

INTRODUCTION

This is the second part of a message I started earlier this month entitled three levels of love. With Christmas behind us, we can take a deep breath from all the hustle and bustle of shopping and crowds. I heard a story about a guy who was driving around in a crowded mall parking lot during the holidays looking for a parking place. The parking lot was packed. He finally resorted to prayer. He said, "Dear Lord, please find me a parking place. God, if you'll find me a parking place, I promise I'll never miss another Sunday at church, and I'll start tithing every week." At that very moment a miracle happened. A car backed out of a prime-parking place. The man said, "Never mind, Lord. I found one on my own!"

That's how some people treat God, He's like a 911 emergency number. And when God answers their prayer, they forget to acknowledge Him or thank Him. Other people think of God as some kind of cruel tyrant who has laid down an endless list of rules that are impossible to keep. There are all kinds of laws in this world. In the Old Testament there are ceremonial laws, civil laws, and moral laws. In our world we have federal laws, state laws, local laws, in-laws and outlaws. There are a lot of laws and rules. But in this passage of scripture Jesus tells us to relax, because there are only two rules you really need to know to please God. Love God with all your being and love your neighbor as yourself.

Before we read this passage, let's recall the context. Jesus is in Jerusalem knowing in a few hours He will face arrest, torture, and a horrific crucifixion, to be followed by a glorious resurrection. The religious leaders had been asking Jesus a series of incriminating questions to trap Him, but He had easily slipped out of all their verbal traps.

Mark 12:28-34. One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: [He quotes from Deuteronomy 6] '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: [and He quotes from Leviticus 19] 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

"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."

When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

The Ten Commandments can be summarized by the two principles of loving God and loving your neighbor. The first four commandments deal with loving God, and the last six deal with loving your neighbor. Mark Twain once wrote that he knew of a wealthy, but ruthless businessman in Boston. After Mark Twain visited the Holy Land and wrote about it, this businessman read the account. He told Mark Twain his greatest goal in life is to travel to the

Holy Land, climb Mt. Sinai and read the Ten Commandments aloud. Mark Twain said, "I have a better idea. Why don't you stay in Boston and KEEP the Ten Commandments?" Loving God and loving others fulfills the Ten Commandments.

Jesus was speaking of three levels of love. In the previous message we talked about the first two levels and in this message we'll explore what it means to live in the third level of love.

Let's review: The first level of love is to love yourself correctly. Jesus said to love your neighbor as yourself. You can't love your neighbor or God until you love yourself. The only way you can love yourself is to see yourself correctly, as God sees you. The Bible says, "To all who received him, those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." (John 1:12) Have you received Jesus as your Lord and Savior? If your answer is "yes" then you are a child of God. And God love His children so much that He says through the prophet Isaiah that He has engraved you on the palms of His hands. We can love ourselves because God first loved us. One of my mentors, Adrian Rogers, used to say, "God doesn't love you because you are valuable; you are valuable because God loves you!"

The second level of love is to love other compassionately. The night before Jesus died, He told the disciples, "A new command I give to you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." (John 13:34) It's easy to love lovable people. But there are a lot of unlovely people out there, and God often places them in our path to teach us that He wants to love them through us. It's not enough to say you love someone, you must *show* your love to others by performing acts of grace and kindness. Love isn't a feeling it's a choice. In the musical, "The Sound of Music," Oscar Hammerstein wrote these lyrics: "A bell's not a bell 'til you ring it; A song's not a song 'til you sing it—love in your heart wasn't put there to stay—love isn't love 'til you give it away."

Speaking of demonstrating love to strangers let me make a fun suggestion. If you go out to a restaurant to eat at lunch or dinner today, why don't you leave an extravagant tip? I mean, leave the server more than the meal cost itself. If they notice it, just say, "Our pastor told us today we should love one another by performing acts of kindness to strangers. You'll be blessed by performing acts of kindness in Jesus' name."

And the third level of love is love God completely. At the top of the ladder of love we are to love God with all our being. We made a confession about each level of love, so here's our confession for the Highest Level of Love: **I LOVE GOD WHEN OBEYING HIM IS THE PRIMARY PASSION OF MY LIFE.** Jesus said, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." (John 14:23)

God's love is unconditional. The reason we love God is because He first loved us. Human love is fickle. We often love others for what they can give us. It's like Marie, who had recently broken off her engagement with her fiancé, Jimmy. She had a change of heart, so she wrote him a letter, "Dear Jimmy, Words cannot express the sadness I've felt since we broke off our engagement. Please say you'll take me back again, so please forgive me. I love you, I love you, I love you! Yours forever, Marie, P.S. And congratulations on winning the state lottery!"

In this passage, Jesus gives us the process by which we love God. It begins with our heart, moves to our soul, then to our mind, and finally to our physical strength. Let's unpack these four ways to show our love to God. Let me ask you four questions.

(1) Do I love/obey God emotionally? (with all my heart)

Your heart is the emotional center of your life. We know what it means when someone says they love us with all their heart. That means they aren't holding back. Love is not primarily an emotion; it is a choice. But true love touches every part of our personality, including our emotions. When you love God, you will often express your love to Him with all your emotions.

The Psalmist expressed it this way, "O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water." (Psalm 63:1) David knew what it was like to be stuck in the dry desert with no water. After several days of no water, his heart was seeking only one thing: Water. David later wrote that the same kind of driving thirst for water described his passion to seek and know the Lord.

The driving motivation behind all great art, all great music, all great architecture, or writing is a single force: Passion. Nothing great in life was ever accomplished without passion.

Here's the sad thing. In America, it's okay to be passionate about anything except God. You can be passionate about movies—thousands dressed in Star Wars costumes to watch the latest movie in the series. You can be passionate about sports—millions of Americans wear the jerseys and caps of their favorite college or professional teams. You can be passionate about politics—and that will be dominating the news for the next eleven months. You can be passionate about cooking, about exercise, about fashion, or about your hobby. But to be passionate about God—that's a no-no in America. People will call you a fanatic, a nut case.

Worship is one way we express our love for God. Over a hundred years ago, our Baptist forefathers were characterized by their emotionally driven worship; many of them were known as shouting Baptists and looked down upon by the more formal denominations. We still have men who shout in our churches, it's just a silent shout that can be mistaken for a yawn.

Today, I think we're afraid about getting too emotional in our expressions of worship. We have all seen some Christians or Christian groups who may be so emotional in their expression of love that it scares us. I love to visit Uganda and worship with the Believers there because they are so expressive in their worship. They love to dance, and I'm not talking about the Texas two-step. I'm talking about the full-blown Watusi jump. And in Manila, their worship services are full of loud expressive singers and they have dance teams of young girls that perform choreographed dances in front of the congregation, sort of a cross between cheerleaders and drill team dancers.

As Baptists, we are so afraid of wildfire that we have settled for no fire. We are so afraid of getting out on a limb of emotional worship that we don't even get near the tree. We mistakenly think the more dignified you are, the more godly. The old Methodist evangelist, Sam Jones, used to say the most dignified person he ever saw was laid out in a coffin. We have confused dignity with deadness.

It wouldn't hurt sometime if someone shouted "Amen!" It wouldn't hurt sometime if someone shouted "Glory Hallelujah!" It wouldn't hurt sometime if we just broke out into a clap offering for the Lord. Why don't we do that without prompting? Because we're afraid someone will criticize us for being a fanatic. We are to love the Lord God with ALL our hearts!

(2) Do I love/obey God willfully? (with all my soul)

Your soul is where you make choices. It is the volitional center of your life. If emotions are the shallowest part of your personality, your soul is the deepest. The reason you got out of bed this morning and chose to attend church was because your soul led you to make the right choice.

In the same way, we must make a choice to love God. God gave us a valuable gift when He gave us a sense of free will. He put Adam and Eve in the Garden and told them to enjoy His creation, but He warned about the consequences of disobedience. Now, God could have placed an "obedience gene" in their DNA that would have forced them to love and obey Him. But God wanted the people He created to *choose* to love and obey Him.

We aren't robots. God wants us to surrender our lives to Him in order that we might love, obey, and show His light to others. But there's not a computer keyboard in heaven where God punches "enter" and we fall on our knees in repentance. He wants us to choose to love Him.

Life is full of choices, and the number of choices is growing. When I was a kid we had three choices for television: CBS, NBC, or ABC. Now we have thousands of programming choices. When I was growing up, we had three flavors of ice cream: chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry. Today there are hundreds of flavors. Bad choices have bad consequences and good choices have good consequences. Just before the children of Israel entered the Promised Land, God laid out their life choices for them. God said, "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him." (Deuteronomy 30:19-20) God presents the choices—life or death. And then He even tells us which choice to make—choose life; but He won't force you to make the right choice. God wants to love Him willingly.

(3) Do I love/obey God intellectually? (with all my mind)

Your mind is the center of your intellectual life. There is no contradiction between loving God emotionally and loving God intellectually. Some people think when they arrive at church, they have to check their brain at the door because they don't think they'll need it.

We live in a world that is becoming more and more un-Christian. The world wants to try to mold you to fit the popular mindset of our culture. That's why Paul wrote in Romans 12:2, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

God wants you to use your mind to observe His creation and think about the implications of having a love relationship with your Creator. The Psalmist wrote, "When I consider your

heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him?" (Psalm 8:3-4)

If you want to love God with your mind, I encourage you to read two sources. First, devour the Bible itself. Jesus told the Jewish religious leaders, "You diligently study the scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me." (John 5:39)

Second, read the biographies of great Christian thinkers. Most of us are aware of the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien, who wrote *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Did you know he was a devout follower of Jesus Christ? He had a tremendous influence on a fellow professor at Oxford who claimed to be an atheist. His name was Clive Staples Lewis. C. S. Lewis placed his faith in Jesus and went on to write *The Chronicles of Narnia* and many other works. He is one of the most quoted Christian intellectuals of the 20th century. He had this to say about our faith. "Christianity, if false, is of no importance; and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important." Go ahead; don't be afraid to use your intellect to love God!

(4) Do I love/obey God energetically? (with all my strength)

The heart, soul, and mind have to do with the invisible parts of who we are. But our strength involves our body, our muscles. True love for God will start from within, but will engage the body in acts of loving service. In other words, we offer our bodies to God as a living sacrifice. We ask Him to make our hands His hands, and our feet His feet. We are to long for Him with all our being.

The Psalmist wrote, "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?" (Psalm 42:1-2) Imagine a deer in the desert, thirsting for water. That deer makes seeking and finding water the #1 priority of its life. When you love God with all your strength, seeking and serving Him becomes the primary passion of your life.

Do you have a burning, passionate love for God? If I could place a spiritual thermometer in your heart what would be the core temperature of your passion for God? Bill Bright was the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ. He wasn't a preacher. When he was a businessman attending First Presbyterian Church in Hollywood California, God touched his heart. From that moment until he died at 81, Bill never lost his passion for God. I attended a conference in Orlando in January of 2003 where Bill Bright was supposed to speak. He was too sick to speak live, so he spoke from his bed at his home, and he gave an impassioned plea to reach the world for Christ. The Billion Souls Network, which we're a part of, was his last dream before he died later that year.

Bill Bright never lost his passionate love for God. Over forty years of ministry, I've known people who at one time seemed to be "on fire" for God. Like Bill Bright, there was a time when they followed God with passion and fire. But through the years, their love has grown cold, and now they are AWOL: absent without love.

A young Christian visited an elderly believer who had never lost his passion for God. He found the old man sitting on his front porch with his dog. The young man said, "Sir, why is it that some Christians zealously follow God for the first year or two of their conversion, but then fall into spiritual complacency? But I've been told that you are different, that you've never lost your zeal and passion for God. What makes you different?"

The old man said, "Let me answer your question with a story. One day I was sitting right here with my old dog when suddenly a large rabbit ran across the yard right in front of us. Well, my dog jumped up and took off after that big old rabbit. He chased that rabbit through the woods barking his head off. Soon there were other dogs that joined the chase, attracted by his barking. Soon I could hear almost a dozen dogs all barking after the rabbit as they circled the woods around my house. Gradually, though, one by one all the other dogs dropped out of the pursuit of the rabbit and returned to their homes. Only my dog continued to chase that rabbit. And in that story, you have the answer to your question about pursuing a love relationship with God." The young man thought for a moment and said, "Sir, I don't understand. What is the connection between the rabbit chase and the pursuit of God?"

The old man said, "Ask yourself the question why all the other dogs didn't continue to chase the rabbit?" The old man smiled and said, "The reason the other dogs quit was because they had not seen the rabbit. They only caught a scent and heard my dog chasing the rabbit. My dog was the only one who really saw the rabbit. And unless you truly see the glory of God, you won't have the passion and necessary to continue the pursuit of knowing God for all your life."

CONCLUSION

Have you ever just told God how much you love Him? Have you ever spent time in prayer and you didn't ask Him for anything, you just praised Him and told Him how much you love Him? When Abraham Lincoln was president, an elderly lady set up an appointment to come see him. As she entered his office, President Lincoln asked, "How can I be of service to you Madam?" She replied, "Mr. President, I know you are a busy man, and I haven't come to ask for anything. I just came to bring you a box of cookies and tell you that I appreciate the good job you're doing."

There was a long silence. Tears flowed down Lincoln's furrowed cheeks and he said, "Madam, I am greatly moved by what you have done. People come into this office, asking or demanding things from me. You are the first person who has ever entered my office asking no favor, but bringing a gift. I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

Why don't you just get alone with God sometime and don't ask Him for anything; just tell Him how much you love Him?

There are three levels of love. Love yourself correctly; the love your neighbors compassionately; only then can you be ready to love God completely!

OUTLINE

Review

1. Love Yourself correctly.
2. Love Others compassionately.
3. Love God completely.



THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF LOVE: I LOVE GOD WHEN OBEYING HIM IS THE PRIMARY PASSION OF MY LIFE.

"If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." *John 14:23*

(1) Do I love/obey God emotionally? (heart)

"O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water." *Psalms 63:1*

(2) Do I love/obey God willfully? (soul)

God said, "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him." *Deuteronomy 30:19-20*

(3) Do I love/obey God intellectually? (mind)

"When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him?" *Psalms 8:3-4*

(4) Do I love/obey God energetically? (strength)

"As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?" *Psalms 42:1-2*

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



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