

The Great Commandment – Love the Lord
Chapter 1 in TPOC: Ezra Taft Benson, 2014

President Ezra Taft Benson’s life reflected his love for the Lord and his steadfast commitment to living the gospel. An extended family member once said, “To Ezra and his family religion is a complete way of life—something to be lived seven days a week. It takes first place in his consideration when the time comes for making decisions.”¹

People outside the Benson family also noticed President Benson’s love for the Lord. In 1939, when President Benson was serving as a stake president, he was invited to Washington, D.C., to meet with the directors of the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives. “After looking him over and questioning him, the board of trustees offered him the position of executive secretary of that organization. . . . Though he was thrilled by this unsolicited bid for his services, he did not wish to accept it. As he understood it, the job would entail lobbying by the use of cocktail parties, which would not be compatible with his religion.

“‘Mr. Benson,’ Judge John D. Miller, head of the group, replied, ‘that is why we selected you. We know what your standards are.’ With full assurance from the board that he would not be expected to seek an understanding of agricultural problems over cocktail glasses, he was delighted to accept the position, but only after consultation with the First Presidency and his wife.”²

President Benson taught that we manifest our love for the Lord by our willingness to do the Lord’s will. He said: “I wish that every Latter-day Saint could say and mean it with all his heart: ‘I’ll go where you want me to go. I’ll say what you want me to say. I’ll be what you want me to be’ [see Hymns, no. 270]. If we could all do that, we would be assured of the maximum of happiness here and exaltation in the celestial kingdom of God hereafter.”³

In a sermon at the April 1988 general conference—the sermon upon which this chapter is based—President Benson focused on the first and great commandment: to love God. Regarding this sermon, Elder Francis M. Gibbons of the Seventy observed, “All that President Ezra Taft Benson worked for, all that he stood for, and all that he hoped for—for himself, for his family, and for the Church—is embodied in this sermon.”⁴

As the Savior taught the rich young man, we show our love for the Lord when we help other people (see Matthew 19:16–21).

The first and great commandment is to love the Lord.

The great test of life is obedience to God. “We will prove them herewith,” said the Lord, “to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them” (Abraham 3:25).

The great task of life is to learn the will of the Lord and then do it.

The great commandment of life is to love the Lord.

“Come unto Christ,” exhorts Moroni in his closing testimony, “. . . and love God with all your might, mind and strength” (Moroni 10:32).

This, then, is the first and great commandment: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength” (Mark 12:30; see also Matthew 22:37; Deuteronomy 6:5; Luke 10:27; Moroni 10:32; D&C 59:5).

It is the pure love of Christ, called charity, that the Book of Mormon testifies is the greatest of all—that never faileth, that endureth forever, that all men should have, and that without which they are nothing (see Moroni 7:44–47; 2 Nephi 26:30).

“Wherefore, my beloved brethren,” pleads Moroni, “pray unto the Father with all the energy of [your] heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ; that ye may become the sons of God; that when he shall appear we shall be like him” (Moroni 7:48).

In the closing accounts of both the Jaredites and the Nephites, Moroni records that except men shall have this pure love of Christ, called charity, they cannot inherit that place which Christ has prepared in the mansions of His Father nor can they be saved in the kingdom of God (see Ether 12:34; Moroni 10:21).

The fruit that Lehi partook of in his vision and that filled his soul with exceeding great joy and that was most desirable above all things was the love of God.⁵

When I think of charity, I . . . think of my father and that day he was called on his mission [see pages 4–6 in this book]. I suppose some in the world might say that his acceptance of that call was proof he did not really love his family. To leave seven children and an expectant wife at home alone for two years, how could that be true love? But my father knew a greater vision of love. He knew that “all things shall work together

for good to them that love God” (Romans 8:28). He knew that the best thing he could do for his family was to obey God.⁶

To love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength is all-consuming and all-encompassing. It is no lukewarm endeavor. It is total commitment of our very being—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually—to a love of the Lord.

The breadth, depth, and height of this love of God extend into every facet of one’s life. Our desires, be they spiritual or temporal, should be rooted in a love of the Lord. Our thoughts and affections should be centered on the Lord. “Let all thy thoughts be directed unto the Lord,” said Alma, “yea, let the affections of thy heart be placed upon the Lord forever” (Alma 37:36).⁷

We show our love for God when we put Him first in our lives.

Why did God put the first commandment first? Because He knew that if we truly loved Him we would want to keep all of His other commandments. “For this is the love of God,” says John, “that we keep his commandments” (1 John 5:3; see also 2 John 1:6).

We must put God in the forefront of everything else in our lives. He must come first, just as He declares in the first of His Ten Commandments: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3).

When we put God first, all other things fall into their proper place or drop out of our lives. Our love of the Lord will govern the claims for our affection, the demands on our time, the interests we pursue, and the order of our priorities.

We should put God ahead of everyone else in our lives.

When Joseph was in Egypt, what came first in his life—God, his job, or Potiphar’s wife? When she tried to seduce him, he responded by saying, “How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” (Genesis 39:9).

Joseph was put in prison because he put God first. If we were faced with a similar choice, where would we place our first loyalty? Can we put God ahead of security, peace, passions, wealth, and the honors of men?

When Joseph was forced to choose, he was more anxious to please God than to please his employer’s wife. When we are required to choose, are we more anxious to please God than our boss, our teacher, our neighbor, or our date?

Joseph of Egypt was willing to go to prison rather than deny his loyalty to God.

The Lord said, “He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:37). One of the most difficult tests of all is when you have to choose between pleasing God or pleasing someone you love or respect—particularly a family member.

Nephi faced that test and handled it well when his good father temporarily murmured against the Lord (see 1 Nephi 16:18–25). Job maintained his integrity with the Lord even though his wife told him to curse God and die (see Job 2:9–10).

The scripture says, “Honour thy father and thy mother” (Exodus 20:12; see also Mosiah 13:20). Sometimes one must choose to honor Heavenly Father over a mortal father.

We should give God, the Father of our spirits, an exclusive preeminence in our lives. He has a prior parental claim on our eternal welfare, ahead of all other ties that may bind us here or hereafter.

God, our Father; Jesus, our Elder Brother and our Redeemer; and the Holy Ghost, the Testator, are perfect. They know us best and love us most and will not leave one thing undone for our eternal welfare. Should we not love them for it and honor them first? There are faithful members who joined the Church in spite of the objections of their mortal relatives. By putting God first, many later became the instruments to lead those loved ones into the kingdom of God. Jesus said, “I do always those things that please [God]” (John 8:29).

What is the condition in our homes? Are we striving to put the Lord first and to please Him?

Fathers, would it please the Lord if there were daily family prayer and scripture reading in your home? And what about the holding of weekly home evenings and periodically having individual time with your wife and each child? And if your child went temporarily astray, do you think it would please the Lord and He would honor your efforts if you continued to live an exemplary life, consistently prayed and frequently fasted for that child, and kept the name of that son or daughter on the temple prayer roll?

You mothers, who are especially charged with the righteous rearing of the youth of Zion, are you not putting God first when you honor your divine calling?

... Our mothers put God first when they fill their highest mission within the walls of their own homes.

Children, do you pray for your parents? Do you try to support them in their noble endeavors? They will make mistakes, like you, but they have a divine mission to accomplish in your life. Will you help them do so? Will you add honor to their name and bring comfort and support to them in their older years?

If someone wants to marry you outside the temple, whom will you strive to please—God or a mortal? If you insist on a temple marriage, you will be pleasing the Lord and blessing the other party. Why? Because that person will either become worthy to go to the temple—which would be a blessing—or will leave—which could also be a blessing—because neither of you should want to be unequally yoked (see 2 Corinthians 6:14).

You should qualify for the temple. Then you will know that there is no one good enough for you to marry outside the temple. If such individuals are that good, they will get themselves in a condition so that they too can be married in the temple.⁸

When we choose to put God first in our lives, His blessings come in abundance.

Men and women who turn their lives over to God will discover that He can make a lot more out of their lives than they can. He will deepen their joys, expand their vision, quicken their minds, strengthen their muscles, lift their spirits, multiply their blessings, increase their opportunities, comfort their souls, raise up friends, and pour out peace. Whoever will lose his life in the service of God will find eternal life.⁹

God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Had Abraham loved Isaac more than God, would he have consented? As the Lord indicates in the Doctrine and Covenants, both Abraham and Isaac now sit as gods (see D&C 132:37). They were willing to offer or to be offered up as God required. They have a deeper love and respect for each other because both were willing to put God first.

The Book of Mormon teaches that “it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11)—and so there is. Opposition provides choices, and choices bring consequences—good or bad.

The Book of Mormon explains that men “are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil” (2 Nephi 2:27).

God loves us; the devil hates us. God wants us to have a fulness of joy as He has. The devil wants us to be miserable as he is. God gives us commandments to bless us. The devil would have us break these commandments to curse us.

Daily, constantly, we choose by our desires, our thoughts, and our actions whether we want to be blessed or cursed, happy or miserable. One of the trials of life is that we do not usually receive immediately the full blessing for righteousness or the full cursing for wickedness. That it will come is certain, but oftentimes there is a waiting period that occurs, as was the case with Job and Joseph.

In the meantime the wicked think they are getting away with something. The Book of Mormon teaches that the wicked “have joy in their works for a season, [but] by and by the end cometh, and they are hewn down and cast into the fire, from whence there is no return” (3 Nephi 27:11).

During this testing time the righteous must continue to love God, trust in His promises, be patient, and be assured, as the poet said, that “who does God’s work will get God’s pay.” ...

I testify to you that God’s pay is the best pay that this world or any other world knows anything about. And it comes in full abundance only to those who love the Lord and put Him first.

The great test of life is obedience to God.

The great task of life is to learn the will of the Lord and then do it.

The great commandment of life is, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength” (Mark 12:30).

May God bless us to put the first commandment first and, as a result, reap peace in this life and eternal life with a fulness of joy in the life to come.¹⁰