



31 October – 06 November 2021

### THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

This week the focus is on the Great Commandment. We know Jesus' words so well: "‘And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’ The second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ No other commandment is greater than these." But, sadly, in spite of the clarity of these words, in spite of Jesus' claim that the whole of the Scripture is summarized in these words, we still struggle to make this commandment the focus of our faith and life.

The Great Commandment is not two commandments, of course. The original text suggests that the "second" is "like" the first – that is, it is the same as the first. This means that this is really one commandment in two parts. Loving God and loving neighbour are inextricably linked. The love that Jesus speaks about here is not an emotion. It is not just saying the words "I love you." For Jesus, loving another person means to honour her or his value as a human being and as valuable to God, and to express this in actions of service, respect and kindness. Love is always expressed in action. Of course, this is much harder than following the law. Legalism is attractive because it's easy – you just tick each law off on a list. You've either done it or you haven't. But love requires true engagement with the other person. It requires sensitivity, curiosity, interest, compassion, and a willingness to extend ourselves for the other person. Love is messy and unpredictable and costly.

But love is also the only place where life can be found. This is what we will be exploring this week.

### SUNDAY 31 OCTOBER 2021

**Read:** Mark 12:28-34

**Reflect:** In Mark's Gospel, the Great Commandment comes at the climax of what I call "the great debate." The day after Jesus cleansed the temple, he and his disciples returned there. Here Jesus was challenged by the religious leaders on some of the most basic issues of human life. There was a debate around authority and power, and where the authority of Jesus originated. There was a debate around money and whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. And there was a debate around resurrection and marriage in the afterlife, and whose wife a poor bereaved woman would be. Power, money and human relationships – these are the three big issues we all face. For Jesus, the guiding principle in all of them is love – love for God and love for people. We may be tempted to feel that neighbours are only those who are close to us and who are like us, but, as we saw yesterday, Luke's version of this passage expands the term to include everyone.

Love is about honouring and respecting the other person, putting their needs first, and refusing deliberately to hurt them, even when it's costly. This is the tough challenge of following Jesus. It is far easier to respond to anger with anger, to violence with violence, to hurt with hurt. But this only increases the cycle of hatred and misery. It is only when we commit to love above all that we can bring peace, compassion and justice into our world. This is not about doing "great acts" to change the world. It's just about working to change our own hearts so that we live with kindness toward those around us – both friend and enemy.

How can you make your commitment to love a little stronger today?

**Do:** To love others, you have to really see them. To see them, you have to give them your attention and welcome them into your space. This is why the simple act of greeting is so important and so powerful. Today, make a conscious effort to greet everyone you meet with warmth and kindness.

**Pray:** In every situation, with every person, O God, may your love be my guide.

## MONDAY 01 NOVEMBER 2021

**Read:** Romans 12:17-21; 13:8-10

**Reflect:** Once again we're faced with Paul's very practical application of the Gospel to our lives. Obedience to the Great Commandment is worked out in the small details of our lives, as today's reading shows. And, when we love others like this, we're actually loving God (see 1 John 4:20). Paul's guidelines for living in love are not new. They are really just common sense, but they are helpful if we're looking for clear and practical directions. Love refuses to retaliate, but respects others – even when we conflict. Love strives to be at peace with others and refuses to seek revenge. Love feeds the hungry, even if they are enemies. Love strives not to be indebted to others and strives not to do anything wrong or harmful to another human being.

There is, of course, the temptation to use “love” to “pile burning coals of fire” upon the heads of those who have hurt us. It can be very satisfying to respond to aggression with peace just to show the other person up. But, of course, this is not genuine love. It is manipulation. The toughest part of love is swallowing our pride, and our need to be proven right, in order to rebuild relationships. If it's truly love that we're showing, we'll be willing to prioritise the relationship over our own need for justification.

How willing are you to love your “enemies” in this practical way today?

**Do:** It has been said that you can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving. This means that, if we are truly seeking to love others, we need to be prepared to give to them – of our time, abilities and resources, but most especially of ourselves. This is what makes love so scary, but it's also what makes it so powerful and life giving. Try to be generous with yourself today.

**Pray:** Help me to give myself freely to others in your name, Jesus.

## TUESDAY 02 NOVEMBER 2021

**Read:** Psalm 18:20-30

**Reflect:** The second half of today's passage is a celebration of God's love. God is faithful, full of integrity, pure, and rescuing. God

upholds justice against wickedness and lights up the darkness in our lives. God gives us strength and keeps God's promises. God protects those who trust in God. These are just a small sample of all the ways we experience God's love in our lives.

But, even before the Psalmist lists these qualities of God's love, he speaks about God's desire that we imitate God's loving nature. God “rewards” the Psalmist for doing right, for keeping his innocence, for living a blameless life, for being faithful and pure and living with integrity. It is important to remember that the worldview of the Old Testament writers was built on a strong belief in reward and punishment. Now, in Christ, we realise that God is less concerned with rewards, and more concerned with consequences. When we follow God's ways, we find that the consequences are good, but when we insist on doing things our own way, the consequences are not always so good – especially when our way brings pain to others. And if the only reason we're trying to be people of love is so that we will receive a reward, we're not really loving at all – we're just trying to find a way to satisfy our own selfishness!

How can you imitate God's love a little more intentionally today?

**Do:** If we want to imitate God, we need to constantly open our hearts and minds to a vision of God's nature and purpose. The practice of praise does just this for us. It reveals God to us, and, by doing this, helps us learn to follow God's ways. Today, use the practice of praise to celebrate God's love and to learn to imitate it.

**Pray:** God of infinite love, I praise you with my words, and with a God-imitating life.

## WEDNESDAY 03 NOVEMBER 2021

**Read:** John 13:31-35

**Reflect:** It is a great tragedy that Christians are too often known for anything but love. We may quote and sing about the new commandment, but somehow this does not really convert into action. It is not by accident that Jesus spoke these words to his disciples just after washing their feet (including those of Judas, his betrayer) and just before he went to the cross to die. What is startling is that Jesus speaks about his coming death as the time

when he will enter his glory. The glory of Jesus, then, is his willingness to die out of love for others. Jesus was so committed to love that he chose love over his own life. So, when Jesus commands us to love one another, this is what he has in mind – a love that would rather die than stop loving.

How sad it is, then, that we find so many excuses to stop loving one another. We use differences in belief, in religion, in skin colour, in gender, in sexuality, in economic status, in education and even in musical preferences as excuses to judge and condemn one another. What is worse is that we so often justify this lack of love by using the Bible! But, in the light of Jesus' commandment – and his own commitment to love even his betrayer and executioners – we really have no excuse to stop loving. And it is this love – not right ideas, or purity, or saying particular prayers, or speaking in tongues – that shows the world that we follow Christ.

How can you recommit yourself to this one task of love today?

**Do:** Jesus does not ask us to condemn ourselves or anyone else for our lack of love. He simply asks us to learn to overcome it. In order to resist the temptations to hatred and selfishness we need only confess our lack of love, and then open our hearts to allow God's love to flood into us and through us. Anytime you find yourself acting in an unloving way today, take a moment to confess and then choose to act with love.

**Pray:** Forgive me, O God, when I fail to be known by my capacity to love.

#### THURSDAY 04 NOVEMBER 2021

**Read:** Romans 5:6-11

**Reflect:** This Sunday we explore how those with power and those without interact. God's Reign, of course, does power very differently from the way human systems tend to do it. Today, we get an amazing glimpse into the "power in powerlessness" that Jesus lived and taught.

Paul speaks about us as "utterly helpless". He also speaks with awe at how Christ gave his life for our sakes. We did nothing to deserve or even justify such a sacrifice. It is a reflection only of God's

immense love. Though God had all power, and could easily have condemned and destroyed us, God chose to come to us and restore us to friendship with God. It's a gift of utter grace from the One who held all the power to the ones who had no power at all.

This willingness to give up power in order to empower others is not just God's gift to us. It is also God's call for us to follow. How can you share your power with others today?

**Do:** Sometimes prayer takes the form of words and sometimes it takes the form of being present with another person in their need – the way Christ has come to us. Either way, prayer is an automatic response of a loving heart that seeks to empower others through humble service. Today pray for others in words, but pray also through your empowering presence.

**Pray:** As you have come to me in love, O God, so in prayer I share your love and power with others.

#### FRIDAY 05 NOVEMBER 2021

**Read:** Ruth 4:11-17

**Reflect:** The story of Ruth is a remarkable testimony to the way God uses the powerless to manifest God's Reign in the world. Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, were poor widows in a world where they had no power. All they could do was join the other poor people who relied on the generosity of wealthy farmers to leave some grain aside for them to glean. But then, they discovered that they had a kinsman who could, if he so chose, redeem them. Boaz was a well-respected man who used his power to empower Ruth and Naomi and bring them back to life. One of the consequences of his generosity and compassion was that he and Ruth became the great-grandparents of David, Israel's greatest king. What a wonderful story of power flowing from powerlessness.

It may make us feel strong to belittle and look down on those who are poorer or weaker than we are, but it's a false strength. It is only bullies who always need weaker people to make them feel stronger. Those who are truly strong have no need to show their power off, but use their power to uplift and bless others. It is only when we are

able to give power away that we are truly powerful. Power hoarded grows weak. Power shared multiplies.

Where are your areas of power? How are you tempted to hoard this power, or use it to have power over others? How can you share this power today?

**Do:** The practice of submission is not very popular in our world today. It is the choice to willingly humble ourselves for the sake of God's purpose, and for others. It can be painful to be submissive, but it opens us to God's strength, and to the power of deep relationships. Today, instead of trying to "claim" your power, see what happens if you practice submission instead.

**Pray:** Whatever power I may have, O God, I place in service of your Reign.

## SATURDAY 06 NOVEMBER 2021

**Read:** Deuteronomy 24:17-22

**Reflect:** I can't imagine the principles in today's reading being taught in any business schools! By today's standards, Deuteronomy seems to be advocating a rather careless way to manage our financial affairs. If a widow doesn't have anything but her cloak to secure her debt, we are not to take it. This means we have no security on the loan at all. If we forget to take a bundle of grain home on the first trip, we are not to go back for it, but must leave it for the poor. When harvesting olives and grapes, we must make only one pass, and leave whatever is over for the hungry. This is very different from our "don't leave any money on the table" way of doing business today.

But imagine for a moment what the world would be like if we adopted this attitude. Imagine if the wealthy decided that they had enough and chose to share their excess with those who are poor. Imagine if, instead of us all trying to get as much as we can for ourselves, we worked together to ensure everyone had enough. It is this willingness to release our power and wealth that brings peace and justice into the world. We do not become more secure by keeping ourselves separate from the needs of others.

What excess do you have that could be shared with others today?

**Do:** The practice of thanksgiving is a good way to remind ourselves of the abundance we enjoy. It is also a good way to be liberated from the need to hoard what we have. Thanksgiving always leads us into sharing because giving multiplies the blessing. Make today a day of thanksgiving for every good thing you enjoy.

**Pray:** For all your abundant provision, O God, I thank you.