

Bridging the Two Great Commandments

By Elder Gary E. Stevenson

Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

Our ability to follow Jesus Christ depends upon our strength and power to live the first and second commandments with balance and equal devotion.

Introduction

As my wife, Lesa, and I travel on assignment throughout the world, we relish the privilege of meeting with you in congregations large and small. Your devotion to the work of the Lord buoys us up and stands as a testimony to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We return home from each trip wondering if we possibly gave as much as we received.

When traveling, we have little time for sightseeing. However, when possible, I spend a few moments in a particular passion. I have an interest in architecture and design and a special fascination with bridges. Suspension bridges amaze me. Whether it's the Rainbow Bridge in Tokyo, the Tsing Ma Bridge in Hong Kong, the Tower Bridge in London, or others I have seen, I marvel at the engineering genius built within these complicated structures. Bridges take us places we otherwise would not be able to go. (Before I continue, I note that since this message was prepared, a tragic bridge accident occurred in Baltimore. We mourn the loss of life and offer condolences to affected families.)

A Magnificent Suspension Bridge

Recently, a conference assignment took me to California, where I once again crossed the iconic Golden Gate Bridge, regarded as an engineering wonder of the world. This monumental structure intertwines beautiful form, functional purpose, and masterful engineering. It is a classic suspension bridge with bookend towers, supported by massive piers. The colossal, majestic weight-bearing twin towers soaring above the ocean were the first elements to be constructed. Together they shoulder the load of the sweeping main suspension cables and the vertical suspender cables, which cradle the roadway below. The extraordinary stabilizing capacity—the power of the tower—is the magic behind the engineering of the bridge.

Early construction images of the bridge bear testimony of this engineering principle. Each bridge element finds weight-bearing support from the symmetrical towers, both interdependently connected one to another.

When the bridge is complete, with its two powerful towers firmly in place and piers anchored in a foundation of bedrock, it is an image of strength and beauty.

Today I invite you to look at this stately bridge—with its ascending twin towers built on a strong foundation—through a gospel lens.

In the twilight of Jesus Christ’s ministry, during what we now call Holy Week, a Pharisee who was a lawyer¹ asked the Savior a question he knew was nearly impossible to answer:² “Master, which is the great commandment in the law?” The lawyer, “tempting him” and seeking a legalistic answer, with seemingly deceitful intent, received a genuine, sacred, divine response.

“Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

“This is the first and great commandment.” Harkening to our bridge analogy, the first tower!

“And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” This is the second tower!

“On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”³ The remaining elements of the bridge!

Let’s examine each of the two great commandments, revealed and recited in Jesus Christ’s response. As we do so, let the image of the magnificent suspension bridge resonate in your mind’s eye.

Love the Lord

The first, to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, and mind.

In this answer, Jesus Christ condenses the essence of the law embodied in the sacred teachings of the Old Testament. To love the Lord centers first on your heart—your very nature. The Lord asks that you love with all your soul⁴—your entire consecrated being—and finally, to love with all your mind—your intelligence and intellect. Love for God is not limited or finite. It is infinite and eternal.

For me, the application of the first great commandment can sometimes feel abstract, even daunting. Gratefully, as I consider further words of Jesus, this commandment becomes much more graspable: “If ye love me, keep my commandments.”⁵ This I can do. I can love Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ, which then leads to prayer, scripture study, and temple worship. We love the Father and the Son through the payment of tithes, keeping the Sabbath day holy, living a virtuous and chaste life, and being obedient.

Loving the Lord is often measured in small daily deeds, footsteps on the covenant path: for young people, using social media to build up rather than tear down; leaving the party, movie, or activity where standards might be challenged; showing reverence for things sacred.

Consider this tender example. It was fast Sunday as Vance⁶ and I knocked on the door of a small, humble home. We and other deacons in the quorum had come to expect the words “Please come in,” yelled warmly in a thick German accent loud enough to hear through the door. Sister Mueller was one of several immigrant widows in the ward. She couldn’t answer the door very easily, as she was legally blind. As we stepped inside the dimly lit home, she greeted us with kind

questions: What are your names? How are you doing? Do you love the Lord? We answered and shared that we came to receive her fast offering. Even at our young age, her meager circumstances were readily apparent, and her faith-filled response was profoundly touching: “I placed a dime on the counter earlier this morning. I am so grateful to offer my fast offering. Would you be kind enough to place it in the envelope and fill out my fast-offering receipt?” Her love of the Lord lifted our faith each time we left her home.

King Benjamin promised remarkable power for those who follow the first great commandment. “I would desire that ye should consider on the blessed and happy state of those that keep the commandments. ... They are blessed in all things, ... and if they hold out faithful to the end they are received into heaven ... in a state of never-ending happiness.”⁷

Loving the Lord leads to eternal happiness!

Love Your Neighbor

Jesus then said, “And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”⁸ This is the second tower of the bridge.

Here Jesus bridges our heavenly upward gaze, to love the Lord, with our earthly outward gaze, to love our fellow men and women. One is interdependent on the other. Love of the Lord is not complete if we neglect our neighbors. This outward love includes all of God’s children without regard to gender, social class, race, sexuality, income, age, or ethnicity. We seek out those who are hurt and broken, the marginalized, for “all are alike unto God.”⁹ We “succor the weak, lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees.”¹⁰

Consider this example: Brother Evans¹¹ was surprised when he was prompted to stop his car and knock on an unknown door of an unknown family. When a widowed mother of over 10 answered the door, their difficult circumstances and great needs became readily apparent to him. The first was simple, paint for their home, which was followed by many years of temporal and spiritual ministering to this family.

This thankful mother later wrote of her heaven-sent friend: “You have spent your life reaching out to the least of us. How I would love to hear the things the Lord has to say to you as He expresses His appreciation for the good you have done financially and spiritually for the people that only you and He will ever know about. Thank you for blessing us in so many ways, ... for the missionaries you provided for. ... I often wonder if the Lord picked on you exclusively or if you were just the one who listened.”

To love your neighbor includes Christlike deeds of kindness and service. Can you let go of grudges, forgive enemies, welcome and minister to your neighbors, and assist the elderly? You will each be inspired as you build your tower of love for neighbor.

President Russell M. Nelson taught: “Giving help to others—making a conscientious effort to care about others as much as or *more* than we care about ourselves—is our joy. Especially ... when it is not convenient and when it takes us out of our comfort zone. *Living* that second great commandment is the *key* to becoming a true disciple of Jesus Christ.”¹²

An Interdependency

Jesus further taught, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”¹³ This is very instructive. There is an important interdependency between loving the Lord and loving one another. For the Golden Gate Bridge to perform its designed function, both towers are equally strong and with equal power to bear the weight of the suspension cables, the roadway, and the traffic crossing the bridge. Without this engineering symmetry, the bridge could be compromised, even leading to collapse. For any suspension bridge to do what it was built to do, its towers must function together in complete harmony. Likewise, our ability to follow Jesus Christ depends upon our strength and power to live the first and second commandments with balance and equal devotion to both.

The increasing contention in the world suggests, however, that we at times fail to see or remember this. Some are so focused on keeping the commandments that they show little tolerance of those they see as less righteous. Some find it difficult to love those who are choosing to live their lives outside of the covenant or even away from any religious participation.

Alternatively, there are those who emphasize the importance of loving others without acknowledgment that we are all accountable to God. Some refuse entirely the notion that there is such a thing as absolute truth or right and wrong and believe that the only thing required of us is complete tolerance and acceptance of the choices of others. Either of these imbalances could cause your spiritual bridge to tip or even fall.

President Dallin H. Oaks described this when he said: “We are commanded to love everyone, since Jesus’s parable of the good Samaritan teaches that everyone is our neighbor. But our zeal to keep this second commandment must not cause us to forget the first, to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind.”¹⁴

Conclusion

So the question for each of us is, How do we build our own bridge of faith and devotion—erecting tall bridge towers of both loving God and loving our neighbors? Well, we just start. Our initial efforts might look like a plan on the back of a napkin or an early-stage blueprint of the bridge we hope to construct. It might consist of a few realistic goals to understand the Lord’s gospel more or to vow to judge others less. No one is too young or too old to begin.

Over time, with prayerful and thoughtful planning, rough ideas are refined. New actions become habits. Early drafts become polished blueprints. We build our personal spiritual bridge with hearts and minds devoted to Heavenly Father and His Only Begotten Son as well as to our brothers and sisters with whom we work, play, and live.

In the days ahead, when you pass over a majestic suspension bridge or even when you see a picture, with its soaring towers, I invite you to remember the two great commandments, described by Jesus Christ in the New Testament. May the Lord’s instructions inspire us. May our hearts and minds be lifted upward to love the Lord and turned outward to love our neighbor.

May this strengthen our faith in Jesus Christ and His Atonement, of which I testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. “In the New Testament, [the term *lawyer* was] equivalent to *scribe*, one who was by profession a student and teacher of the law, including the written law of the Pentateuch, and also ‘the traditions of the elders’ (Matt. 22:35; Mark 12:28; Luke 10:25)” (Bible Dictionary, “Lawyer”).
2. Anciently, Jewish scholars had enumerated 613 commandments in the Torah and actively debated the relative importance of one versus the other. Perhaps the lawyer intended to use Jesus’s answer against Him. If He said one commandment was the most important, it might allow an opening to accuse Jesus of ignoring another aspect of the law. But the Savior’s response silenced those who had come to entrap Him with a foundational statement that today is the bedrock for all we do in the Church.
3. Matthew 22:36–40.
4. See Doctrine and Covenants 88:15.
5. John 14:15.
6. Both names changed in this story to protect privacy.
7. Mosiah 2:41.
8. Matthew 22:39.
9. 2 Nephi 26:33.
10. Doctrine and Covenants 81:5.
11. Name changed to protect privacy.
12. Russell M. Nelson, “The Second Great Commandment,” *Ensign or Liahona*, Nov. 2019, 100.
13. Matthew 22:40.
14. Dallin H. Oaks, “*Two* Great Commandments,” *Ensign or Liahona*, Nov. 2019, 73–74.