

GC1: The Greatest Commandment

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Deuteronomy 6:5 ESV



This Bible study is the first in the GC Trilogy and focuses on the greatest commandment given in both the Old and New Testaments. Here, we seek to understand what it means to love God with our whole being and explore ways we can grow ever closer to the Lord in obedience to this command.

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The GC Trilogy

GC1: The Greatest Commandment
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GC3: The Great Commission

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Session One: The LORD, Your God

Read Matthew 22:35-40 and Mark 12:28-31.

1. What did the lawyer (scribe) ask Jesus?

Jesus had already proven himself to be well-versed in the Mosaic Law. With 613 laws in the Old Testament, asking which commandment was the greatest was a reasonable question.

2. What is a commandment?

3. If someone in authority over you gives you a command, do you have a choice to do it or not? Explain.

In the Mark passage, Jesus begins his answer by quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5. To begin understanding what it means to love God with our whole being, we must examine verse four closely.

Read Deuteronomy 6:4.

4. Who is this command to? How is this also a command for Christians?

5. What does the word “our” imply?

6. Christians are happy to identify with God and/or Jesus as their friend, helper, and savior. From this verse, we are also to identify with God as our _____.

7. How is your answer to #6 necessary for someone to even be a Christian? See Romans 10:8-10.

8. What does it mean to you to identify with God as your Lord?

9. It is all about perspective, i.e., how we view who we are in relationship to God. What do the following verses say about who God is and who we are?

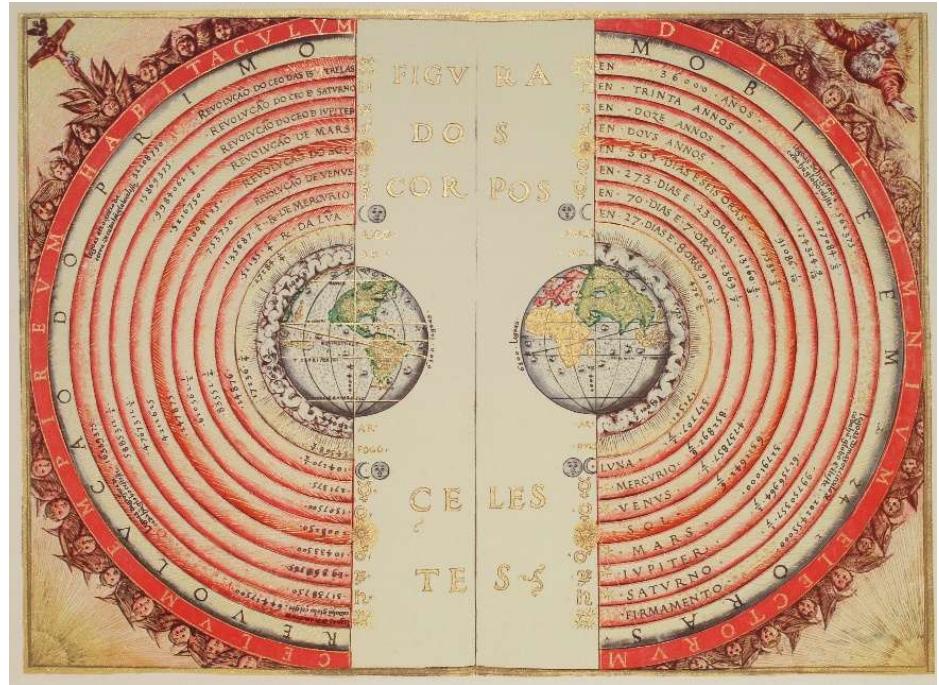
Scripture	Who God Is	Who We Are
Genesis 1:27		
Psalm 22:28		
Isaiah 64:8		
John 15:5-6		
Romans 3:23		

10. "Without the cleansing of sin that God provides, and the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit who lives in the hearts of the redeemed, loving God to any degree is impossible." (Quoted from: GotQuestions.org) Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

In astronomy, the geocentric model describes the Universe with Earth at the center, with the Sun, Moon, planets, and stars all orbiting Earth. This model was the predominant description of the cosmos in many ancient European civilizations and was generally accepted for thousands of years up to the 16th century.

Two observations supported the idea. First, the Sun, Moon, planets, and stars appear to revolve around Earth about once daily. Second, from a person's perspective, Earth seems unmoving; it feels solid and stable.

Complicated models were charted to support this theory, which depicted each planet revolving around the Earth through a system of two spheres or cycles. This explained the observation that planets slowed down, stopped, and moved backward, then reversed to resume normal motion as they revolved around the Earth.



In the 16th century, the Renaissance mathematician and Catholic cleric Nicolaus Copernicus presented his model of a heliocentric system that placed the Sun at the center of the Universe. While there was still much to learn, this explained the general behavior of our solar system: the Earth is one of the planets that revolve around the Sun. This replaced the false perspective and simplified the models, leading to further knowledge and understanding.

It is sometimes easy for us to have the perspective that we are the center of our universe, i.e., our lives. Similar to the geocentric model, we perceive that our lives revolve around our needs, wants, and views, which are valued above those of anyone or anything around us. We are the masters of our own lives and in control. This can feel solid and secure.

11. Like the geocentric model, what is the fundamental problem when we view ourselves as the center of our lives?

12. What is the true perspective? Who should be at the center of our lives?

13. It can be hard to keep this perspective. In the table below, list things in this life/world that threaten this perspective, and what steps can we take to keep this perspective.

Threats to a God-centered Perspective	Steps to Counteract Threats and Keep a God-centered Perspective

Session Two: Love the **LORD** Your God

In Mark 12:30, Jesus quotes what he recognizes as the greatest commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." (Note that the Deuteronomy and Matthew verses also say heart and soul, but differ in the last two terms. We will discuss that in Session Three.) This love must be different from an emotion or a feeling because a command cannot dictate emotions or feelings.

- 1. Notice that love in this command is a verb and therefore an action, a behavior. Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 and list the attributes of the behavior of love.**
- 2. Why do you think the greatest commandment doesn't instead say we are to believe, serve, or worship the Lord our God with our whole being?**
- 3. What does this tell you about God, that the most crucial thing he asks of us is to love him?**
- 4. Just like a fountain must have an ample supply of water to spring forth, we must realize God's abundant love for us to be able to love him back with our whole being. What do the following verses say about God's love for each of us?**

Scripture	What This Verse Says About God's Love For Us
Psalm 36:7-8	
Jeremiah 29:11	
Zephaniah 3:17	
John 3:16	
Romans 5:8	
Romans 8:38-39	
1 John 3:1a	

5. Why must we have God as our Lord *and* know the depth of his love for us before we can obey this command?
6. We can choose to experience and expose ourselves to God's love, therefore increasing our fount. In what ways do the following activities fill our reservoir of realizing God's love for us?
 - Reading the Bible and Bible study
 - Prayer and meditation
 - Communal worship, i.e., going to church
 - Close relationships with fellow believers
 - Reading faith-based books and listening to Christian music
 - Serving/helping others

Understanding how much God loves us and who we are in relationship to him dawns light on some age-old ponderings. Based on what we have examined so far in this Bible study, answer these questions as best you can.

7. Why did God create humans?
8. What is the most critical thing in this life?
9. Does God really love me and care about me?

Session Three: With All Your Heart, Soul, and Might

When Jesus spoke of the greatest commandment, he referenced Deuteronomy 6:5: You shall love the Lord your God with all your *heart* and with all your *soul* and with all your *might*. Matthew 22:37 uses the terms heart, soul, and *mind*. Mark 12:30 and Luke 10:27 mention heart, soul, *mind*, and *strength*.

Jesus did not misquote Scripture, and the Gospel writers did not get it wrong. Instead, using different words stems from two main reasons. First, Deuteronomy was written in Hebrew, Jesus spoke in Aramaic, the New Testament was recorded in Greek, and we read an English translation. A Hebrew word may need more words when translated to capture its essence. Second, the original Hebrew words used in Deuteronomy 6:5 have overlapping meanings. To convey the total thought to Jesus' audience, he used contemporary words that best expressed the original meaning when put together in a sentence. To channel these attributes of ourselves to love God, we must understand how the Scriptures use the words heart, soul, and might.

Much of the following information is from W. E. Vine's *Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words*. These files are public domain.

Heart

In the Deuteronomy verse, the word "heart" is the Hebrew word *lēb*, which refers to our inner person, not the heart as an organ. Over 800 verses in the Hebrew Old Testament use *lēb* and its synonym *lēbab*. Below is a list of elements of our inner person that the Old Testament Scriptures connect with the heart.

- Affections/Aversions
- Attitudes
- Conscience
- Decision Making
- Desires/Passions
- Emotions/Feelings
- Faith/Beliefs
- Imagination
- Intentions
- Knowledge
- Memory
- Moral Character
- Perceptions
- Personality/Character
- Purpose
- Reasoning
- Thoughts/Thinking
- Understanding
- Values
- Will

1. In the table below, look up the Scriptures, paraphrase them to show how the word "heart" is used, and indicate the element(s) of the heart referred to from the list above.

Scripture	How the Word "Heart" is Used	Elements(s) of the Heart
Exodus 8:15		
Exodus 25:2		
1 Kings 2:44		
Job 22:22		
Proverbs 3:5		
Zechariah 10:7		

Vine's dictionary notes that the "heart" is sometimes referenced in Scripture as the seat of knowledge and wisdom and as a synonym of "mind." This helps to understand why "mind" was not included in the Deuteronomy verse.

To summarize, the "heart" is the inward self, where feelings, emotions, and thinking occur. It is the origin of all we do.

2. What does Genesis 8:21 say about our hearts and sinful nature?

3. What does God want to give us in Ezekiel 36:26?

4. In Acts 15:8-9, what happens when we put our faith in Jesus as Lord and accept the gift of salvation?

Soul

The word "soul" is the Hebrew word *nephesh*. The noun refers to the essence of life, the act of breathing, but in the Deuteronomy context, it refers to the inner self, what one is to themselves, as opposed to what others observe about that person. This definition links it closely to the noun "heart" we saw above. *Lēbab* is often compounded with *nephesh* for emphasis. You could think of the heart as the processing area for thoughts, emotions, etc., and the soul as the product.

5. There are over 200 verses in the Hebrew Old Testament where *nephesh* denotes the inner self. From these verses, what are the characteristics of our soul?

- Leviticus 17:11

- 1 Samuel 18:1

- Psalm 42:5

Might

The word “might” is the Hebrew word *gebûrâh*, meaning “power” or “strength.” In the context of how the verse in Deuteronomy is used and other Old Testament verses, additional aspects can be associated with the word, such as counsel, wisdom, physical and/or mental ability, effort, endurance, and intellect. If we think of the heart as the processing area and the soul as the product, then might can be thought of as the tools and the fuel.

6. *Gebûrâh* occurs over 60 times in the Hebrew Old Testament. From the list above, what are the aspects of the word might (alternatively, power or strength) expressed in the following verses?

- Deuteronomy 8:17

- Proverbs 24:5

- Esther 10:2

Spirit

You may be wondering where our spirit fits in all this.

7. Is our soul and spirit the same thing? Explain your answer based on Hebrews 4:12.

8. When does our spirit come alive, and how does it come alive? See John 3:5-8.

We will learn more about our spirit in the next session.

9. Our God is a jealous god. He wants the apex of our devotions directed toward him. We experience peace, *shalom*, when our heart, soul, and might are united with our spirit in loving God. What do you think about this statement?

Session Four: Application Part I

Sessions One, Two, and Three have taught us that to obey the Greatest Commandment, we must first accept Christ's gift of salvation and make him Lord. We must also realize his great love for us so that we can love him. Furthermore, we need to

understand how the Bible defines our heart, soul, and might; together, they make up our inner being. We will now focus on applying what we have learned to better love the Lord, our God, with all our heart, all our soul, and all our might.

Picture your inner being as a city with a wall around it. The gates in the wall give access to what enters your inner being through experience: what you see, hear, taste, touch, and smell. The gates also provide passage to what exits your inner being: what you do and say, your behavior, i.e., what others can observe. Inside the walls is the city of your inner being, where all the elements of your heart, soul, and might exist.



1. Before we come to the Lord, what does the wall around our inner being do? See Isaiah 59:2.
2. Before we come to the Lord, what we allow ourselves to experience (and therefore enter into our inner being), what we let take place within our being, and what we allow to exit as behavior, is ruled by our unregenerated hearts and minds. What does Romans 8:7-8 tell us?

The wall encompassing our unregenerated inner being can be likened to the wall around the city of Jericho. When Joshua led the nation of Israel into the Promised Land of Canaan, Jericho was the first city they were to capture. God wanted the city for his people, but a great wall surrounded it, keeping them out.

3. **What did God tell the Israelites to do, and what happened? See Joshua 6:1-5 and 6:20.**
4. **God instantly destroyed the wall so that his people would have access. When we come to Christ, what happens to our old wall? See Ephesians 2:13-14.**
5. **What else happens when we give the Lord our lives?**
 - Romans 8:9-10
 - Ephesians 3:16-19
 - Philippians 4:5b-7

As new Christians, our spirit comes alive, and we immediately have access to the best guards, power, and strength. We need these for the project ahead that will last our lifetime: building and maintaining a new wall, gates, and city.

This project is the work of sanctification and begins with our efforts to realize God's love for us, from one degree to another, brick by brick, day by day, which motivates, urges, and gives us the passion to love God with all our being. Our love for God is manifested in what we provide access to enter the gates to our inner being, what we allow to transpire inside the city of our inner being, and what words and actions we permit to exit our gates.

The Book of Nehemiah provides insight and direction for our building project. Nehemiah was a Jew who lived in Susa, one of the Persian capitals. He was a high official to King Artaxerxes. In 445 BC, he received news that the walls of Jerusalem were still lying in heaps of rubble from the Babylonian siege that had occurred in 586 BC. The exiles had begun to return around 537 BC, and by 516 BC, they had rebuilt the temple and resumed worship. But they were exposed and vulnerable to invasion without a wall and secure gates.

6. **What was the first thing Nehemiah did when he realized a crucial building project needed attention, and how can we apply this to our lifetime sanctification project? See Nehemiah 1:4 and 1:11.**
7. **What does Psalm 147, verses 2 and 13, say about our building project?**

8. Read Nehemiah 2:17-18 and glance through chapter three. What was needed to build the wall, and how does this apply to our lifetime sanctification project?

9. What do the following verses say about why we need to do life together with other Christians, and how does this help us to love God?

- 1 Thessalonians 5:11

- James 5:16

10. What else is available to help us? See John 14:26 and 2 Timothy 1:6-7.

11. Did Nehemiah's God-given work go smoothly? What happened in Nehemiah 4:7-9?

12. How does your answer from #11 apply to our lifetime sanctification project?

Under Nehemiah's leadership, the Jerusalem community finished the wall, set the gates, and appointed gatekeepers. The Book of the Law of Moses was read to everyone, and a holy day was celebrated with great rejoicing.

13. What else did the people do, and how does this apply to our lifetime sanctification project? See Nehemiah 9:1-2 and 10:28-29.

Session Five: Application Part II

The city of Jerusalem now had a wall with guarded gates and people within who had realized their sinful weaknesses and dedicated themselves to following the Lord. This is similar to our Christian experience when we come to the Lord, acknowledging our total dependence on him for forgiveness and strength to maintain our wall and gates. But there was more to be done for Nehemiah and the Jews to keep their covenant with the Lord, thereby loving him with their whole being.

1. Fill out the table below to describe the issues that Nehemiah remedied and how we can relate this to our maintenance and growth in loving the Lord with all our being.

What Happened in Nehemiah		How This Relates to Us
Issue	13:4-5	
Remedy	13:7-9	
Issue	13:10	
Remedy	13:11-14	
Issue	13:15-16	
Remedy	13:17-22	
Issue	13:23-24	
Remedy	13:25-27	

You have likely heard the saying, Garbage In, Garbage Out, or GIGO for short. Controlling ungodly behavior is essentially a futile effort if we continue to allow ungodly inputs to our inner being. For example, making an effort to stop swearing will be extremely difficult if we routinely watch TV shows where foul language is rampant, or we choose to spend a lot of time with people whose vocabulary consists mainly of four-letter words. What we allow inside affects our inner being, our thoughts, emotions, will, etc. The elements of our inner being process what we experience to produce attitudes, values, and decisions that are then expressed as behavior. Even immediate reactions to sudden situations are a result of what is happening and what has happened before in our inner being.

2. How do you interpret what Jesus said in Matthew 12:34?

3. What does Paul instruct in Romans 12:1-2, and what are your thoughts on that?

Much of our responsibility in sanctification is to bar our gates to reduce and/or eliminate inputs that can harm our love for God (i.e., do not be conformed to this world) and open our gates wide to godly inputs (i.e., be transformed in the renewal of our mind).

Below are continuums of inputs to our inner being. As we progress to the right, we reduce inputs that can callous us to God, and increase the inputs needed for our inner being to grow closer to the Lord, get to know his character, and realize his love for us. This process grows our love for him. The continuums have no beginning and no end. In this life, we each are on our own continuums, and our perseverance keeps us ever progressing. Consider where you would place yourself on each of these continuums and identify specific actions you can take now to progress to the right. Consider sharing aspects of this exercise with the group.



4. Specific actions you can take to progress to the right with the views and thoughts you entertain.



5. Specific actions you can take to progress to the right regarding the people you choose to spend time with.



6. Specific actions you can take to progress to the right regarding how you spend your time, treasure, and talents.

7. Besides our efforts, what else must we continually remember and ask for? See Psalm 127:1 and James 1:5.

The above is necessary work and makes a huge impact. But what about unwanted, harmful experiences that barge through our gates, worldly or ungodly thoughts that pierce our mind as a flaming arrow shot over our walls, memories of our past sinful behavior that haunt us, or our will that can't seem to be curbed from doing what we know is not right, like a traitor living amid our city?

8. What do the following Scriptures say, and how do they help us in these situations?

Scripture	Paraphrase	How This Scripture Helps Us
Romans 7:21-25		
1 Corinthians 10:13		
2 Corinthians 10:4-5		
2 Corinthians 12:7-10		
Philippians 4:8		
James 1:2-4		
James 4:7		

To love God with our whole being takes more than one Bible study; it takes a lifetime of persistent discipleship. Loving God is nurturing the most important relationship we will ever have, extending through eternity.

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it. (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 ESV)