

Chapter 1 – The Two Great Commandments

“Love” may be the trickiest word in the English language. If you think about it, when we say we “love” certain things, we could be using the same word in totally different senses. “I love chocolate-covered cherries” or “I love sports” has a fundamentally different meaning than “I love my wife and children.”

Most people would be willing to give their lives for their loved ones, but no one would be willing to die for a box of chocolates (well, maybe a few chocoholics would).

We are faced with this same dilemma of the English language when addressing the Two Great Commandments. Let’s first hear how Jesus expresses them:

One of the scribes, when he came forward...asked him, “Which is the first of all the commandments?” Jesus replied, “The first is this: ‘Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:28-31)

Notice the word “love” in both of these statements? It has two different meanings.

We can only love the infinite God with heart, soul, mind, and strength. There are no conditions placed on this love. It encompasses the whole person and implies a sense of worship and obedience. It is total and absolute – the way God loves us.

Human Love

Not so with people! Jesus does not command us to love other human beings with heart, soul, mind, and strength. That would be impossible. Even worse, it would actually be a form of idolatry.

You may have witnessed a scenario where someone loves another person “too much”. It puts the other person in the place of God. A situation like that always ends in disaster because it places a burden on the persons who are objects of a love they cannot possibly live up to.

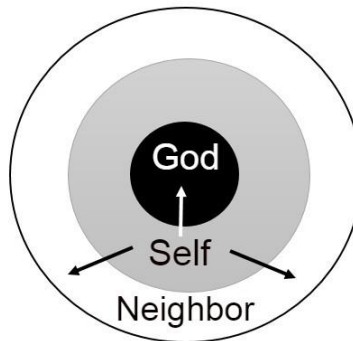
The way we are supposed to love our neighbor is “as we love ourselves.” We will explain more about this type of love in the chapter on the Golden Rule (Chapter 15). However, God’s command is simple and clear: loving one’s self is *the condition* for loving other people.

Love of self is not the kind of narcissism we see in the lives of celebrities and self-absorbed individuals. Love of self is self-respect, integrity, character, and humility.

Let's look more closely at how these loves relate to one another.

Two Commandments, Three Loves

The Two Great Commandments contain three types of love. Love of God (#1) is absolute, as we have noted. Love of neighbor (#2) is an expression of our self-love or self-respect (#3). Think of these loves as concentric circles. Here's how they would look in a chart:



Admittedly, the chart is pretty basic, but so is love. Let's not make it more complex than it is. Someone once said that "Love directed *upward* is adoration / Love directed *outward* is charity / Love directed *inward* is self-respect."

Notice that "self" is the middle *ring* of this chart, not the middle *circle*. The person who loves God and neighbor in a proper balance is not the center of his own universe, God is. Keeping God in the center of everything, we are able to love self and others with much greater strength and genuineness.

The middle ring also makes us intercessors and mediators between the ones we love: our lives become a channel through which love of God enters the world and through which our prayers for others rise up to God.

Two commandments, three loves. Simple.

Love is Real

The two Great Commandments are not abstract. They are very real. To prove this, we can ask ourselves some concrete questions about how we express these loves in real time.

"Love of God" Test

1. Do I worship God in my interior life: heart (emotions), mind (intellect) and strength (will)? And with the totality of my being (soul)?
2. Do I often express my worship through the virtue of religion, that is, being regularly faithful to religious practices and teachings?
3. Do I obey the moral law and pray every day?

“Love of Self” Test

1. Do I neglect my basic needs to the point of betraying my own health and wellbeing?
2. Do I invest reasonable amounts of time, resources, and effort in the care of my mind, my soul, and my spiritual fitness?
3. Does my family (an extension of self) receive my best efforts and tangible expressions of love on a daily basis?

“Love of Neighbor” Test

1. Do I follow the Golden Rule (Chapter 15) in treating others the way I wish to be treated and in loving them as I love/respect myself?
2. Do I regularly practice the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy (Chapters 16 and 17) on behalf of those who suffer or are in need of my help?
3. Do I develop the human virtues (Section 5) so that I can be the best possible person for the sake of others?

What must we do to love God, our neighbor, and ourselves? To love God, our neighbor, and ourselves we must keep the commandments of God and of the Church, and perform the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. *“My dear children, let us not love in word, neither with the tongue, but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18).* ~The Baltimore Catechism, 190.

Inseparable Commandments

We can use another familiar image to describe the Two Great Commandments: they are as inseparable as two sides of a coin.

Whenever anyone asked Jesus, “Which commandment (singular) is the greatest?” He always answered the question by talking about the Two Great Commandments (plural) because they are actually inseparable.

We cannot fulfill these two commandments *independently* of each other because one without the other deprives our love of integrity. Let’s take two examples of this:

Hypocrisy: Those who love God without love of neighbor are like the Pharisees in the Gospel. They would “devour the houses of widows and, as a pretext, recite lengthy prayers.” Jesus rejects hypocrisy of that sort because it separates love of God from love of neighbor. Jesus adds, “They will receive a very severe condemnation” (Luke 20:47).

Humanitarianism: On the other hand, those who pretend to love their fellow human beings without transcendent faith in God usually end up doing great harm to the people they are trying to help.

Examples abound, but the most serious example of that today involves the person who believes that abortion is a legitimate help to women. This mindset is a kind of secular humanitarianism without any reference to the law of God, and it always harms women emotionally, spiritually, and sometimes even physically, not to mention that it always ends in the death of an innocent child.

St. John the Evangelist sums up this kind of partial love. For him, love of our neighbor is an expression of our love of God:

One who has no love for the brother he has seen cannot love the God he has not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: whoever loves God must also love his brother (1 John 4:20–21).

So, in sum, the Two Great Commandments are actually one commandment of love. There's no better way to conclude our chapter than with a quote from a saint who knew a lot about love of God and neighbor:

“Spread love everywhere you go: first of all in your own house. Give love to your children, to your wife or husband, to a next door neighbor... Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier. Be the living expression of God's kindness; kindness in your face, kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile, kindness in your warm greeting.” ~Mother Teresa of Calcutta

Summary

The Two Great Commandments require us to love God and our neighbor in a balance. In sum:

1. They are different kinds of love: one is total, the other is conditional.
2. Love of God requires worship and challenges us to obey His moral law.
3. Love of neighbor requires self-respect as its primary condition, enabling us to live according to the Golden Rule and the demands of charity.
4. These commandments should never be separated; they are two sides of the same coin.
5. Love of God without neighbor is religious hypocrisy. Love of neighbor without God is empty humanitarianism.

Excerpt: Peter Darcy, *Flames of Faith: 18 Elements of Catholicism to Light Your Way* (Port Salerno, FL: Strength of Soul Books, 2025), Chapter 1.