

Raise Your Devotion

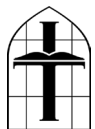
Johannes Zwick (c. 1496–1542); tr. Johann Christian Jacobi (1670–1750)

Raise your devotion, mortal tongues,
To praise the King of Glory,
Sweet be the accents of your songs
Of him who went before ye;
Bright angels, strike your loudest strings:
Let heav'n and all created things
Sound our Emanuel's praises.

Ye mourning souls, look upward too,
For Christ is now preparing
At God's right hand a place for you:
Shake off what seems despairing.
Thence our great Lord and King shall come
To fetch our longing spirits home,
And crown your love and labor.

Since He o'er heav'n bears sov'reign sway,
By all its pow'rs attended;
And has more graces to display
Than can be comprehended;
Fear not but he his graces pours
On such meek trembling hearts as yours,
The objects of his favor.

Extend, O Lord, thy sov'reign grace,
Thy light to ev'ry nation:
Let earth and seas avow and praise
Thy love, thy pow'r, thy passion;
'Till we join with thy saints above
In hymns to celebrate thy love,
And dwell with thee forever..



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www.centalseminary.edu | info@centralseminary.edu
900 Forestview Lane N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 800.827.1043

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

The Center of Biblical Religion, Part 2: Loving God

Kevin T. Bauder

The center of biblical religion is the recognition that there is one and only one true and living God, and that He is Jehovah. To say that Jehovah or Yahweh is the only true God is to say that He alone is worthy of worship. We must value Him always as an end and never as a means. He is the goal, the *telos*, of all that exists, including us. In other words, Yahweh alone deserves our absolute loyalty and our unconditioned trust.

We have a word for that kind of loyalty and trust. We call it *love*. Granted, we use the word *love* for other things too, but its highest and most proper use is for a relationship of loyal trust.

Thus, the *Shema* leads directly into the Greatest Commandment. Indeed, Jesus Himself made this connection. When a scribe asked Him which was the greatest commandment, Jesus replied by citing Deuteronomy 6:4–5. The lawyer got the point immediately: “Well, Master, thou hast said the truth: for there is one God; and there is none other but he: And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength. . . , is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices” (Mark 12:32–33). The text of Mark labels this answer as “discreet” (12:34), implying that the scribe’s evaluation was correct.

If there is one and only one true and living God, then we are obligated to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We must love Him for Himself, and not merely for His gifts. If we love Him for His gifts, we are not really loving Him. We are loving the gifts, and we are making Yahweh into a means to the end of receiving them.

We are commanded to love Jehovah our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. The word *all* is decisive. If we love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, then we shall have no heart, soul, mind, or strength left over to love anything else. The love that God demands of us is an exclusive love. We must love Him alone.

This very exclusiveness creates a paradox, though. In the same breath that Jesus tells us to love Yahweh our God, He also tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves. What trickery is this? If I am already loving God with all my

heart, soul, mind, and strength, then how can I have any love left over for my neighbor?

The problem is even more pronounced than that. Followers of Jesus are also commanded to love each other (John 13:34–35; Rom 12:10). Husbands are told to love their wives (Eph 5:25), and wives must be taught to love their husbands and children (Titus 2:4). We are even supposed to love our enemies (Matt 5:43). Loving our neighbor turns out to be more extensive than we might have guessed.

How are all these loves compatible with loving God alone? The answer lies in Matthew 5. There we are told that if we love our enemies, we shall become children of our heavenly Father (5:44). These words do not mean that God becomes our Father because we love our enemies. It means that our kinship to God is placed on display when we love our enemies, because our Father loves His enemies. He “maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust” (5:45).

There is the key. Our love for neighbor, spouse, brother, and even enemy is a copy of a pattern that we learn by loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. In other words, I must not love my neighbor, brother, spouse, or enemy for their own sakes. I must love them as a manifestation of the love that I already experience toward God. Loving God includes loving what God loves (and, incidentally, hating what God hates).

We must love God alone for His own sake, simply because He merits our love. We must love nothing else in that way. We ought not to love our neighbors, spouses, brethren, or enemies because they merit our love. Rather, we ought to love them because they are objects of God’s love. We ought to love them for His sake. Loving them ought to be integral with loving Him.

One more thing. Loving God so completely is a commandment. It is law, not gospel. It is not the way to salvation. Rather, our failure to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength is the heart of what condemns us.

We can never repair lawbreaking by law keeping. Even if we could, we would find it impossible to stir up within ourselves the kind of love that God requires. In the hands of the accuser, the Greatest Commandment stands over against us, judging and condemning us. We are—all of us—law-breakers at this most fundamental level.

We have failed to keep the Greatest Commandment and it condemns us. But this is the very condemnation that Jesus came to bear. God demonstrated His love in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 5:8). When we repent of our sin and trust Christ, God forgives us and cleanses us.

He also places His Spirit within us to begin remaking us. The fruit of the Spirit is (among other things) love. We cannot will ourselves into love for God, but the Holy Spirit can produce in us the very thing that we lack. Even though we are not sanctified by law keeping, to the degree that we are sanctified we shall look more and more like law keepers. As we walk according to the Spirit rather than the flesh, we shall more and more mind the things of the Spirit (Rom 8:4–5).

In other words, the Greatest Commandment is still relevant to us. Indeed, nothing is more relevant. It stands as a summary of the final goal of the life of faith. We have begun to love God already (Rom 8:28). This is a first consequence of our salvation. Let us seek those means that the Holy Spirit will use to foster and nourish this love in us. It remains the center of all biblical religion.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
