

LOve

FULFILLING GOD'S GREATEST COMMANDMENT IN EVERYDAY *Life*

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INTRODUCTION:
A Loving Life

For more than a hundred years, the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize has been awarded to individuals and organizations. It is given to people who have, according to founder Alfred Nobel, "done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations, the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses."

The list of winners of this coveted prize reads like a who′s who of world peace...

- A former president dedicated to advancing human rights and peaceful resolution to world conflicts.
- An organization working tirelessly to eliminate landmines in war-torn countries.
- A group of unlikely partners in the quest for peace in the Middle East.

Men and women fighting a host of world conflicts and crises over the decades, from The Troubles in Northern Ireland to Apartheid in South Africa. From Global Warming to nuclear disarmament. From post-war reconciliation to ending sex trafficking.

Presidents, prime ministers, and countless brilliant minds have received this prized award, likely candidates whose names naturally appear on this prestigious list.

Except for one.

Arguably the most unlikely of Nobel Peace Prize winners is not a diplomat or a head of state or a loud voice fighting injustice, but a tiny, humble, quiet woman caring for the poor in the crowded slums of Calcutta, India.

Mother Teresa, in her iconic blue and white sari, dedicated her entire life as a Catholic nun to feeding the hungry, teaching the illiterate, helping the sick, and comforting the dying in one of the most hopeless places on earth.

She was not ordered to this unwanted post by any church or organization. In fact, she spent over a year lobbying her convent to allow her to leave a comfortable teaching position to follow this ″call within a call” as she referred to it. Her heart's desire was to care for the forgotten, and she would do it for the rest of her life.

Why would she do such a thing?

What would inspire a woman to take on such an undesirable, unpleasant, unimportant job serving the most undesirable, unpleasant, and unimportant people of India?

The answer is found in her own words.

A quick search of Mother Teresa quotes reveals a common thread. One word is repeated over and over from her lips:

Love.

- ″Intense love does not measure, it just gives.”
- ″Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.”
- ″The hunger for love is much more difficult to remove than the hunger for bread.”
- ″I have found the paradox, that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love.”
- ″The most terrible poverty is loneliness, and the feeling of being unloved.”
- ″We do not need guns and bombs to bring peace, we need love and compassion.”

Time and again she spoke of love, and it motivated her to tangibly love the most unlovable people imaginable. The world recognized how unusual this was by awarding her with prizes and accolades, though she never sought such things.

But where would such love come from?

We all talk about love. We love our spouses and our children. We love our aging parents and care for them the best we can. We might even love our neighbor, or at least we think we do.

Few of us display the sacrificial love of Mother Teresa, yet we can look to people like her as shining examples of living out the greatest commandment.

The greatest commandment is to love

CHAPTER 1:
Biblical Love Defined



Verse for Today

"Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him."

1 John 4:7-9

Reflection

The word love is found all throughout the Bible and represents a foundational truth of the Christian faith. God is a God of love, and as people created in His image, we are to be people characterized by love.

While the English language has only one word for love, the original Hebrew and Greek of the Bible utilized several forms of this critical word.

We may use the same word love to describe romantic passion toward a spouse and nurturing affection toward a

child, but the Bible would use different words to explain the nuanced difference in those relationships.

The Greek word ″phileo” is used in the Bible to denote friendship, fondness, and affection. It is the love between brothers and close friends. Seeing how Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus, witnesses exclaimed, *″Behold how he loved him,”* (John 11:36) using the word ″phileo.”

Phileo is not a uniquely Christian term as it is used to describe a common feeling of affectionate devotion toward another person.

The Greek word ″agape” is used far more often in the Bible and represents a love unique to the Christian faith. Agape is often described as unconditional love, or an altruistic love directed at someone who you know may give you nothing in return.
Agape is sacrificial, and always seeks the best interest of the beloved. It is present and active regardless of emotions or circumstances.

The Apostle John wrote much about agape in his gospel and epistles. He understood it deeply, even referring to himself as ″the disciple Jesus loved.”

John gives us a remarkable definition of love when he says, ″God is Love.” His very being is love, and his character, words, and actions always flow from that unconditional, sacrificial love.

Love is of God because God is love. Those of us who know God, know love, and have experienced it unconditionally through him. John tells us that He is the source of love, and when we know that love it will flow from us as it flows from him. It enables us to love the unlovable, just like Mother Teresa did.

Prayer

Gracious heavenly Father, you have scattered the word love all throughout your holy scriptures. Love is fundamental to your word, your character, and your kingdom. Your love has reached into my heart and changed my life, and I long to learn more about it.

I confess that I have thrown this holy word around flippantly and used it in incorrect contexts. I′ve spoken of my fleeting feelings toward created things in terms of love, a word too lofty for such trivial matters. Help me to use this word correctly and only use it to describe my true affection toward you and people created in your image.

Your agape toward me is hard for me to fathom. You love me despite my sin, my shame, and my smallness in the grand scheme of your unending kingdom. You loved me before the creation of the world, knowing that I could never be worthy of such love.

You are the God who loves because you are love! Love is so intrinsic to who you are that you are, in essence, love itself. I struggle to understand this, yet I believe it. You are love, and because I have been born of you, I know that love and can rejoice in it.

The greatest display of your love was Jesus. You sent your only son, the son you loved, to die in my place because you loved me. I thank you for showing your love to me in this

most incredible way, through Jesus, in whose name I pray. Amen.

CHAPTER 2:
A Question for Jesus



Verse for Today

"Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, "Master, which is the great commandment in the law?"

Jesus said unto him, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Matthew 22:35-40

Reflection

Sometimes Jesus taught with parables and stories which the hearer needed to interpret. This teaching through stories often confounded those who listened out of selfish curiosity or sinister motives. They couldn't understand why he was talking about things like lost coins, scattered seeds, and houses being blown down in a storm.

Yet at other times, Jesus teaching was crystal clear and couldn′t possibly be misinterpreted. When a lawyer attempted to trick him by asking what the greatest commandment was, it was no time for stories. Jesus answered the question plainly and left no room for any interpretation other than the truth that he spoke.

The two greatest commandments are to love.

It may surprise some that the most important commandments given by God are all about love. People often wrongly think of our God as one who sits on high making laws we cannot live by, allowing terrible things to happen, and condemning people to hell.

Yet our God is defined by love, and he says so clearly all over the scriptures, even when talking about laws and commandments.
Let′s consider these 2 commandments:

1. The first greatest commandment is to love God completely. Our heart, soul, and mind are to be entirely devoted to loving God. This ″agape" love must not come naturally to us, or there would be no need of a commandment to do it.
    - A believer who experiences the love of Christ will love him in return, even if we need to be reminded from time to time in the scriptures.

2. The second commandment behind loving God is loving others. Jesus says quite plainly that this command is inextricably tied to the first. When we love God, the love for others naturally flows from it.
    - People can be hard to love at times, and loving them may look different depending on circumstances, but it is a commandment that is to be followed.
    - Like loving God, the distractions of the world and sin in our hearts can keep us from doing it, so we need the constant reminders found in the Bible.

This love for God and love for others is fundamental to the Christian faith, and it begins with God′s very character. Remember, God is love. His whole being is love, and we cannot be a part of him if we do not have love.

Prayer

Heavenly father, you have given us your word by which we can know you. Included in that word is the law, a holy and just set of commands which reveal our fallen nature and need for a savior.

Jesus tells us in that word that the greatest commandment is to love you with all our heart, soul, and mind. This needs to

be a command because so often we fail to do it. I need this commandment because I fail to do it.

I confess that I have not loved you with all my heart, soul, and mind. Sometimes I don′t even know what that means. Sometimes I don′t know where to begin. I need your grace to cover me in this shortcoming and to teach me what loving you looks like.

The second great commandment is to love others as I love myself. I fail at this one too. Forgive me, Lord, and help me to love the people you put in my path with the love you have shown me. Help me to love others so that they will see you. Remind me constantly of these two greatest commandments. I know that everything else in my life should flow from these truths. I long to live a life marked by loving you and loving others, but left to my own sinful heart, I will struggle with these commandments.

Teach me what it looks like to love you with all my heart, soul, and mind and to love my neighbor like I love myself. I want to be more like Jesus, who loved you and me so much that both of those loves enabled him to endure the cross. It′s in his holy name I pray, Amen.

CHAPTER 3:
God's Love for His People



Reflection

Verse for Today

″For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Romans 8:38-39

In order to follow the two greatest commandments, loving God and loving others, we must first understand God′s love for us. Again, the beloved Apostle John informs us, saying in Chapter 4 of his First Epistle, *″We love him, because he first loved us.”* God loved us first, and from that love flows love for Him and His people.
The love God has for us is hard to fathom since we are so undeserving of it. God′s ″agape” for us is so undeserving that we often don′t believe it. How could the God of the universe love such a sinner?

Remember, God′s very being is love, so loving us is all about who God is and not at all about who we are.

The proof of God′s love for us is in His words and actions. A person who loves you will not just say it, but will demonstrate it through consistent, loving actions.

Likewise with God, who through His word tells of his great love for His people while demonstrating it in countless ways:

- God′s love for us is sacrificial. A person who loves you will make sacrifices for you, laying down their own needs and desires in favor of yours. How much more does God sacrifice for us! He needs nothing from us yet gives us all we need out of His great love toward us. Our greatest need is for Him, and He is more than enough.

- God′s love for us is not dependent on our goodness. Paul tells us in Romans, *"But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."* (Romans 5:8) Christ died for sinners, not for good people who have it all together.

- This is the ultimate proof of God′s love, that He would sacrifice His only son to die in the place of undeserving sinners like you and me.

- Nothing can separate us from God′s love. How can Paul be so certain of this idea he so poetically professes at the end of Romans 8? Is there really

> nothing that would cause God to retract His love and separate us from it?

Paul, as the most undeserving of sinners, experienced the love of God on the road to Damascus and had no doubt about the abiding love of God. He knew how undeserving of it he was and how lavishly God had poured it out on him anyway. No, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Prayer

Loving Father, I can only love because you first loved me. The two great commandments Jesus gave, to love you and love my neighbor, are impossible for me to follow without first experiencing your love. You love me, so now I am able to follow those commandments. Thank you for this truth.

I confess that I have a hard time wrapping my mind and my heart around your love for me. When I think of the depths of my sinful heart and the disobedient actions that flow from it, I cannot imagine that you would still love me. I am so undeserving of your love, and I need faith to believe it. Your word declares your love for me. All over the scriptures I find words that declare your love for me. Thank you for these words, for your word is truth. Please help me to believe it.
Your actions prove your love for me. Every good gift I have here on earth is from you, lavished upon me out of your great love for me. You have given me far more than I

deserve: health, a home, a family, a church...the list could go on endlessly. Thank you for the good gifts you have given me because you love me.

The greatest proof of your love is Jesus. I know that you so loved the world that you sent your only son Jesus to die for the sins of it, for my sins. That is the greatest testament of your love, and no other proof is needed. I am brought to my knees in worship when I think of the sacrifice you made for me.

Nothing can separate me from your love. There is nothing I could do to make you not love me, and in that I rejoice! Though I still struggle with sin and need your grace and mercy daily, I can rest in your sacrificial love for me. Thank you that I can never be separated from that love and will know it in this life and the life to come. In the name of Jesus, who gave His life for me out of love, I pray. Amen.

CHAPTER 4:
Our Love for God



Verse for Today

"And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, To keep the commandments of the Lord, and his statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good?"

Deuteronomy 10:12-13

Reflection

We know that God loves us through His words and through His actions. But as the old saying goes, "Love is a two-way street." A marriage where only one spouse does all the loving will not last. Likewise, God expects us to love Him with a love flowing from the greatest love, His undeserving, unconditional, sacrificial love for us.

In the same way, we can show our love for God through our words and actions. If we say that we love God but do nothing to support that claim, do we really love Him?

He commands us to love Him because He knows we need that reminder, but we cannot just say that we love Him without somehow living out that love.

We can speak our love for God through praying, worshipping, and sharing the truth of His word. All of these forms of communication tell God verbally how much we love him. God has first loved us, so we now can love Him and tell him so in a variety of ways.

We can put out love for God in action by obeying Him. Jesus himself said in John 14, *"If ye love me, keep my commandments."* The way to live out our love for God is to obey Him.

It is like a child who adores their father and wants to do everything possible to please him, not because the father demands perfection, but because there is mutual love and affection.

God knows our love for Him will not be perfect. God′s very nature is entirely loving, but though we are created in His image and have love within us, sin is a part of us as well.

We will fail to love Him and follow His commandments as we should, yet His love for us is complete and covers all of our sins and shortcomings.

We can rest in His love for us, especially when we fall short of loving Him.

Prayer

Gracious Father, your love for me is evident through your words and your actions. I know that you love me and that you command me to love you with all of my heart, soul, mind, and strength. I do love you!

I want to declare my love for you right here and now. I love you with all of my heart, soul, mind and strength, though I know I don′t do it perfectly. I love you because you first loved me, despite my sin and unworthiness. I love you because of who you are and what you have done, despite who I am and what I have done.

I know that I just can′t say that I love you - I need to show you that I love you through my actions. Your word says that those who love you will keep your commandments. I confess that I have failed to keep your commandments, especially the two most important ones that I am learning more about here.

Forgive me for not loving you in perfect obedience.

I am not capable of following your commands perfectly. That is the point of your law, to show me that I need a savior. You provided me a savior, your own son Jesus, who you sent to the world to die for my sins because you love me. Thank you for providing me the way, the truth, and the life.

Thank you that your love is enough. While my love for you is inadequate and flawed, your love for me is complete and perfect. I am not love, but you are, and in that I can rest and rejoice. Show me how to love you more, because you are so worthy of it. In the name of Jesus my savior I pray. Amen.

CHAPTER 5:
Our Love for Others



Verse for Today

″A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.”

John 13: 34-35

Reflection

From the command to love God flows the command to love others. We cannot love God without also loving His people. The two commands are not to be separated. Again, we love God and others because God first loved us.

All people are created in God′s image and therefore worthy of His love and ours.
God clearly calls us to love others without qualification.
We are not worthy of God′s love and yet he loves us.
Likewise, others may not be worthy of our love, yet He commands us to love them.

We don't love because people deserve it or have earned it, but because we have the love of God within us.

We are called to love others the way we love ourselves. Naturally, we want what is best for ourselves and think we are deserving of good.

Likewise, we should want what is best for other people and love them as such. We should strive to see others as God sees them and us, as precious children created in His image and worthy of His love.

Jesus tells us to love others the way He has loved us. What does this look like? Just before Jesus spoke those words, He got on his knees and washed the filthy feet of twelve men he was about to die for.

Jesus love looked like utter humility and complete sacrifice with no expectation of getting anything in return.

We are to love others in the same way, with humility and sacrificial actions that demand nothing in return.

Loving others the way Christ loved us will enable us to live in peace with one another. Paul tells the Ephesian church in Chapter 4 of his epistle to them to walk, *"with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."*

Loving others will help us to bear with them even in the midst of sin and brokenness, living alongside them in peace.

Prayer

Loving Father, you have first loved me, so therefore I have your love within me. It is with this love that I can love the people around me, as your word calls me to do. Thank you for first loving me, for I do not deserve that love.

All people have been created in your image and are worthy of being loved. Forgive me for not always walking in that truth. I confess that I have not always looked at my fellow man and thought of them as your image bearers and therefore worthy of love. I have not loved your people as I should, and I need your grace as I seek to change.

You have called me to love others the way I love myself. I of course look out for my own wellbeing, but I do not always love others with their wellbeing in mind. Help me to understand what this really means and live it out with the people you put in my life.

You have also called me to love others the way you love me. You love me so much that you sent your son Jesus to die in my place. This kind of sacrificial love overwhelms me, and I thank you for loving me with it. Show me how I can love others with the same kind of humility.

Loving others this way will help me live at peace with those around me. Help me to clothe myself with such love, a love that will help me to bear with people in their sin and walk alongside them in their struggles.

I know I need such love as well, and I rejoice that this love is mine thanks to you. In the name of Jesus, my loving savior, I pray. Amen.

CHAPTER 6:
Jesus, Our Loving Example



Verse for Today

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

John 3:16-17

Reflection

Jesus is our example of love. Being the sinless Son of God, he loved both God and people perfectly in His time on earth. We can look to the Gospels to see what He said about love, and how He lived it out among the people around Him.

Not long after he spoke these famous words to Nicodemus during their secret nighttime meeting, Jesus met a woman drawing water at a well. We can learn much about how Jesus loved people from this profound interaction found in John Chapter 4.

Jesus didn′t shy away from people different from Him. The woman at the well was a Samaritan, a group of people despised by the Jews. It would have been shocking at the time for a Jewish man to speak at length to a Samaritan woman, yet that′s exactly what Jesus did. He loved her despite her differences.

Jesus drew near to people, meeting them in their place of brokenness and sin. He knew full well that this woman was a sinner, even revealing this knowledge to her. Yet he spoke to her, challenged her, and loved her, not despite her sinful state but because of it!

Jesus gave people what they most desperately needed. The woman at the well might have had personal, physical, and financial needs, but Jesus knew that ultimately, she just needed Him.

He shared His message of forgiveness, salvation, and love with her, and because of that, her life and the life of many in her village was forever changed. He loved her by giving her Himself!

We are to love others the way Jesus loved them. We can love them despite their different race, ethnicity, or status. We can love them regardless of their sin and brokenness. We can love them by sharing with them the thing they need most: the love of God through Jesus!

Prayer

Gracious Father, you loved the world so much that you sent Jesus into it to die for it. Salvation was your plan and Jesus was your means to do it. I rejoice in it and praise you that I am the recipient of such grace.

Jesus, you are the perfect example of love. You were the embodiment of God′s love here on earth in everything you said and did. Help me to learn from it and emulate it in my life.

Jesus, you drew near to people who were different from you, and you loved them. I confess to you that I often feel intimidated and uncomfortable around people who don′t look or act like me. This is wrong, as all people are image bearers of God and worthy of His love. Forgive me, and help me to change, seeing others as you see them so that I can love them too.

Jesus, you drew near to broken, sinful people. I confess to you that I am often repulsed by sin and stand in judgement of it, wanting nothing to do with sinful people. Forgive me Father! I am a sinner myself, yet you drew near to me and loved me unconditionally. Help me do the same with others, who are sinners just like me. Jesus, you gave people what they most needed. I confess to you that I don′t share your love with others as I should. I lack boldness in sharing my faith with those who need you, please forgive me. Give me the courage I need to share with people what they most need, and that is you! In your Holy name I pray, Amen.

CONCLUSION:
The Greatest of These



Paul′s famous discourse on love found in 1 Corinthians 13 teaches us so much about this overused word:

- Love is patient and kind.
- It is not envious or proud.
- Love doesn′t dishonor others or keep a record of their wrongs.
- It is not selfish or easily angered.
- Love doesn′t delight in evil but instead rejoices in the truth.
- It always protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres.

Love never fails.

This profound passage is read at weddings and printed on Valentine cards, but what love on earth could possibly meet these criteria? Even the most beautiful of human relationships are fraught with sin and struggle.

Human love cannot live up to this definition.

Sin has entered the world and our hearts, so we will fail at love time and again.

It is only through knowing the love of God that we can in turn love Him and love others.

The love of God is far greater than anything we can possibly imagine apart from Him.

In Ephesians 3, the apostle Paul prays, *"that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."*

May you grasp the wide, long, high, and deep love of Christ today and every day. Amen