

# The Cornerstone and the Centerpiece

## Lesson 1

### TEACHER TO TEACHER

**W**ith this lesson we begin the study of the foundations of our faith through the lens of a biblical relational theology. The term “biblical relational theology” is foreign to many Christians. It might even be “off-putting” to some. In spite of its rather academic tone, it communicates an idea that most evangelical Christians relate to with ease.

Simply put, a biblical relational theology considers what the whole Bible says about humankind’s relationship both with God and with one another. The Bible reveals that God is the Supreme Spiritual Being who eternally lives in relationship with the other members of the Trinity, with heavenly hosts, and with the saints. Christians speak often about their personal relationship with Christ. They also recognize their call as Christ-followers to live in *koinonia* (community with other believers) and to love their neighbors as they love themselves. Christians are a people who deeply believe in loving relationships. They seek to understand what Scripture says regarding what we should believe about a loving relationship with God and with others.

Our first lesson focuses on the centerpiece of Jesus’ moral code or system of ethics that He teaches His followers to embrace and to emulate. This is a lesson about the precept many Christians know as the Great Commandment. Like you, many in your Bible fellowship likely can quote some version of it from memory. However, most have never considered how the two Great Commandment imperatives enrich and expand many of our foundational doctrinal beliefs and behavioral practices.

The two imperatives that make up the Great Commandment are found first in the Old Testament — the Pentateuch — the Torah. You will find the first imperative in Deuteronomy 6:5 and the second in Leviticus 19:18. I encourage you to read each one before beginning “Studying the Word Together.” Don’t just read the individual verses. Instead, read each in the context of the chapter in which it is found. Imagine yourself standing in the midst of those hearing these words for the first time, knowing that Moses was speaking what Yahweh had spoken to Him.

Next, read the synoptic Gospel accounts of Jesus’ conversation with the experts in the Law as they dialogued about the Great Commandment. You will find the narratives in Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-34, and Luke 10:25-28. See yourself standing in the group gathered around Jesus and the Pharisees as the conversation takes place. Hear Jesus’ passion and reverence for the truth of these ancient commands.

Open your spiritual eyes and ears to the Holy Spirit as you meditate upon the passages. Allow Him to reveal things to you that you have thus far not seen in the Great Commandment. What does the Great Commandment suggest to you about both God and Christ? What do you learn about discipleship and spiritual transformation from these imperatives? What does “loving God” look like in your life? How do you demonstrate your love for the neighbors or “near ones” in your life?

**W**e must not look at the Great Commandment as “just another teaching.” Rather, it is the centerpiece of Jesus’ teaching. May God anoint you as you teach this important message.

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## Studying the Word Together

Is it possible that our culture no longer sees us [Christians, the church] as relevant to its needs because we have lost touch with the very heart of who we are? Could it be that the Holy Spirit is drawing us back to our identity as followers of Christ?

Fundamentally, the Gospel promise of new life is about a Person; it is about the One who lived and died and rose again on our behalf. It is for this reason that the foundations of our faith must be *relational*. Jesus lived and died so that we might have eternal life *with* Him. He has now equipped us to live out the wonder of this relationship as His light in a darkened world. — David Ferguson<sup>1</sup>

Love—and the unity it attests to—is the mark Christ gave Christians to wear before the world. Only with this mark may the world know that Christians are indeed Christians and that Jesus was sent by the Father. — Francis Schaeffer<sup>2</sup>

A man may be a good doctor without loving his patients; a good lawyer without loving his clients; a good geologist without loving science; but he cannot be a good Christian without love. — D. L. Moody<sup>3</sup>

**I**n biblical times, craftsmen constructed important buildings upon foundations made of large stones capable of bearing the weight of walls and roof. Without a strong foundation, a building could collapse under an enemy's attack or fall during a natural disaster. Solomon was careful to build the Lord's temple with such stones.

*Solomon had seventy thousand carriers and eighty thousand stonecutters in the hills, as well as thirty-three hundred foremen who supervised the project and directed the workmen. At the king's command, they removed from the quarry large blocks of quality stone to provide a foundation of dressed stone for the temple. The craftsmen of Solomon...cut and prepared...the stone for the building of the temple. (1 Kings 5:15-18)*

*All these structures [the Temple and Solomon's palaces], from the outside to the great courtyard and from foundation to eaves, were made of blocks of high-grade stone cut to size and trimmed with a saw on their inner and outer faces. The foundations were laid with large stones of good quality, some measuring ten cubits<sup>4</sup> and some eight. (1 Kings 7:9-10)*

The most important stone in the foundation was the cornerstone. The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*<sup>5</sup> describes the cornerstone as essential to structural integrity:

The cornerstone is the principal stone around which construction in antiquity was achieved. In the lexicon of biblical images of architecture, no image is more evocative than the cornerstone, the focal point of a building, the thing on which it most depends for structural integrity.

## CHRIST, THE CORNERSTONE

**A**s we begin to consider the foundations of our Christian faith, we discover that the Bible metaphorically points to Christ as the cornerstone of our foundation. For example, the Apostle Paul says:

*[Y]ou are...fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of [the teaching of] the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And*

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*in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)*

Jesus, the Christ, is indeed the Cornerstone that ensures the integrity of the other foundation stones of our faith. As His

disciples—those who take upon themselves the yoke<sup>6</sup> of His teaching—we must understand the ethics<sup>7</sup> of His teaching. The centerpiece of Jesus’ ethics was *not* a new teaching. It was very familiar to the religious leaders. Today, we know that teaching as the Great Commandment.



**THE GREAT COMMANDMENT: THE CENTERPIECE OF JESUS’ ETHICS**

**M**y wife, Lana, loves to decorate. She skillfully uses colors and textures to create a warm, welcoming environment in our home. On both our dining table and our kitchen table you will always find a centerpiece that serves as a pleasant focal point for the table setting. On more than one occasion, a centerpiece has been the very first topic for conversation raised by dinner guests.

A group of Scriptures that we know today as the Great Commandment served as the centerpiece or focal point of the entire body of Jesus’ moral code or system of ethics that He wanted His followers to mirror to the people with whom they related. The table below presents in parallel format the three Gospel accounts of the Great Commandment. Carefully read each account. Compare the passages. What elements do they share? Mark and Luke provide data not contained in Matthew’s account. How does the additional data expand your understanding of Matthew’s Great Commandment story?

Matthew 22:34-40	Mark 12:28-34a	Luke 10:25-28
<p><sup>34</sup>Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together.</p> <p><sup>35</sup>One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: <sup>36</sup>“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”</p> <p><sup>37</sup>Jesus replied: “<b>Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.</b>” <sup>38</sup>This is the first and greatest commandment. <sup>39</sup>And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ <sup>40</sup>All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”</p>	<p><sup>28</sup>One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. ...[H]e asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”</p> <p><sup>29</sup>“<b>The most important one,</b>” answered Jesus, “<b>is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.</b>”</p> <p><sup>30</sup><b>Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’</b></p> <p><sup>31</sup>The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”</p> <p><sup>32</sup>“Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him.</p> <p><sup>33</sup>To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”</p> <p><sup>34</sup>When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “<b>You are not far from the kingdom of God.</b>”</p>	<p><sup>25</sup>On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”</p> <p><sup>26</sup>“<b>What is written in the Law?</b>” he replied. “<b>How do you read it?</b>”</p> <p><sup>27</sup>He answered: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”</p> <p><sup>28</sup>“<b>You have answered correctly,</b>” Jesus replied. “<b>Do this and you will live.</b>”</p>

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Even a quick reading of the above passages shows that while each inspired author communicates the same central point, each offers information that can broaden our understanding of Christ's overall teaching.

► **Comparison  
of the Passages**

Let's state the most obvious first. All three Great Commandment accounts reference foundational teachings from the Law and the Prophets.<sup>8</sup> Jesus' command to love God (Matt. 22:31, Mark 12:30, and Luke 10:27) cites Deuteronomy 6:5. (Mark 12:29 includes Deuteronomy 6:4, a portion of the *Shema*, Israel's confession of faith.) In addition, His command to love our neighbors as we love ourselves (Matt. 22:39, Mark 12:31, and Luke 10:27b) cites Leviticus 19:18.

Even though the pattern of conversation varies, Jesus dialogues in each scenario with an expert in the Law. Mark and Luke both indicate that the expert in the Law and Jesus agree that love is the foundation upon which the Law, as given by Moses and the teaching of the Prophets, rests. Matthew addresses this point by saying, "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (v. 40). The *UBS New Testament Handbook Series*<sup>9</sup> indicates that this verse also translates accurately as, "All the Law of Moses and the teachings of the Prophets are based on these two commandments." The verse may also mean either *sum up* or *contain* the two commandments. An English translation of an early Bible in German renders Matthew 22:40 saying, "In these two commands is contained everything that the Law of Moses and the teaching of the prophets have said concerning God's will."

Mark's version gives us additional insight into why the significance of loving God and loving neighbor forms the centerpiece of Jesus' teaching. Notice again that the teacher agrees with Jesus.

"Well said, teacher," the man replied.

"You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

(Mark 12:32-33)

The system of offerings and sacrifices were important to the Jews. However, it was an abomination to God to give an offering or to make a sacrifice while living an unrighteous lifestyle or having an unloving attitude toward God and/or others. Thus the teacher of the Law knew that loving God and neighbor was more important than "all burnt offerings and sacrifices." Jesus' response to the teacher is very revealing: "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (v. 34). Remember, Christ had not yet died. Therefore, Jesus was only able to tell the teacher that he was "not far" from the Kingdom. Since Christ's sacrifice is now complete, we know that Kingdom citizens may live lives characterized by wholehearted love of God and others.

Luke has the expert in the Law opening his dialogue with Christ by asking a critical question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Rather than answer directly, Jesus asked the expert to offer his own interpretation of how the Law answered the question. Jesus' questioner replied by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Jesus replied, "You have answered correctly; do this and you will live." We inherit eternal life and gain Kingdom citizenship when we place our faith in Christ. As His disciples, we follow the code of morality or ethical system of moral principles that He lived and taught. The centerpiece or focal point of that moral code or system of ethics is summed



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up in the two priority commandments to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus’ own teaching as recorded in the three synoptic Gospels indicates that all of the other commands must be understood in light of these two: “On these two hang [the teachings of] the Law and [the teachings of] the Prophets.” Paul clearly understood this concept of interpretation and application. He wrote about it in his doctrinal treatise to the Christians in Rome.

*The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law. (Romans 13:9-10)*

**UNDERSTANDING AGAPÉ LOVE**

If we are indeed to live by the moral/ethical code of Christ, it is imperative that we understand the word *love* as Jesus used it.

The translators of our English versions of the Bible use *love* to render two differing Greek word groups. The word group represented by the verb *phileo* is associated with tender affection, intimate friendship, and kinship. Most humans naturally are capable of showing this kind of love to one another. *Agapao* is the verb representing the second word group. An imperative form of *agapao* occurs in both places where we find the English word *love* in the Great Commandment. There are numerous other occurrences of the verb *to love* (*agapao*, NT:25) and the noun *love* (*agapé*, NT:26) in the New Testament. *Englishman’s Concordance*<sup>10</sup> lists 143 instances of the verb and 116 instances of the noun.

While both word groups had use in the ordinary language of Jesus’ day, Jesus

added new dimensions of meaning to the *agapao* group. Of *agapao* and its related words, *Vines Expository Dictionary*<sup>11</sup> says:

In respect of *agapao* as used of God, it expresses the deep and constant “love” and interest of a perfect Being towards entirely unworthy objects, producing and fostering a reverential “love” in them towards the Giver, and a practical “love” towards those who are partakers of the same, and a desire to help others to seek the Giver.

Simple logic will uncover the nuances of meaning attached to *agapé*, *agapao* by Jesus and the early church. The following syllogism is an example:

- ◆ Primary premise: God is love (1 John 4:8, 16).
- ◆ Minor premise: God is benevolent, giving to meet the needs of His people.
- ◆ Conclusion: Love is benevolent.

Applying such reasoning to various passages, we conclude:

1. Love is an act of the will; it is a choice made by the “lover” without regard of the merit or worthiness of the beloved (Rom. 5:8).
2. Love respects and values the beloved (Rom. 5:10).
3. Love focuses upon the needs of the beloved (Matt. 6:8; 6:32-33; Philip. 4:19).
4. Love freely gives from its resources to serve (minister to) the needs of the beloved without demand of return (Matt. 10:8b; John 3:16; James 1:16-18).
5. Love gives first (Gen. 1:27-31; Rom. 11:35).

This kind of *agapé* love is impossible for man to practice apart from fellowship with God. It is foreign to our nature. God alone is the source of *agapé* love. We receive the capacity to love (*agapao*) God and others when we are indwelled by

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Christ at the time of our initial salvation experience. The Apostle John makes this point in his first epistle. (Each occurrence of the noun *love* or the verb *to love* is a rendering of some form of the Greek noun *agapé* or the Greek verb *agapao*.)

<sup>7</sup>Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup>Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. <sup>9</sup>This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup>This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup>Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup>No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. ... <sup>19</sup>We love because he first loved us. <sup>20</sup>If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. <sup>21</sup>And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother. (1 John 4:7-12, 19-21)

Here are some key truths and principles that I believe are contained in the above passage.

1. God is the source of all agapé love (v. 7).
2. Those who are truly saved love others well and have an intimate relationship with God; those who do not love are not true followers of Christ (vs. 7-8).
3. God is love; love is the essence of God's nature and character (v. 8).
4. Jesus is the evidence of God's love for us (vs. 9-10).
5. Believers have the capacity to love God and others with agapé love,

because they are indwelt by God (v. 11).

6. Believers respond to God's love by loving Him and others (v. 19).
7. The believer's love of others is evidence of his/her love for God (vs. 20-21).

APPLICATION  
IDEAS &  
QUESTIONS

The applications of the truths and principles in this lesson are significant. They affect our spiritual growth in numerous ways. For example, because the whole of Scripture hangs on the two imperatives in the Great Commandment, we must allow it to instruct our interpretation of the Bible. We must understand our doctrines and our code of moral/ethical behavior in light of the Great Commandment. Otherwise, they do not rightly conform to the ethics of Jesus' teaching.

In addition, we must realize that wholeheartedly loving God and loving others as we love ourselves requires us to examine, and possibly adjust, our theological view or perspective of God (theology), Christ (Christology), and humankind (anthropology).

This centerpiece of Jesus' teaching also must strongly influence our understanding of what it means to be Christ's church (ecclesiology). It not only gives direction to how we relate to one another but also suggests that love—rather than a critical, condemning, or judgmental attitude—must govern our relationship with the world around us.

Finally, we must allow the Great Commandment to speak into the way we carry out the Great Commission—the way we develop our apologetics and seek to evangelize the lost. We must learn to evangelize within the context of loving relationships with our family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. Similarly, we

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must equip our missionaries to share Christ within the context of loving relationships with the various peoples of the world.

Here are a few questions to consider as you ponder this lesson and look forward to the future lessons in the series.

1. Do I allow the Great Commandment to give direction to my interpretation of Scripture?
2. Am I open to having my view of God and humankind informed by the Great Commandment?
3. Am I open to letting the Great Commandment serve to influence my understanding of Christ's teachings and to give direction to my pursuit of intimacy with Him?
4. What evidence of agapé love do I see in my relationships with the other believers in my Bible Fellowship?
5. How would unchurched people I know likely describe the Christian community as a whole?
6. Am I compelled by agapé love for my neighbor to share lovingly—at appropriate times—my experiences with Christ? Do I love my neighbor enough to be concerned about his/her spiritual condition?

<sup>1</sup> David Ferguson, *Relational Foundations: Experiencing Relevance in Life and Ministry*, copyright © 2004, Relationship Press, Austin, TX, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> *The Complete Gathered Gold*, copyright © 2006 by Evangelical Press (all rights reserved); *PC Study Bible V5* formatted electronic database, copyright © 1988-2006 by Jim Gilbertson, BibleSoft, Inc. Seattle, WA.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> A cubit was an important and constant measure among the Hebrews (Exod. 25:10, 17, 23; etc.; 1 Kings 7:24, 27, 31; etc.; Ezek. 40:5; etc.), and other ancient nations. It was commonly reckoned as the length of the arm from the point of the elbow to the end of the middle finger, about eighteen inches (from *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, originally published by Moody Press of Chicago, Illinois, copyright © 1988. *PC Study Bible V5* formatted electronic database, copyright © 1988-2006 by Jim Gilbertson, BibleSoft, Inc. Seattle, WA).

<sup>5</sup> *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, copyright © 1998 by InterVarsity Fellowship/USA (all rights reserved); *PC Study Bible V5* formatted electronic database, copyright © 1988-2006 by Jim Gilbertson, BibleSoft, Inc. Seattle, WA.

<sup>6</sup> Disciples who took up the teachings of a rabbi were said to take up his yoke.

<sup>7</sup> Ethics in its plural form refers to a code of morality or a system of moral principles governing the appropriate conduct for a person or group.

<sup>8</sup> See Commentary section of this lesson for discussion of the phrase "the Law and the Prophets."

<sup>9</sup> *UBS New Testament Handbook Series*, copyright © 1961-1997 by United Bible Societies; *PC Study Bible V5* formatted electronic database, copyright © 1988-2006 by Jim Gilbertson, BibleSoft, Inc. Seattle, WA.

<sup>10</sup> *Englishman's Concordance*, *PC Study Bible V5* formatted electronic database, copyright © 1988-2006 by Jim Gilbertson, BibleSoft, Inc. Seattle, WA.

<sup>11</sup> *Vines Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, copyright © 1985, Thomas Nelson Publishers; *PC Study Bible V5* formatted electronic database, copyright © 1988-2006 by Jim Gilbertson, BibleSoft, Inc. Seattle, WA.

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## Commentary

This material is, in part, adapted from a non-copyrighted publication titled *The Making of the Bible*<sup>1</sup> written by Dr. William Barclay, the renowned Christian commentator and long-time professor of New Testament at Glasgow University. Other resources are annotated.

The phrase “the Law and the Prophets” was a common reference used during Jesus’ time to refer to the Scriptures studied and revered by the Jews. For Christians today, we view them as sections of the Old Testament. The story of how the Old Testament canon came together is a long one. It began with the appearance of the book of Deuteronomy in 621 B.C and concluded with the Council of Jamnia in 90 A.D.

As the Jews regarded it, the Old Testament fell into three sections: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Using the layout of the temple as a parallel, the Jews considered the Writings comparable to the Outer Court; the Prophets, the Inner Court; and the Law, the Holy of Holies. This division traces back to at least 180 B.C to the Greek translation of Ecclesiasticus. In his prologue, the translator indicates that the tri-part view was held by several preceding generations of Jewish scholars.

### The Law

The Law consisted of the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Known as the Pentateuch, these books were considered Scripture *par excellence*.

*The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*<sup>2</sup> reports:

The Pentateuch portrays the Law as a codification of God’s *covenant* with Israel. Rather than just an abstract moral

code or a mere collection of general ethical or social principles, the Law is an aspect of the covenantal relationship between God and His people—Israel. The law expresses God’s expectations for the moral and spiritual conduct of Israel—the guidelines God has given to Israel to enable them to live life as he created it to be lived.

Jesus, living in the overlap between the old covenant and the new, is generally obedient to the Law, but at the same time He makes clear that He has sovereign rights both to interpret and to set aside that Law. On this basis He criticizes the developing oral Law for its focus on a casuistic literalness that denied the very heart and purpose of the Law. It is in the dual command to love God and neighbor that Jesus found the heart of the Law, and He used these basic demands to interpret and apply the Law in accordance with its author’s intention.

### The Prophets

The Prophets were composed of two sections. The first was the *Former Prophets*, which we refer to as historical books: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. (In our current divisions of Scripture, Samuel and Kings are considered four books instead of two.) The second division was known as the *Latter Prophets*, including Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve—sometimes called the Minor Prophets.

It seems strange to us to find Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings classified as prophetic books. We include them in a division of the canon made up of historical literature. It is likely that the early Jews considered them prophetic because they tell the stories of older prophets like Samuel, Nathan, Ahijah, Elijah, and Elisha. To the Hebrew mind, the will of God became



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concrete through experience. Therefore, these books that we consider history could have been included in the Prophets because they recorded prophetic principles as clearly as did the prophets themselves.

The Prophets were the guides and the directors of the nation of Israel. They moved the people to walk in the ways of God and warned and restrained them when they went astray. It was impossible for Israel to think of the Law without thinking of the Prophets. One scholar put it this way: “Without prophecy, the Law was like a body without a soul.”

### The Writings

**T**he Writings were considered a much more miscellaneous and loosely associated group and were composed of Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Song

of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles, and Daniel. These books do not form a homogenous whole as do the Law and the Prophets. They were called “a miscellany of independent books.” They did not enter the canon as a whole like the Law and the Prophets. Instead, they came in one by one. For some time, they formed what one writer called “an informal appendix to the Law and the Prophets.” They were most commonly used for liturgical reading in worship services and at key festivals. They became Scripture more by public use and acceptance than by official decision. However, in 90 A.D., twenty years after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, a group of Jewish Rabbis and scholars gathered at Jamnia (also known as Jabne, near Jaffa) to definitely and finally define the canon of Scripture as we know it today.

<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Making of the Bible*, published jointly by Lutterworth Press (London) and Abingdon Press (New York and Nashville), printings in 1961, 1962, 1963, and 1965.

<sup>2</sup> *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, copyright © 1998 by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA (all rights reserved). *PC Study Bible V5* formatted electronic database, copyright © 1988-2006 by Jim Gilbertson, BibleSoft, Inc. Seattle, WA.

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Notes **RESOURCES  
NEEDED:**

- ◆ 2-sided copies of Lesson Notes / Take-Home pages
- ◆ Pencils or pens for each person
- ◆ Dry erase markers and marker board or felt tip markers and a flip chart

**TIMEFRAME:**

- ◆ 35 minutes

**EXTRAS:**

- ◆ Make copies and recruit two people for the Role Play in Step Four.

**Suggested Lesson Plan**

**NOTE TO TEACHER:** This *suggested* lesson plan contains many elements that, if employed, will help maximize learning for life-change in your Bible Fellowship. If you are an experienced teacher, you have freedom to create your own plan based upon the “Studying the Word Together” section. If you are less experienced, we suggest that you “stick to the plan.” However, even less-experienced teachers should feel free to modify the plan based upon the needs of your Bible Fellowship. This plan is designed to be presented in 35 minutes. It is important, therefore, that you carefully plan your presentation so that you communicate the main points with brevity and clarity.

**Important Scripture  
References:**

- ◆ 1 Kings 5:15-18; 7:9-10
- ◆ Ephesians 2:19-22
- ◆ Matthew 22:34-40
- ◆ Mark 12:28-34a
- ◆ Luke 10:25-28
- ◆ Romans 13:9-10
- ◆ 1 John 4:7-12, 19-21

**Teaching Goals:**

Bible Fellowship participants will

- ◆ **Learn:** The Great Commandment is the foundation of the Old Testament Law.
- ◆ **Learn:** The Great Commandment is the centerpiece of Jesus’ teaching concerning the moral code or system of ethics by which Christians live.
- ◆ **Experience:** Bible Fellowship participants vicariously experience Mark 12:28-34a and ask God to grow them as they consider the implications of the Great Commandment upon their foundational beliefs.

**Before Class Begins:**

- ◆ Give both of your recruits a copy of the role play for Step Four so that they may be ready for their parts.
- ◆ Distribute handouts.

**STEP ONE: CHRIST,  
THE CORNERSTONE  
(GETTING READY  
TO LEARN) - (7 MINUTES)**

*Use material from “Studying the Word Together” pages 1-2 to 1-3 to prepare for this section.*

- ◆ Tell your class that this series is about the foundations of our Christian faith.
- ◆ Quickly divide your department into buzz groups of 3 to 5 people.
  1. Ask each group to identify several reasons why a strong foundation is essential to any building. After a few moments, collect some responses from group members.
  2. Refer your Bible Fellowship to the 1 Kings passages (on handout). Briefly discuss the size of the foundation stones that Solomon used in building the Temple and discuss the significance of the cornerstone to the structural integrity to of a building.
  3. Ask a volunteer to read aloud Ephesians 2:19-22 (on handout). Explain the significance of Jesus being the cornerstone of the Christian faith.
  4. Then tell your Fellowship: *As His disciples we must understand the ethics of His teaching. The*

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*centerpiece of Jesus' ethics was not a new teaching. It was very familiar to the religious leaders. Today we know that teaching as the Great Commandment.*

Explain the meaning of ethics. (See endnotes from "Studying the Word Together.")

**STEP TWO: THE GREAT COMMANDMENT: THE CENTERPIECE OF JESUS' ETHICS (13 MINUTES)**

*Use material from "Studying the Word Together" pages 1-3 to 1-4 as well as "Commentary" pages 1-8 to 1-9 to prepare for this section.*

- ◆ Ask each person to read silently the Great Commandment passages (on handout in parallel format). Direct them to make a few notes concerning the similarities and differences between the accounts.
- ◆ After allowing a few minutes for participants to complete the above exercise, compare the passages by pointing out the following:
  1. All three accounts reference Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18.
  2. In both Mark's and Luke's accounts, the experts in the Law and Christ agree that the Law is built upon the foundation of what we now call the Great Commandment.
  3. In Matthew's account, Jesus makes the point that "the Law and the Prophets" hang on the two imperatives in the Great Commandment. Briefly explain the meaning of:
    - a. Hang
    - b. The Law and the Prophets (see "Commentary")

4. Tell your department that Paul taught this principle, too. Then read aloud Romans 13: 9-10 (on handout).

**STEP THREE: UNDERSTANDING AGAPÉ LOVE (10 MINUTES)**

*Use material from pages 1-5 to 1-6 to prepare for this section.*

- ◆ Tell your group that this part of the lesson will be a brief review for those who participated in *The Generous Heart of God* study last fall. Briefly explain that it is important for us to understand the word rendered *love (agapè)* as Jesus used it in the Great Commandment.
- ◆ Point out that the Greek noun *agapè* and the verb *agapao* were used in a limited way in Jesus' day; however, He added new dimensions to the word. Define agapè as follows:
  1. Love is an act of the will; it is a choice made by the "lover" without regard of the merit or worthiness of the beloved (Rom. 5:8).
  2. Love respects and values the beloved (Rom. 5:10).
  3. Love focuses upon the needs of the beloved (Matt. 6:8; 6:32-33; Philip. 4:19).
  4. Love freely gives from its resources to serve (minister to) the needs of the beloved without demand of return (Matt. 10:8b; John 3:16; James 1:16-18).
  5. Love gives first (Gen. 1:27-31; Rom. 11:35).
- ◆ Refer your department members to the 1 John 4:7-12, 19-21 passage on their handout. Ask each one to silently read the verses, underlining with pen or pencil what they consider the key thoughts in the passage. Give them about 90 seconds to accomplish this.



## The Cornerstone and the Centerpiece

Notes 

- ◆ Explain that each occurrence of *love* in the passage is from the *agapé* word family. Quickly review the seven points from the passage:
  1. God is the source of all agapé love (v. 7).
  2. Those who are truly saved love others well and have an intimate relationship with God; those who do not love are not true followers of Christ (vs. 7-8).
  3. God is love; love is the essence of God's nature and character (v. 8).
  4. Jesus is the evidence of God's love for us (vs. 9-10).
  5. Believers have the capacity to love God and others with agapé love, because they are indwelt by God (v. 11).
  6. Believers respond to God's love by loving Him and others (v. 19).
  7. The believer's love of others is evidence of his/her love for God (vs. 20-21).

## STEP FOUR: APPLICATION &amp; CLOSING (5 MINUTES)

*As you prepare, remember to make the two copies of the role play for your readers.*

- ◆ Close with the following meditation:
  1. Ask all to close their eyes and imagine that they are in the outer courts of the Temple, silently observing and listening to the conversation between the teacher of the Law and Jesus.
  2. Have your two volunteers role play the teacher and Jesus, reading the script below.
- ◆ After the role play, ask Department members to consider the six closing questions on their handouts and to ask God to take them another step in their journey toward spiritual maturity as these questions are addressed in upcoming lessons.
- ◆ Close with a prayer thanking God for His love and for giving us the capacity to love Him and others with His agapé love.

## STEP FOUR ROLE PLAY

**Teacher:** Of all the commandments, which is the most important?

**Jesus:** The most important one is this: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." The second is this: "Love your neighbor as yourself." There is no commandment greater than these.

**Teacher:** Well said, Teacher. You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.

**Jesus:** You are not far from the kingdom of God.



**The Cornerstone and the Centerpiece**  
**Today in My Bible Fellowship**

**TALK IT OVER:** Why is a strong foundation essential to any building?

**1 Kings 5:15-18:** Solomon had seventy thousand carriers and eighty thousand stonecutters in the hills, as well as thirty-three hundred foremen who supervised the project and directed the workmen. At the king's command, they removed from the quarry large blocks of quality stone to provide a foundation of dressed stone for the temple. The craftsmen of Solomon...cut and prepared...the stone for the building of the temple.

**1 Kings 7:9-10:** All these structures [the Temple and Solomon's palaces], from the outside to the great courtyard and from foundation to

eaves, were made of blocks of high-grade stone cut to size and trimmed with a saw on their inner and outer faces. The foundations were laid with large stones of good quality, some measuring ten cubits and some eight.

**Ephesians 2:19-22:** [Y]ou are...fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of [the teaching of] the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Matthew 22:34-40	Mark 12:28-34a	Luke 10:25-28
<p><sup>34</sup>Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together.</p> <p><sup>35</sup>One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question:</p> <p><sup>36</sup>"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"</p> <p><sup>37</sup>Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."</p> <p><sup>38</sup>This is the first and greatest commandment.</p> <p><sup>39</sup>And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'</p> <p><sup>40</sup>All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."</p>	<p><sup>28</sup>One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. ...[H]e asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"</p> <p><sup>29</sup>"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. <sup>30</sup>Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' <sup>31</sup>The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."</p> <p><sup>32</sup>"Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. <sup>33</sup>To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."</p> <p><sup>34</sup>When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."</p>	<p><sup>25</sup>On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"</p> <p><sup>26</sup>"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"</p> <p><sup>27</sup>He answered: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"</p> <p><sup>28</sup>"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."</p>

**Romans 13:9-10:** The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.

**1 John 4:7-12, 19-21:** Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup>Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. <sup>9</sup>This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup>This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup>Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup>No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. ...<sup>19</sup>We love because he first loved us. <sup>20</sup>If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. <sup>21</sup>And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

**THOUGHTS TO PONDER:**

1. Do I allow the Great Commandment to give direction to my interpretation of Scripture?
2. Am I open to having my view of God and humankind informed by the Great Commandment?
3. Am I open to letting the Great Commandment serve to influence my understanding of Christ's teachings and to give direction to my pursuit of intimacy with Him?
4. What evidence of agapé love do I see in my relationships with the other believers in my Bible Fellowship?
5. How would unchurched people I know likely describe the Christian community as a whole?
6. Am I compelled by agapé love for my neighbor to share lovingly—at appropriate times—my experiences with Christ? Do I love my neighbor enough to be concerned about his/her spiritual condition?

**Next Week's Lesson: The Great Commandment and Bible Interpretation**

**Daily Reflections**

**B**egin each daily reflection by meditating a few minutes on the suggested Scripture passage. Seek to listen to the Holy Spirit as He speaks to you. Then consider the comments and questions about the passage. Be aware of both your thoughts and your feelings. Respond to God through both.

**Monday:** *[Y]ou are ... members of God's household, built on the foundation of [the teaching of] the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him, the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)*

Does the structural integrity of the "foundation stones" of your faith truly depend upon Jesus being the Cornerstone? Are you a Christ-follower who, with full devotion, follows the moral code or system of ethics revealed in His teaching? Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal truth to you concerning these questions.

**Tuesday:** *Jesus replied [to the Pharisee]: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:37-39)*

Consider this question: *Do my relationships indicate that I am growing in my love for God and that I am growing in my love for others?*

**Wednesday:** *All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments [Love God and love your neighbors as you love yourself]. (Matthew 22:40)*

The experts in the Law agreed with Christ that the imperatives in the Great Commandment (Matt. 22:37-39) summed up all the teachings of the Law as given by Moses, as well as the teachings of the Prophets. Reflect upon your basic Christian beliefs for a moment. Would Christ agree with you that your life indicates that you, too, believe that the Great Commandment is the centerpiece of His teaching? Ask Him.

**Thursday:** *The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law. (Romans 13:9-10)*

Too many Christians believe that following Christ means jumping through numerous "spiritual hoops." This passage tells us that discipleship is truly simple: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Is your list of "hoops" too long? Invite the Holy Spirit to speak to you about your "spiritual hoops" list.

**Friday:** *Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.... We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.... (1 John 4:7-8, 19-21)*

We receive from God Himself the capacity to love both Him and others with agapé love. We choose to allow that capacity to fill our souls or to remain constrained by sin. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal any ways that you constrain your capacity to love Him and others with agapé love.