

De Sales

SPIRITUALITY CENTER

"Love: The Greatest Commandment"



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"An expert in the law tested Jesus with this question: 'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?' Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and all your strength. This is the first and greatest commandment.'" (Matthew 22:35—38)

This is, indeed, the greatest commandment...and a daunting one as well. Can we imperfect people really make this commandment real in our lives? Francis de Sales proclaims: "Some foolish people claim that such a commandment is an impossibility in this life. They make a huge mistake. Our Lord would never have given us the commandment without also giving us the power to set about doing it. Others will say that we cannot love God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength: we have to share some of our love with our families and friends. Had our Lord commanded us to love him as the blessed do in heaven, there might be some truth in these objections, for, indeed, the love of the angels and the saints never changes: it is never interrupted. In our case, however, there are any number of distractions that we cannot escape. Nevertheless, our love for God can be strong and unchanging, even though we cannot always be actively showing it."

In an effort to make this commandment less daunting — and to make our attempts to live it more encouraging — Francis de Sales suggests that we break down or break

open this commandment into distinct parts.

What does it mean to love God with our whole heart? "God means that our love for him should be a love of choice. God wants to be loved with a love that is chosen from among all other loves. God wants the love that we must have for each other to be a faint reflection of the supreme love which we have for God. This is what it means to love God with our whole heart: to choose God from among ten thousand, allowing God's love to reign supreme in our hearts."

Loving God with all our hearts also requires that we acknowledge that we can never have enough, as it were, of the love of God. "If we do not wish to grow in the love of God, then we do not love God enough. While we might get to a point where we are saturated with the quest for wealth or honors, how can we ever say 'I have had enough' when it comes to loving God? Such a person does not really love God."

From this love of the whole heart flow the other loves that Jesus names in the greatest commandment.

What does it mean to love God with our whole soul? "It is to love God with a pure, simple love." *What does it mean to love God with all our mind?* "It is to think of God as much as possible." *What does it mean to love God with our whole strength?* "It is to be faithful and loyal, unwavering and persevering."

In sum, to love the greatest commandment is to love God with

all of who and what we are. "To love God with all we are is to surrender the whole of ourselves to God, to be entirely obedient to whatever God's love may ask of us."

Francis de Sales offers us three benchmarks for monitoring our progress.

First. "Do you long to live in God's presence? Love always craves the presence of the one loved. Love seeks unity, knitting hearts together by an unbreakable bond...if you love God you will seek God's presence and yearn to be close to God."

Second. "Do you love few things besides God? Our capacity for loving is limited. The love of too many things dissipates or dilutes our love: it lessens its perfection. We are to love other things in addition to God, but we must always place God first, prepared to forego other loves as God may require."

Third. "Do you love your neighbor? Do you love your neighbor with a love similar to the love that God has for you? Is your love of neighbor loyal and unchanging; is it a love that does not rely on outward appearances; is it a love that does not grow impatient with others' faults and imperfections; is it a love ever ready to lend a helping hand to further another's good?"

Perhaps this is why we cannot pursue the first part of the greatest commandment without including the other: "You must love your neighbor as you love yourself." Or, put another way, we must love our neighbor as God loves us.