must be one of ***heart*** also or it is not the love commanded by God. If we have this

⁹I. Epstein, The Babylonian Talmud (London: Soncino Press, 1938), Berakoth 14b-15a, Vol. 1:86.

¹⁰H. Danby, The Mishnah (London: Oxford, 1958), 3-4. Raban Gamaliel’s date is A. D. 110.

affective loyalty, we will not give up on one another, we will not abandon the body, we will not allow relationships to remain distant and cold. Rather, we will strive to be patient and kind with each other. We will always protect, always trust, always hope, always persevere and never fail each other. We will be in each other's lives to spur one another on to love (be loyal) and to do good works. We will make time commitments to one another out of a heart that *desires* to "be there" for the other person.

I want to call everyone to dedicate themselves to Biblical love, Biblical loyalty to one another. Let us consider how to spur one another on toward this love. In our pledge of loyalty to one another, however, let us never make that loyalty greater than that toward God. Loyalty to Him must remain supreme, for this is the Greatest Commandment.

Practically speaking, to "be there" for someone demands a time element. As such we cannot "be there" the same amount of time for everyone. In my own life, while I pledge my loyalty to *all* my brothers and sisters, I do attempt to *prioritize* that loyalty with respect to time spent just like Jesus seems to have done with the 3 (Peter, James, and John) receiving the most of his time, and the 12 (all the Apostles as a group) next, his other followers next, and finally the lost. With respect to our church around the world, that would mean that I would make my wife my first priority after God, my children next, my family group next, my relationships in the region next, then my relationships with other regions, then my loyalty to my brothers and sisters around the world. How is your loyalty to your spouse, your children, your family group, your region, your church, and your brothers and sisters around the world?

Brothers, let us not sink into the loyalty-less world around us. Let us be the first to recapture this aspect of love, put it into our lives, bring it to the church, practice it toward one another, and bring it to the world! I pledge my loyalty to you. Will you pledge your loyalty to me and to all our brothers and sisters in our church and churches? Will you "be there" for them and be in their lives? When this occurs, then Jesus' words in John 13:34-35 will gain new life and new meaning:

"As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

He is loyal to us. Will we be loyal to Him and like Him? Will we be loyal to one another? Will we urge each other to be loyal? I pray we all will, and I am confident, that with God's power we will be able to continuously live out that kind of loyal love, all to his glory.