

Try to remember. What did you say when you rolled out of bed today? Was it more along the lines of “Good morning, God” or “Good God, its morning?” Chances are, those first words set the tone for the rest of the day. For the pious Jew the first words of each morning are always the same. They were first spoken by Moses, in the book of Deuteronomy and this is the first place in the Torah where the people are told to love God.

They are told first to **love God with all our heart.** You might say that no one can be told to love someone. Love is an innermost feeling, and we can't command love. It either happens or it doesn't. But in the Hebrew language love is not just a feeling. It involves our whole being.

The primary obligation for every good Jew has always been to love God with the **heart, with the center of all passion and trust.** That is the primary purpose of human life. When we were baptized in the name of Jesus, we were given the same script to follow.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your soul." In Hebrew thought, the soul is the breath of life, the part of us that is the breathing part. To love God with the soul, therefore, is to love God with every breath. We affirm that the source of every breath is the God who gives it. We breathe because God has breathed life into us.

Back in the fourth century, some Christian monks visualized this insight in a memorable way. They talked about prayer as a breathing exercise. "As you inhale," they taught, "thank God for the gifts which are given you for today. As you exhale, tell God how you are going to use those gifts."

For example, breathe in and say, "I thank you, God, for daily bread." Breathe out and say, "God, let me find strength in daily bread to do the work you have given me." Breathe in and pray, "I thank you, Lord, for the forgiveness of my sins." Breathe out and pray, "I ask you, Lord, to make me a forgiving person." Breathe in, breathe out. The early monks said, "Let every breath be a prayer."

You shall love the Lord your God with all your mind. Anybody who was listening closely to the scripture lesson did not hear these words from the original commandment in Deuteronomy. The Gospel of Mark was written for a world that spoke Greek, in a culture with a deep respect for the human intellect and its capacity to think. If we are called upon to love God with every possible human ability, the implications are clear for the first audience of the Gospel of Mark: we are to love God with our minds.

It's not enough to have a faith that feels deep feelings. We must develop a faith that thinks profound thoughts. If the only mental stimulation we receive comes from tabloids or Wheel of Fortune, then we do not have the capacity to know how deeply God loves

us. If we're trying to handle adult life with a third-grade Sunday School education, we will not have the skills needed to negotiate the daily difficulties

Finally, "**You shall love the Lord your God with all your strength.**" We misunderstand love if we reduce it to a sentiment of the heart, a word from the breath, or a thought from the mind. Love is also something we do. Love is a word that taps our energy and flexes our muscles.

Love finds expression in what you do, not what you say. If you've ever seen the wonderful musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, there's a great scene where Tevya the milkman asks his wife Golda if she loves him. They've been married twenty-five years at this point, but theirs was an arranged marriage. They never met before their wedding day. Now their children are choosing to marry for love, and not because of a parent's arrangement.

Golda responds at first by saying the question is foolish, but soon she begins to count what she's done for her husband — washing his clothes, raising their children, sharing a bed — and as she sings, "If that's not love, what is?"

Each day we wake to face some task for God's sake. If we pledge each new morning to love God with all of our strength, we pray that the work we do will be part of God's work, that we might delight in his ways and walk with his love.

The second commandment that Jesus calls the greatest extends in all directions — “You shall love your neighbor as yourself. That” is more than a commandment. It should be a reality that includes conflict and resolution, with God as a central player in our relationships.

Neighbors can be annoying, exasperating, and impossible, (And sometimes we’re the neighbor who’s the royal pain!) You learn you can’t just make “love of neighbor” happen. And maybe that’s why the command Jesus quoted from is a lot more complex — and longer — than we usually think of. In Jesus’ day when you quoted part of a verse, it was assumed you were actually quoting from the larger passage. Looking at the context in Leviticus gives you a good idea of what it means to love your neighbor. When conflict happens, the one who is wrong has to confront their neighbor and confront the wrong. When the chapter in Leviticus tells us, “You shall reprove your neighbor,” you have to bring things out into the open in order to solve the problem. We don’t always like to do this sort of thing. We don’t want conflict or confrontation. But true neighboring means you have to be open about these things and face the issues squarely. You can’t solve a problem by wishing it would go away.

Don’t let your grudge build up. Instead, love your neighbor, and that means recovering what you’ve lost with your neighbor. And what you’ve lost is peace.

Working toward reconciliation means recovering the relationship you had before sinning against each other. Jesus' interpretation of the morning prayer and what it would mean not only for our loyalty to God but to our actions would set the foundation for all of Christianity. For Christians are to be lovers not judges, people of mercy and forgiveness not bestowers of banishment and punishment, servants of all not wielders of power and judgments.

G. K. Chesterton once said that the really great lesson of the story of "Beauty and the Beast" is that a thing must be loved before it is loveable. A person must be loved before that person can be loveable. Some of the most unlovely people I have known got that way because they thought that nobody loved them. The fact of the matter is that unless and until we feel ourselves loved, we cannot love. That's not only a principle of theology but of psychology and sociology as well. Just as abused children grow up to abuse their children, loved children grow up to love their children. Loved persons are able to love. Unloved persons are not. Christianity says something startling. It says that God loves and accepts us "just as we are." Therefore we can love and accept ourselves and in so doing, love and accept others. If you can't quite make that your first thought in the morning, at least try to make that the final summary of your day as you go to sleep.

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