

LOVE GOD

Matthew 22:34-40

Our mission here at Grace Church is to love God, love others and make disciples. This morning we are thinking about what it means to “love God”.

“Love” is a very nebulous word. Think about all the kinds of things we say we “love”. We “love” Super Big Gulps. We “love” football. We “love” guitar. We “love” our wives and kids. We “love” humanity. We “love” God.

What does it mean to love? What does love look like? To get answers to these deep questions we do what all wise scholars do; we ask our children.

When John, age 9, was asked, “What is love?”, he answered, “Love is like an avalanche where you have to run for your life.”

Here is Manuel’s answer to the same question, “What is love?” “I think you're supposed to get shot with an arrow or something, but the rest of it isn't supposed to be so painful.”

Michelle, age 9, had profound insight when she answered the question, “What are most people thinking when they say ‘I love you’?” “The person is thinking: ‘Yeah, I really do love him. But I hope he showers at least once a day.’”

One little boy spoke for all us men when he answered the same question, “What are most people thinking when they say ‘I love you’?” “Some lovers might be real nervous, so they are glad that they finally got it out and said it, and now they can go eat.”

“How do you make someone fall in love with you?” Nine-year-old Camille answered, “Shake your hips and hope for the best.” Alonzo was much more practical in his answer, “Don’t do things like have smelly, green sneakers. You might get attention, but attention ain’t the same thing as love.”

Seven-year-old Ricky has a bright future as a marriage counselor. When he was asked to give some good advice on love he answered, “Tell your wife that she looks pretty even if she looks like a truck”. Erin’s eight-year-old advice was, “Don’t forget your wife’s name. That will mess up the love.”

Why is the topic of love so important? According to Jesus, love is the greatest command.

Matthew 22:34–40 (ESV)

³⁴ But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. ³⁵ And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” ³⁷ And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

This morning we’re thinking about what it means to love God. Jesus certainly wasn’t springing a new idea on the lawyer or the Pharisees. All of them knew and recited Deuteronomy 6:4-5, the “Shema” regularly as part of their daily prayers.

Deuteronomy 6:4–5 (ESV)

⁴ “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

We are not Israel, nor are we under the Law of Moses, but because Jesus affirmed this as the greatest commandment it remains the greatest commandment and obligation of all Christians. God’s will for your life is first and foremost that you love Him with all your being.

Immediately we have a problem for the western mind; we think to ourselves, “Love can’t be forced.” “How can God command us to love Him?”

This is important for us to grapple with because if our concept of love is off, our relationship to God will be off. Some of us are thinking, “When I think about God I have a warm feeling toward Him so that means I love Him.” Others are thinking, “I don’t know if I love God because I don’t feel anything towards Him.”

Thinking about loving God in these terms is based on a romantic definition of love. Love “happens” to us. We “fall” into love. It’s all about feelings and therefore love can’t be forced. We can’t make someone feel love for us. How then can God command us to feel love for Him?

As long as we think of loving God in these romantic terms we won’t take seriously the command to love God. A romantic definition leads to passivity; we’re waiting for something to happen to us to change our feelings about God.

God isn’t commanding us to feel affection for Him. The love in view is not based on a romantic definition of love, but an ontological definition of love. Ontology refers to the nature of being. We ought to love certain things because of what they are. We ought to value and prioritize certain things because of what they are.

Would you agree that a mother ought to love her child? Why? We can’t explain why in romantic terms, only ontological terms: a mother ought to love her child because the child is her flesh and blood. Even that answer is inadequate because there is something about the love between mother and child that cannot be explained. It just is and ought to be. We would agree that a mother who does not love her child is sick and a child that does not love its mother is sick; something has gone terribly wrong.

We ought to love our Creator. Just as we ought to love our mothers we ought to love our Creator. But we don’t. Something has gone terribly wrong. We may have mothers who neglected us or rejected us, which accounts for our not loving them. But such is not the case with God. God created us in His image and placed our first parents in the Garden and blessed them (Gen. 1:27-28). God, Adam and Eve enjoyed a loving relationship until things went terribly wrong at the Fall. We’ve been sick ever since the Fall. We should love God with all that we are just like a child loves his mother. But we don’t.

We ought to love our Creator but here’s how sick we’ve become: we deny we even have a Creator. Can you imagine a child so damaged inside that she denies she has a mother? This is what God is saying to us in Romans 1.

Romans 1:18–25 (ESV)

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. ²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

We are so damaged by sin and self-centeredness we can’t love God on our own. We’ve lost that capacity. We ought to love our Creator, but we can’t. The Greatest Commandment is that we love God with all our being, but we can’t.

It is God Who must restore to us the very capacity to love Him. That’s how damaged and sick we are.

1 John 4:7–10 (ESV)

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

The first step in loving God is honestly confessing your lack of love for Him and how wrong that really is.

Violating the command to love God is so bad and so serious it required the death of Jesus Christ for us to be forgiven. If you will humble yourself and confess your sin against God and believe that Jesus died to

pay the penalty of your sin and rose again to give you life, you will be born again. The Holy Spirit will come into your life and restore to you the capacity to love God.

Now, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can strive to obey the greatest commandment. Loving God is a growing process. Loving God is not an all-or-nothing proposition like an on-off switch. It would be a sad thing if, after 27 years of marriage, the depth and intensity of my love for Cathy were at the same level as when we first wed. That would indicate that something was terribly wrong in the way I am relating to Cathy. Love grows stronger and deeper as we see more and more clearly the quality and value of the other person. Getting through five years of graduate school, raising three children, serving in ministry together, navigating through cancer and now welcoming my mother to live with us – I see more clearly today what I saw only dimly twenty seven years ago; I am married to an incredible woman.

How does love grow? By engaging our whole being in the relationship. That's what I think is meant by loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. All four components are vital to loving God as they are to loving anyone.

Engaging our heart, soul, mind and strength in a relationship taxes us greatly. We can't do it with very many people. On what basis do we decide which relationships will be the priority relationships in our lives?

On the basis of ontology; the basis of being. We prioritize on the basis of who we are in relationship to the other person. Who am I in relationship to Cathy? I am her husband. Is it not my obligation? Is it not the right and good thing for me to give my best energy and effort to my relationship with her? Would it be right and good for me to give more energy and effort to a relationship with a woman not my wife than to my wife? Of course not! And why not? Because of who Cathy is and my obligation to her.

The point of this illustration is that we decide all the time to whole-heartedly love certain people, not based on romantic feelings, but based on who they are and our obligation to them.

If this is as it ought to be in our human relationships, how much more so in our relationship to God?

The second step in loving God is to prioritize your relationship with God because of Who He is and your obligation to Him.

The sad thing is that God would have to command love from us whom He created. What miserable, pathetic creatures are we!

But thanks be to God for His incomprehensible love for us.

¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

My goal in this message has been to bring clarity in our thinking about the Greatest Commandment. We cannot obey the command to love God until we first confess our lack of love for Him and receive His forgiveness. Once forgiven, we need to think rightly about loving God. We ought to prioritize our relationship with God as the most important relationship. We prioritize human relationships all the time based on who the person is and our obligation to them. So it is with God. He is God. He is Creator. Who is greater than God? Who should be number one in our lives except God?

Choose today to prioritize your relationship with God. If you're not sure what it looks like to love Him with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, there are men and women in our church family who can help you pursue your relationship with God.