

The First Commandment First

D. TODD CHRISTOFFERSON

Each of the three synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—recounts a question put to Jesus about the greatest commandment in the law. In Matthew, the questioner is a lawyer of impure motive, tempting the Master.¹ In Mark, it is a scribe asking the question, but one who sincerely seems to want to know.² In Luke, we are back to “a certain lawyer [who] stood up, and tempted him.”³

Despite my professional background in the law, it is difficult for me to defend the lawyer in this account. But I will at least give him credit for asking, despite his motive, because the Savior’s answer is so wonderful and profound. I have to thank him as well for his follow-up question—“And who is my neighbour?”⁴—that led to the Savior’s moving parable of the good Samaritan.⁵ The lawyer got more than he wanted, but we got something priceless.

Matthew’s account of Jesus’s answer is familiar to all of you:

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.*⁶

To loving God with all one’s heart, soul, and mind, Mark and Luke add “and with all thy strength.”⁷

I ask you to consider the majesty of the two great commandments on which “hang all the law

D. Todd Christofferson, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, delivered this devotional address on March 22, 2022.

and the prophets” and also why the first commandment is first. What is the significance of that order for us?

The second commandment is a brilliant guide for human interaction. Consider what the world would be like if the second commandment were universally accepted and followed. Think of what would not happen. Among other things, there would be no violent crime, no abuse, no fraud, no persecution or bullying, no gossip, and certainly no war. The second commandment is essentially the Golden Rule: “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.”⁸ As disciples, we should be deliberate in living this second commandment by reaching out in love and empathy to those the Lord defines as our neighbors—that is, everyone.

To support “the law and the prophets”—that body of truth and commandments established by God and taught by the prophets—both the first and second commandments are needed, working in tandem. But why is the first commandment the overarching priority? At least three reasons come to mind.

First is the foundational nature of this first commandment. Wonderful and essential as the second commandment is, it does not provide the necessary foundation for our lives, nor is it intended to. Obeying the second commandment makes us nice people, but to what end? What is the point of our existence? For purpose, direction, and meaning, we must look to the first and great commandment.

Putting the first commandment first does not diminish or limit our ability to keep the second commandment. To the contrary, it amplifies and strengthens it. It means that we enhance our love by anchoring it in divine purpose and power. It means that we have the Holy Ghost to inspire us in ways to reach out that we would never have seen on our own. Our love of God elevates our ability to love others more fully and perfectly because we in essence partner with God in the care of His children.

Second, ignoring the first commandment, or reversing the order of the first and second

commandments, risks a loss of balance in life and destructive deviations from the path of happiness and truth. Love of God and submission to Him provide checks against our tendency to corrupt virtues by pushing them to the extreme. Compassion for our neighbor’s distress, for example, even when the suffering is brought about by his or her own transgression, is noble and good. But an unbridled compassion could lead us, like Alma’s son Corianton, to question God’s justice and misunderstand His mercy.⁹

There are those, for example, who believe that loving others means we must twist or ignore God’s laws in a way or ways that advocate or condone sin. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland addressed this misperception when he taught:

*So if love is to be our watchword, as it **must** be, then by the word of Him who is love personified, we must forsake transgression and any hint of advocacy for it. . . . Jesus clearly understood what many in our modern culture seem to forget: that there is a crucial difference between the commandment to forgive sin (which He had an infinite capacity to do) and the warning against condoning it (which He never ever did even once).¹⁰*

As Alma explained to Corianton, we need both justice and mercy, and it is only through God’s love in the gift of His Son and in His Son’s gift of repentance that we can have both.¹¹

Third, the first commandment must be first because attempts at love that are not grounded in God’s truths risk harming the person or persons we are trying to help. Speaking to students here at BYU, President Russell M. Nelson taught:

Because the Father and the Son love us with infinite, perfect love and because They know we cannot see everything They see, They have given us laws that will guide and protect us.

There is a strong connection between God’s love and His laws.¹²

Well, those are three reasons why the first commandment is first, but we should probably list one more that is in reality sufficient in itself: the first commandment is first because God put it first.

The first and great commandment provides the true paradigm for life. President Ezra Taft Benson once observed:

*When we put God first, all other things fall into their proper place or drop out of our lives. Our love of the Lord will govern the claims for our affection, the demands on our time, the interests we pursue, and the order of our priorities.*¹³

God's Love for Us: Providing Us "A Privilege to Advance Like Himself"

God, who commands us to love Him, first loved us.¹⁴ Consider for a moment what God's love has meant for you and me to this point in our existence and what it foreshadows. Even prior to our spirit existence, we existed as uncreated intelligence or intelligences. God came down in the midst of the intelligences and devised a plan whereby we might advance. In the words of the Prophet Joseph Smith:

*God himself, finding he was in the midst of spirits [or intelligences] and glory, because he was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself.*¹⁵

As you know, His plan encompassed our becoming His spirit children, which was a glorious step forward, our "first estate."¹⁶ Then He established the path wherein we might have the physical added to the spiritual—a "second estate"¹⁷—essential to obtaining the fulness of being and glory that God Himself enjoys. It required the creation of an earth as the setting of a "probationary state,"¹⁸ a spiritual and a physical death, and a Savior to redeem and resurrect us. In all of this, God gave us the agency to choose and has prepared greater and lesser outcomes and blessings according as we might choose.

Thus, beginning from our primal state as intelligences, our Heavenly Father has centered Himself and His work in us—in our immortality and eternal life. He sees it as His work and glory to do so.¹⁹ I don't believe He had to do any of it, so why has He done this for us? What is His motivation? Can it be anything but love? Clear evidence of this is the gift of His Son:

*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*²⁰

Is it too much to ask that in return we center our lives in God and love Him as He has loved us, with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength? How can we resist His love for us and withhold our own love from Him knowing that our love of God is the key to our own happiness?

Our Love for God: The Savior's Example

If we love God with the full measure of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, our focus in life will be to fulfill His desires. No being, of course, has done that more fully and perfectly than our exemplar, Jesus Christ, who once observed, "The Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please him."²¹ His highest priority was and is to glorify the Father.

That highest priority, that highest loyalty, enabled Jesus to see His Atonement through to its completion, to drink that bitterest of bitter cups to the very last drop. In this greatest (and literally superhuman) sacrifice, the intensity of the Savior's suffering "caused myself," He said, "even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink."²² Nevertheless, His love for and desire to glorify the Father surpassed the incomprehensible suffering. In the Lord's own words, "Nevertheless, *glory be to the Father*, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men."²³

As Christ hung upon the cross, our fate, our immortality, and our eternal life hung in the balance, and the thing that tipped the scale in our favor in determining whether our very existence would have meaning was that Jesus Christ loved the Father with all His heart, soul, mind, and strength.

In Christ then we find our pattern: loyalty to God above all else and above everyone else; a consciousness of our accountability to Him, at all times and in all things; and a yearning desire to know and to do His will. Here is our guide in making decisions. When we love God first, we see

the world and our lives through His eyes rather than through the eyes of any other person (even a social media influencer).

So, what does it look like to put the first commandment first? I cannot list everything that loving God above all else entails, but I would like to describe some examples.

Putting the First Commandment First: “Keep My Commandments”

Certainly one of the foremost aspects of keeping the first commandment is strict obedience to God. As the Savior said, “If ye love me, keep my commandments.”²⁴ Jesus was fixed upon keeping each and all of His Father’s commandments and showed us what obedience to God means in real life.

A good friend of mine once commented about our seemingly universal inclination to rationalize when it comes to God’s commandments. He noted, for example, from his observations and his own experience, that a question that begins “Does the Lord really care if I . . . ?” will always be answered “No.” It is a convenient way to excuse almost anything, if we can convince ourselves that the Lord surely wouldn’t care about something so relatively minor as we suppose it to be. But my friend noted that this is the wrong question. It is not whether the Lord cares but whether we will do what we promised. The question is “What sign will I give to God regarding my love for Him?” or “What does it mean to keep His commandments and covenants with exactness and honor?”

Of course one of the most important aspects of keeping the first commandment is to keep the second commandment to love our brothers and sisters. As John stated, “If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?”²⁵ And we have the Lord’s familiar words: “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.”²⁶

Putting the First Commandment First: “Feed My Sheep”

Closely allied to disciplined submission to God’s commandments is service to Him and His

cause. To Peter, and to us, the Lord directs His thrice-repeated question: “Lovest thou me?”²⁷ And, like Peter, our answer must be, “Yes, even more than my career or anything or anyone else.” And we each hear the Shepherd’s voice: “Feed my lambs”²⁸; “feed my sheep.”²⁹

I am confident that our Heavenly Father and His Beloved Son are pleased with your individual kindnesses, however limited or insignificant they may seem in a vast world of need. Every act and every offering matters. I am also confident that They are pleased with what we are doing collectively as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and in association with others. As but one example, the aid to alleviate suffering arising from the current war targeting Ukraine is truly Christlike. We consistently try to focus on the need at hand and not let the right hand know what the left hand is doing, but I hope that as a Church we can provide more comprehensive accounts going forward so that you will know more about what you are doing as part of the body of Christ to feed His sheep.

Keeping the first commandment also means promoting the Lord’s cause in the earth, helping bring to pass the eternal life of our Father’s children. I can think of no better example than the missionary service that many of you have given or will yet render. We in the Twelve covet every opportunity we have to be with missionaries because of the uplifting, renewing spirit we feel among those who are so urgently involved in feeding God’s sheep and lambs.

In our time, the gathering of God’s covenant people on earth and in the spirit world, as President Russell M. Nelson stresses, is a vital part of what it means for us to keep the first and great commandment.

Putting the First Commandment First: Call upon Him; Feast upon His Words

Another way we put the first commandment first is quite obvious. It is to call upon God in prayer and to feast upon His word for understanding and direction. We want to know and do what He wants. We want to know what He knows. We want to learn all that He will teach us as His disciples. We want personal revelation.

Amulek urges us to cry to God in the name of Christ for mercy, to cry over our household (which at the moment for many of you may be a household of one, but it will grow), and to cry over our fields and flocks (which could be crops and sheep but more likely at the moment are studies and employment). He urges us to cry unto God against the power of our enemies and the influence of the devil. “And when you do not cry unto the Lord, let your hearts be full, drawn out in prayer unto him continually for your welfare, and also for the welfare of those who are around you.”³⁰

Nephi tells us to “feast upon the words of Christ; for behold, the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do.”³¹ It is a remarkable endowment in our day to have so much of the written word of God available at our fingertips—constantly accessible to us individually—as well as the current teaching of prophets and apostles published in a variety of formats and languages. It is unlike any other time in the world’s history. Ask yourself, What does God intend by this?

I love prayer. I love the scriptures. I want all the light and knowledge that my Heavenly Father is willing to give me. I know that He is no respecter of persons and that He will give both you and me all that we will prepare ourselves to receive. Love God so thoroughly that you will pursue constant communication with Him by the means He has ordained. And remember President Nelson’s example—keep a record of what you receive through the Holy Spirit and act accordingly.

Putting the First Commandment First: Accountability to God

Let me mention just one more way we enshrine the first commandment as first in our lives. It is to live with a sense of accountability to God—accountability for the direction of our lives and for each day of our lives. That means resisting and overcoming temptation, repenting and forgiving, combating selfishness, taking upon us the name of Christ, and developing the character of Christ. It means watching even our thoughts and our words as well as our actions.³² It means yielding “to the enticings of the Holy Spirit” and becoming “as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the

Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father.”³³

This is not a burdensome, weigh-you-down kind of accountability. Rather, it is the acknowledgment of a wise, interested, and caring Father who knows the path to fulfillment and ultimate joy. It is a recognition that He has provided an opportunity for us that we are incapable of creating for ourselves—and one that we cannot achieve without His help. It is to “live in thanksgiving daily, for the many mercies and blessings which [God] doth bestow upon [us].”³⁴ And it is in the context of this accountability that we feel God’s good pleasure in us. We come to understand that He is rejoiced with even the smallest efforts we make to love Him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. What greater reassurance and peace could you have than the witness of the Holy Spirit to your spirit that your Heavenly Father and your Redeemer are pleased with you and your course in life?

The bottom line is that God commands us to love Him because of what He knows it will do for us. He commands us to love one another for the same reason. Love of God transforms us. Love of God transforms our love for each other. This love is requisite for our coming to know Him, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom He has sent.³⁵ It is the key to our becoming like Him.

I know our Heavenly Father’s love for you is real and unending. It is most powerfully manifest through the grace of His Son, Jesus Christ. I bless you that the love of God will envelop you as you love and strive to serve Him. I bless you that you will feel His love and that it will become the most powerful influence in your life. I know and can assure you that your Heavenly Father lives, as does His Son, our resurrected Lord, and as does His messenger of grace, the Holy Spirit. I know it and pray that you will fully come to know it. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See Matthew 22:35–36.
2. See Mark 12:28–34.
3. Luke 10:25.
4. Luke 10:29.
5. See Luke 10:30–37.
6. Matthew 22:36–40.

7. Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27.
8. Matthew 7:12; see also Luke 6:31;
- 3 Nephi 14:12.
9. See Alma 42:1.
10. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Cost—and Blessings—of Discipleship,” *Ensign*, May 2014; emphasis in original.
11. See Alma 42:13–15, 22–24.
12. Russell M. Nelson, “The Love and Laws of God,” BYU devotional address, 17 September 2019.
13. Ezra Taft Benson, “The Great Commandment—Love the Lord,” *Ensign*, May 1988.
14. See 1 John 4:19.
15. Joseph Smith, discourse at a conference of the Church, Nauvoo, Illinois, 7 April 1844; HC 6:312; quoted in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ, 2007), 210.
16. Abraham 3:26.
17. Abraham 3:26.
18. Alma 12:24.
19. See Moses 1:39.
20. John 3:16.
21. John 8:29.
22. Doctrine and Covenants 19:18.
23. Doctrine and Covenants 19:19; emphasis added.
24. John 14:15; see also Doctrine and Covenants 42:29.
25. 1 John 4:20.
26. John 13:35.
27. John 21:15–17.
28. John 21:15.
29. John 21:16–17. Clearly, feeding the sheep and lambs includes ministering to those who lack physical as well as spiritual food. We remember the Lord’s assurance, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40). One of the important characteristics of a Zion society as noted in Doctrine and Covenants 82:19 is “every man seeking the interest of his neighbor, and doing all things with an eye single to the glory of God.”
30. Alma 34:27; see also verses 18–26. Amulek also reminds us that without charity-motivated service to God and fellowman, our prayers will be vain (see Alma 34:28–29).
31. 2 Nephi 32:3.
32. See Mosiah 4:30 and Alma 12:14.
33. Mosiah 3:19.
34. Alma 34:38.
35. See John 17:3.