

**Series:** Seek

**Title:** Great Commandment

**Text:** Matthew 22:37-40

**Date:** March 12, 2023

Love is integral to the Christian religion. Scripture reveals it is one of the foremost attributes of God (1 John 4:8) and that it is a driving motivator behind the salvation offered through God's Son (John 3:16). Jesus encouraged His disciples to be marked by love. He upheld both a love for God (John 14:15) and a love for others (John 13:34-35) as hallmarks of real religion. His valuation of the importance of love is seen through His famous "Great Commandment."

The most repeated account of the Great Commandment is found in Matthew's gospel. Jesus gave the commandment in response to a question he fielded from a religious critic. The man approached and asked, "Teacher, which command in the law is the greatest?" (Matthew 22:36). Though the man's question may seem rather germane to modern believers, it constituted a theological minefield in first-century Judaism. In most circumstances, a response to the question would have separated religious devotees into sectarian camps. The man's question was designed to ensnare Jesus in a theological trap. The masses who followed Jesus could have potentially become disenfranchised by His response. The intent was to harm Jesus' ministry.

### **Love Is The Greatest**

With the wisdom of God, Jesus responded masterfully to His interrogator. He said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands" (Matthew 22:37-40). Jesus' response revealed several important realities. First, His words upheld the unique nature of humanity. As beings made in the image of God, humankind has a special capacity to relate to God and other humans. Second, Jesus' words showed the true pathway for fulfilling God's Law. It is through directing one's affections toward the Lord that one fulfills God's righteous requirements for humankind.

There is a third reality we see from Jesus' Great Commandment. For the purpose of our study, we want to highlight the way Jesus' words placed priority on the virtue of love. Our Lord indicated that love is the mother of all Christian virtue. In a sense, it is the most important word in the Christian religion. Paul promoted Jesus' point of view, saying, "Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love—but the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13). To be faithful in the pursuit of God, believers of all generations should seek after the love of which Jesus spoke.

### **Not a New Thing**

Before we talk about the role of love in seeking God, it is important to emphasize a few matters. First, one must understand that the Lord's call to love is not something reserved for the New Testament era alone. In every age of human history, it has been God's desire for God's people to pursue love first of all. Such is expressed through God's Law. Based on His moral character, the Lord ordained a Moral Law for

humankind. Theologians and Bible teachers have often regarded the Ten Commandments as a succinct statement of God's Moral Law. A cursory reading of those commandments from Exodus 20:1-17 reveals that God's law was primarily concerned with one's relationship with God (Exodus 20:1-11) and one's relationship with others (Exodus 20:12-17). Consequently, God's Moral Law has always promoted the priority of love!

In addition to the Law, the Lord gave explicit commands concerning love in the Old Testament. Contrary to the perspective of some, the first half of the Bible isn't an outdated book concerned with archaic escapades related to human genocide and gruesome sacrifices. One has commented, "...the Bible is a concerted whole, a unity throughout. The notion that we can discard the OT as no longer relevant today is grossly mistaken. Jesus explained that the whole of OT Scripture referred to himself."<sup>1</sup> The doctrine of love is not an exception in this matter. The Hebrew Scriptures contain strong references to the importance of the virtue.

In fact, one of the most important passages for Old Testament believers championed love. Known as the "Shema," portions of Deuteronomy 6 were quoted daily by dutiful Jews. One section of the famous Scripture said, "Listen, Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). The Shema reveals that the command to love isn't a new doctrine for the New Testament era alone. The Lord has always called His people to live by the law of love.

### **The Priority of Love**

Because of the teaching of both the Old Testament and Jesus, it isn't surprising that the apostles upheld the priority of love. When writing to the Romans, Paul said, "Do not owe anyone anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, Do not commit adultery; do not murder; do not steal; do not covet; and any other commandment, are summed up by this commandment: Love your neighbor as yourself" (Romans 13:8-9). In his letter to the Galatians, he similarly said, "For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement: Love your neighbor as yourself" (Galatians 5:14). Paul was well aware that love is a hallmark of true Christianity. John concurred with Paul's perspective. He flatly told his readers, "The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:8).

James too championed the mother of all Christian virtue. Interestingly, the man was a brother of Jesus. He was a half-brother, since Jesus was born of a virgin. Though he didn't regard Jesus as Savior until after Jesus' resurrection (John 2:12; 7:3-5), James eventually learned much about the law of love. In his letter, he made frequent reference to Jesus' Great Commandment. He knew his readers were plagued by unloving treatment of one another (James 2:1-13; 4:1-3). Thus, he urged them to live by what he called "the royal law." He said, "Indeed, if you fulfill the royal law prescribed in the Scripture, Love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing well" (James 2:8).

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<sup>1</sup> Letham, Robert. *The Message of the Person of Christ: The Word Made Flesh*. (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013), 22.

## **The Corinthian Confusion**

All of these things promote the primacy of love in the pursuit of God. Seeking God involves a fervent focus on the greatest of all virtues. Paul's first letter to the first-century church at Corinth gives special attention to this subject. By reading the letter, we learn that the church had a number of problems. There were sectarian divisions in the church (1 Corinthians 1:10-17). Immorality plagued the congregation (1 Corinthians 5:1-5). Even public worship was tainted by issues. When the church gathered on the Lord's Day, individual members fought over opportunities to speak (1 Corinthians 14:26). Some even used the Lord's Supper as an opportunity to get drunk (1 Corinthians 11:20-21)!

What was the remedy for all of the Corinthians' problems? Paul upheld the mother of all virtues — love — as a solution. It is not without coincidence that his letter to the church contains a chapter that is famously regarded as “the Love Chapter” (1 Corinthians 13:1-13)! Interestingly, Paul used the word “seek” on a few different occasions in his letter in conjunction with his instructions regarding love. By examining his use of the word in such contexts, we can learn a lot about what's involved with living according to Christ's Great Commandment. Let's analyze Paul's use of the word “seek” in reference to love and discover how the experience of God's love works in our lives.

## **THE PRINCIPLE OF SELF-CENTEREDNESS**

One of Paul's most well known uses of the word “seek” found within his famous “love chapter.” In 1 Corinthians 13, the apostle said, “Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, is not boastful, is not arrogant, is not rude, is not self-seeking, is not irritable, and does not keep a record of wrongs” (1 Corinthians 13:4-5). The Greek word underlying English translations was the word *zētēō*. It implied a zealous searching after an object. So far in our study, we've seen it applied to the pursuit of the Lord in passages like Matthew 6:33 and John 8:50.

For the purposes of our current discussion, it is important to note that the word was used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:5 to speak of an ungodly sort of pursuit. Namely, Paul used the word to speak of an unholy self-oriented perspective. One has commented, saying, “Paul probably had in mind here the practice of always putting oneself in first place without due consideration of others.”<sup>2</sup> Paul was concerned with the practice whereby one primarily sought his or her own interests.<sup>3</sup>

## **The Garden of Eden**

Such a bent toward self has plagued humanity since the beginning of time. When God created the first man and woman, He gave them hearts that were bent toward His will and His righteousness. Adam and Eve initially had souls that were turned outward toward Gods and others. As beings made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), they

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<sup>2</sup> Pratt Jr., Richard L. *Holman New Testament Commentary: Volume 7, I & II Corinthians*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), [CD-Rom].

<sup>3</sup> Robertson, Archibald Thomas. *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume IV, The Epistles of Paul*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1931), 178.

lived in harmony with their Creator and one another. Such harmony reflected the interrelatedness that has eternally existed amongst the Trinity (John 17:21).

Unfortunately, Adam and Eve fell for the bait of Satan (Genesis 3:1-4). They allowed their souls to become turned inward through an ungodly lust to be like God (Genesis 3:5). Their sin had disastrous consequences for the entire human race. The moment they violated God's command, they experienced spiritual death. Their souls became inwardly focused. Guilt, shame, and insecurity sullied the human condition. Since Adam and Eve's first sin, all of humanity has been marked by an unholy and unhealthy inward focus. Scripture says, "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, in this way death spread to all people, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12).

Earlier in our study, we learned that original sin has corrupted the human soul in such a way that there "...is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God" (Romans 3:11). The fall has perverted the state of human souls. Whereas the first humans initially had souls that were pre-programmed for seeking God and others, sin now makes men and women seek after self as the predominating principle in life. Even a non-Christian author has commented on the condition of humanity, saying, "Each of us tends to be so concerned with his or her own interests that we pay too little heed to the interests of others."<sup>4</sup>

### **Corinthian Confusion**

The Corinthians needed to be aware of such things. They were consumed with self-seeking behavior. Though many of them had experienced new life in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17), they were falling back into a fallen perspective, living for self over God and others. Paul rebuked them because of such things. In 1 Corinthians 14:4 he did so in the context of his discussion regarding the misuse of tongues in the church. He said, "The person who speaks in a tongue builds himself up, but the one who prophesies builds up the church."

Speaking in unknown tongues or languages is something that can be traced all the way back to Genesis 11:1-9. Early in human history, the Lord used foreign languages as a sign of judgment. When Israel was told of pending captivity, the babble of the Babylonians was symbolic of God's disfavor with the nation (Isaiah 28:11; Jeremiah 5:15). At the famous Day of Pentecost after Jesus' crucifixion, the Lord gave the apostles the gift of tongues to signify judgment that had come upon unbelieving Israel (Acts 2:1-13). Solomon's Temple would be destroyed (Mark 13:2) and the "time of the Gentiles" would move the Jews to the background in God's program of redemption (Romans 11:25).

The Corinthians misunderstood the Lord's intent in tongues speaking. Through an inordinate self-focus, they tried to duplicate the events of Pentecost at their regular worship gatherings. Paul corrected their error. In doing so, he pointed to the intent behind their it — an unhealthy spirit of self-centeredness.

Paul wanted the Corinthians to be on guard against a preoccupation with self. He gave personal testimony elsewhere in his letter of how he refused to primarily live

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<sup>4</sup> Fisher, Roger and William Ury. *Getting To Yes Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2011), 53.

for his own interests. He spoke of how he didn't take an offering for his work as an apostle when he could have (1 Corinthians 9:6-15).<sup>5</sup> He also held up Christ as a pattern for all to follow. Through the incarnation, Jesus rejected a self-focus, emptying Himself on our behalf. His faithfulness is an example for us (Philippians 2:3-7).<sup>6</sup> Paul told the Corinthians, "And he died for all so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for the one who died for them and was raised" (2 Corinthians 5:15).

### **Die to Self**

Paul's use of the word seek in 1 Corinthians teaches us that we must reject a self-focused lifestyle in order to live lives of love. Charles Spurgeon once said, "No man is capable of virtue as long as self is his object."<sup>7</sup> To truly love God and others, we must say with John the Baptist, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). We must heed the words of Jesus: "If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Mark 8:34). One has rightly said, "New life and healing can come to us only when we begin to find purpose in pursuing not our self-centered aims but the glory of God himself...."<sup>8</sup>

### **THE PRINCIPLE OF SELFLESSNESS**

Paul also used the word "seek" in 1 Corinthians to speak of the opposite perspective of the one he spoke of in 1 Corinthians 13:5. Whereas he had discouraged a self-seeking perspective in that verse, he encouraged a selfless perspective in another place. In both 1 Corinthians 10:24 and 33, he used the word "seek" in order to encourage a selfless perspective amongst the body of Christ.

The apostle's encouragement to selfless living are worth considering nowadays. William Barclay rightly observed, "There are in this world only two kinds of people -- those who always insist upon their privileges and those who always remember their responsibilities; those who are always thinking of what life owes them and those who never forget what they owe to life."<sup>9</sup> To pursue and glorify God, we must know how to live in a selfless way. From 1 Corinthians 10:24 and 33, we find two ideas that help us understand the nature of Christian selflessness.

### **Seeking the Good of Others**

In 1 Corinthians 10:24, Paul said, "No one is to seek his own good, but the good of the other person" (1 Corinthians 10:24). Paul's words were uttered in the context of his instruction about eating food that had been sacrificed to idols. Such was a hot-topic

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<sup>5</sup> Pratt, [CD-Rom].

<sup>6</sup> Pratt, [CD-Rom].

<sup>7</sup> Spurgeon, C.H. *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, 1880; 26*. (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 2005), 98.

<sup>8</sup> Wallace, Ronald S. *The Message of Daniel: The Lord is King*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1984), 61.

<sup>9</sup> Barclay, William, *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letters to the Corinthians*. (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), [CD-Rom].

issue in the first-century church, as a lot of the meat that was sold in local markets had been previously sacrificed in honor of false gods. Debates raged amongst believers as to whether it was permissible to eat such meat. The apostle dealt with the subject in detail in Romans 14.

In 1 Corinthians 10:24, Paul contented that Christian charity should have played a part in how the church approached the subject. Instead of embracing a contentious spirit concerning such debatable matters, believers were to be considerate of others. In short, they were to practice Great Commandment love. If members of the church would have thought about others before themselves, controversy concerning meat would have died down. It was a selfish spirit that kept troubled waters raging in the church.

The New Testament is consistent in its characterization of the selfless nature of love. The Great Commandment said, “Love your neighbor *as yourself*” (Matthew 22:39). The Golden Rule proclaimed, “...whatever you want others to do for you, do also the same for them...” (Matthew 7:12). Paul told the Romans, “Love one another deeply as brothers and sisters. Take the lead in honoring one another” (Romans 12:10). To the Philippians, he said, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3). Such passages reveal that Christian love involves a selfless attitude in which one puts others before self.

One has said, “Christian love is not a mere pious sentiment, it is a self-sacrificing lifestyle that seeks, perhaps at great cost, the good of fellow members of the family of God.”<sup>10</sup> Such words cut to the essence of what it means to live by the Great Commandment. I’ve often heard the word “joy” used as an acrostic to depict what’s involved in Christ’s command concerning love. Joy can be thought of as standing for Jesus, Others, Yourself. When we put God and others before self, we will be on our way to embodying the love the Lord desires.

### **So That They May Be Saved**

Paul also used the Greek word for “seek” in reference to selflessness in 1 Corinthians 10:33, saying, “...just as I also try to please everyone in everything, not seeking my own benefit, but the benefit of many, so that they may be saved.” Notice that there was a grand motivating factor that drove Paul to selflessness. He renounced self in order that others might be “saved.” The apostle knew that self-driven living has a way of tarnishing the witness of the church.

Paul’s words reveal a primary reason believers should embrace Christian love. When the world sees the same traits of fallen society within the church, they’ll be unlikely to take the witness of the church seriously. Jesus taught that love amongst the body will provide a convincing evidence concerning the credibility of the Christian message. He said, “I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35). Commenting on the evangelistic power of love in the church, one has said, “Love is to be so clear and visible that by

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<sup>10</sup> Editor. Sweet Assurance. *The Banner of Truth Magazine*: 674. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, Nov 2019), 3.

observing it, outsiders will know that Jesus’s disciples are his followers. Sadly, many unbelievers today would probably not mention love as the primary characteristic of Christians.”<sup>11</sup>

### **“Look at How They Love!”**

The early church was known for its love. In one of his writings, Tertullian, an early church leader, commented on how the pagan world viewed the initial followers of the faith. Speaking of the conversations concerning Christians amongst the general population of Rome, he said, “‘Look,’ they say, ‘how they love one another’ (for they themselves hate one another); ‘and how they are ready to die for each other’ (for they themselves are readier to kill each other).”<sup>12</sup> It was a selfless regard for others that made the testimony of the early church so powerful.

The first believers were attuned to Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 10:33. They renounced self so that others might be saved. For Christ to be made known in our generation, a similar commitment is needed. Nancy Pearcey has said, “When people see a supernatural dimension of love, power, and goodness in the way Christians live and treat one another, then our message of biblical truth becomes plausible.”<sup>13</sup>

### **THE PRINCIPLE OF SERVICE**

From Paul’s use of the word “seek” in relation to love in 1 Corinthians, we find one more truth concerning Christian love. Namely, we discover the love of God will lead Christians to serve within the body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 14:12, Paul said, “So also you—since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, seek to excel in building up the church...” The church at Corinth exhibited a zeal for “spiritual gifts.” They were fascinated with signs, wonders, and tongues speaking. However, they were negligent when it came to true Christian service.

Note Paul’s use of the word “zealous.” The Greek term underlying English translations is one that referred to a zealot. The title spoke of a person who had an unhealthy enthusiasm for something. In the original language of the New Testament, Paul employed a definite article with the term. In doing so, he placed stress or emphasis on the zealous activity of the Corinthians. Some had an inordinate fascination with spiritual gifts.<sup>14</sup>

Many believers fall into the same trap as the Corinthians. They have an unhealthy preoccupation with religious programming and entertainment that is devoid of a heart for serving others. Paul revealed the remedy to such a selfish perspective through his use of the words “building up.” Instead of focusing on self, the Corinthians needed to focus on others.

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<sup>11</sup> Kostenberger, J. Andreas & Taylor, Justin. *The Final Days of Jesus*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 70.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.tertullian.org/quotes.html>

<sup>13</sup> Pearcey, Nancy. R. *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 355.

<sup>14</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 382.

The Greek word translated “building up” in 1 Corinthians 14:12 is one that was used in the world of construction in first-century society. The term was employed in Matthew 24:1 and Mark 13:1 in reference to the literal buildings of the Temple complex in Jerusalem. During the days of the early church, the term began to be applied to the church. Three popular metaphors are used in the New Testament of God’s people. The first is that of a body (1 Corinthians 12:12), the second is a bride (Ephesians 5:25-27; Revelation 19:1-10), and the third is that of a building. In Ephesians, Paul said:

So, then, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole building, being put together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you are also being built together for God’s dwelling in the Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22).

### **For the Glory of God**

The building metaphor highlights how believers function like interdependent parts in a vast superstructure. The metaphor also reveals that the Lord wants to use His people for His renown. In the ancient world, buildings were often a source of pride for people groups and societies. Care was given to construct ornate and impressive buildings for getting glory or grandeur to a city or nation. People often marveled at the beauty of great structures (Matthew 24:1; Mark 13:1).

Aware of such things, Paul encouraged the Corinthians to see themselves as a great spiritual structure. No individual part was to be regarded as being more significant than the collective whole. Each member of the church was simply one piece of lumber, stone, or plaster in a great big building that was designed to get glory for Jesus. Consequently, when the church gathered for worship, individual members were to focus on building others up. Earlier in his letter, Paul had said, “For we are God’s coworkers. You are God’s field, *God’s building*” (1 Corinthians 3:9).

### **Learning to Build Others Up**

Elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul encouraged believers to focus on edifying one another. He told the Romans, “So then, let us pursue what promotes peace and what builds up one another” (Romans 14:19). To the Ephesians, he said, “No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear” (Ephesians 4:29). Paul’s point was the same to the Corinthians. Instead of fighting for the limelight during worship, they were to focus on encouraging and edifying others.

As we close our study on Paul’s use of the word “seek” in relation to loving others, it is important to emphasize this last truth. One of the foremost ways of fulfilling the Great Commandment is to use our spiritual gifts for the good of others within the body of Christ. One has rightly said, “When one is in public worship, the paramount concern must be how all the believers should be built up and not how someone or a small group may selfishly benefit by the public experience. In Christian worship the



individual worshiper ought to be concerned how he or she can spiritually benefit others by what he or she does and says.”<sup>15</sup>

When I was young, I had a step-grandfather who was a rather skilled handyman. On one particular summer, my brother and I stayed with him and my grandmother for several weeks. At the outset of our stay, he told me he was going to use the time to teach me some construction skills. Over the next several weeks, I learned how to hold a hammer, use a screw driver, and operate other tools. I helped him with a drywall installation project, and we even built a birdhouse together. To this day, I use some of the construction skills he taught me.

Believers of all generation need similar training in a spiritual sense. Scripture calls each to employ spiritual tools and gifts for the purpose of building others up. The Corinthians were deficient in this regard. May we be different. May we understand that an others focus in church is a way of fulfilling Jesus’ Great Commandment.

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<sup>15</sup> Zodiates, 1031.