

Is Our Misinterpretation of the Great Commandment Ruining Our Application of the Great Commission?

by **Prudence Dancy**

Unfortunately, today's followers of Christ are not being criticized for loving too much. Rather, we are often observed as being critical, harsh and judgmental in the way we operate. Transmitting our Western ways along with our gospel message is not our only challenge in missions today.

Either being glossed over or just flat out taught incorrectly, it seems the right order of the Great Commandment is easily being ignored in ministry and missions alike. Before you disagree, let's closely re-examine the facts some of us have taken for granted for decades.

The Great Commandment reads:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength And your neighbor as yourself.

The way most Christians read, teach and act out this text:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength And your neighbor, making sure to put yourself last.

In fact, in Sunday School I learned a song as a little girl called JOY – Jesus, Others and You. This seemed to reinforce the idea that I was last on my list of things that required my love.

Very seldom do we hear anyone say, "If you do not love yourself, your neighbor is in trouble," or, "If you do not love yourself, you do not know God." While these statements may seem strange, they are fundamentally true.

I have worked for 47 years with Christian evangelical ministries in churches, parachurch organizations and here at Frontier Ventures, formerly known as the U.S. Center for World Mission. In my early days here, as I worked side by side with Dr. Ralph Winter, our main goal was to get the word out about the Unreached Peoples – those who did not have access to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The task was of primary importance and rightfully so.

Dr. Winter and his generation were called Builders. This peer group of Christians diligently demonstrated their love for God out of great sacrifice and personal integrity. As a consequence, being personally exhausted or "spent" was often the norm. The Builder's children, called Boomers, went on to become defined by their work, not particularly their character as were their parents. Family life took second place to their pursuit of career and as a result the Boomer generation has produced the highest divorce and second marriage rate in history. This fragmentation of the family began to produce children who are now called Gen X and Gen Y who had to take care of themselves early on in their development, often creating not only super independence but also cynicism about life. Their abandonment and rejection wounds impacted their ability to function well within relationships. In the absence of the framework of unconditional love and strong family with community ties, a different kind of need has arisen within Christian workers.

Statistics show that missionaries usually return from the field because they are unable to get along with other missionaries or they have burned out from overwork. In many cases this can come as a result of unresolved personal issues and an overall lack of self-care. It has only been recently that we at Frontier Ventures have sensed the sacred responsibility to help our staff develop self-awareness to endure for the long haul and help them bring personal authenticity to their ministries. Yes, The Great Commission is still our utmost objective. But our journey for getting there is currently being defined differently. We have begun by developing a curriculum for our staff training called *Being, Living, Doing*, concentrating on allowing our doing to come from the flow of our being and living relationally with God, our self and others.

It is true that we should love God for God's sake and be involved in his cause. But when Bernard of Clairvaux spoke of the four degrees of love, the highest degree of love he mentioned was to love self for God's sake. This seems somehow contradictory to what we have been taught.

We must understand that the link between loving God and loving ourselves is intricately connected. Loving yourself must come along with loving God and others. Augustine said, "How can we draw close to God when we are far from



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our self? He prayed, “God, grant that I may know myself that I may know You.” After all, if we are made in God’s image, shouldn’t this love of self be a part of our journey to love him?

Sometimes our inability to love God comes from our misconceptions about God. These misunderstandings often stem from our childhood upbringing (relationships including our parents and important events in our life.) Research shows that what a person believes about their earthly father impacts their belief about God no matter what they have been taught. It is one thing to believe and give mental assent to God’s love, for instance, but quite another to internalize and experience with one’s own heart that same fact.

In order to love God we must understand we have been created for an intimate relationship with him. The first time I realized that God was pursuing a relationship with me and wants my heart more than he wants my efforts, it rocked my world. The kingdom reality of this universe is that the Father, Son, and the Spirit are all conspiring to be with me – to live in me, dwell with me, love me and work through me. It’s the divine conspiracy! This understanding takes away my performance orientation to try, after receiving my salvation by grace, to add works to the mix to make sure that I am worthy of the gift. But it is through this understanding and expression of love, coming from the inside out, that substantial works can be

made for the kingdom. Good and remaining works should follow our relationship with God just as good fruit can only be produced when connected to the vine, not before. (John 15)

The command to *go into all the world and make disciples* should be based on a love relationship with the Holy Trinity. This love relationship shows us our own value and worth, gifts and talents and our place in finishing his task. This agape love relationship also allows us to accept our weakness and pronenesses, producing a relationship with God that begins a journey of becoming like his—uniquely us but like him. This process doesn’t ask us to hide or pretend, but rather leads us to become authentic and transparent. **It is this that would be translated to the world as the gospel of Jesus Christ.** Developing a relationship with God and self takes work and time just as any relationship does. It requires time to care for one’s body, soul and spirit and times of silence and reflection—stepping back and being an audience to our own reactions and values.

This necessary order of loving self and others is always so clearly illustrated to me when I travel. When I fly on an airplane I am always instructed that in the case of losing cabin pressure I must first put on my own oxygen mask before I attempt to assist others. The reason for this clearly illustrates the order of the Commandment—I will only be able to truly help others when I have first taken care of myself. Otherwise I run the risk of running out of oxygen before I am able to be of any help. Let’s make sure we do not get the excitement of *doing* the Commission ahead of *being* and *living* within the Commandment. Don’t forget that the Commandment can inform us how well we will be able to give our utmost for his highest in fulfilling his Commission. 



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