

# Loving God Starts with Our Need

Series: First Love: Forming Our Love for God

Brad Bailey – February 26, 2023

Intro

I want to invite us to open ourselves to this truth today:

**We are never home... apart from the love of God.**

The Scriptures testify of our being **created to live in relationship to God and to His love.**

We are **not merely the sum total of our biological parts**, we are in the words of Genesis "a living soul" ([Gen.2:7](#)).

We were **endowed with that** which **unites us with God.**

We were **created to exist in relationship to God's love.**

When we look at a human child...even more than their need for biological care... we see their need to be loved and to love. Because that is who we are. [1]

Jesus said the greatest of all we are called to is this...

**"The most important one...is this... Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." - Mark 12:30**

Such a call can seem **at once obvious...** but also one which is **challenging.**

***Is God our first love?***

**Maybe we recall when our heart leapt before the love of God...** and we **sensed nothing mattered more...**but perhaps like an earthly love... our hearts **waned with familiarity...** **desire is replaced by duty...** and **other affections claimed more of our hearts.**

And so we are **setting apart this season** to focus on our first love... our love for God.

And we are doing so **during the season that is known as Lent.**

As Pope Francis described...

**"Lent comes providentially to reawaken us, to shake us from our lethargy." - Pope Francis**

While Lent is **often associated with the Catholic tradition**, many Christians—including Protestant and Orthodox—observe it. **It arose from the earliest of times...**out of a recognition that **we do well to set apart a time to reflect...** a time **especially fitting in the final weeks** before remembering **the death and resurrection of Christ.** [2]

**Lent draws its inspiration from the 40 days Jesus spent in the desert.** The Gospels tell us that after his baptism, Jesus fasted in the desert and then was tempted by the devil. He resisted these temptations and then went to Galilee to begin his public ministry. **As he prepared for the sacrifice of his cross....so we fast and face our own temptations.**

**As such**, the Lenten season **often includes some form of fasting...** which can sound extreme in our current culture...but is actually a very natural way to detach from something in order to more deeply attach to another. **We might consider a particular meal or food...** but **God may show us other activities...** particularly that we sense have gained a place in our lives... not healthy... or **has too much control.**

**In the Catholic tradition...** which is the **most commonly followed...** Lent **began last Wednesday...**

**Ash Wednesday...** and includes 40 days until Good Friday... based on not including Sundays...several of you joined in that start. We join the same 40 days...but we don't exclude Sundays...and **as such... we begin this tomorrow.... concluding on Good Friday.**

**So today is an invitation to join this season.**

**And we begin in the spirit of Ash Wednesday.**  
With the spirit of **humility and hunger** for God.

In the great Sermon on the Mount...Jesus began ...

**How blessed are those who know their need of God; the kingdom of Heaven is theirs. - Matthew 5:3 (NEB)**

**Our love for God begins with our need.**

Such a need confronts our pride...and independence.

**As C.S. Lewis describes...**

***“In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that - and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison - you do not know God at all.” — C.S. Lewis***

Lewis is speaking into something at the core of our nature. We have been trying to make something of ourselves... which in the end... leaves us lost.

We are not the subjects which can presume to make the source of life merely our object... and contain and control with our understanding. There is one immeasurably greater.

**C.S. Lewis** further notes...

***“As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down you cannot see something that is above you.” - C.S. Lewis***

**Similarly...we face one who is immeasurably superior to our goodness.** And this perhaps is the deeper challenge. [3]

There is an exchange in the life of Jesus... that his disciples recorded... that invites us all into the reality of our need.

**Luke 7:36-50**

**When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table. <sup>37</sup> A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. <sup>38</sup> As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.**

**<sup>39</sup> When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.”**

**<sup>40</sup> Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to tell you.”  
“Tell me, teacher,” he said.**

**<sup>41</sup> “Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii,<sup>[c]</sup> and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup> Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”**

**<sup>43</sup> Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.”  
“You have judged correctly,” Jesus said.**

**<sup>44</sup> Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. <sup>45</sup> You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not**

stopped kissing my feet. <sup>46</sup> You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. <sup>47</sup> Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

<sup>48</sup> Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

<sup>49</sup> The other guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”

<sup>50</sup> Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Here we have a **religious leader... Simon...he’s a Pharisee... a member of the religious and cultural elite**. He’s holding a **formal dinner party in ancient Palestine...and Jesus is the special guest of honor**.

In those days formal dinner parties often **took place in an open courtyard**. They were **public events where the public felt free to come into the courtyard** to observe the dinner party as it took place. They weren’t considered guests, but they weren’t intruders either.

**And amidst all the feasting and conversing...a woman has come into the courtyard... and is honoring Jesus... with such a degree of emotion and extravagance...that we can imagine no one could miss**. In this middle eastern culture, Jesus was not sitting upright as in a modern chair...in which case he would be looking down on her. Instead, He was **reclined position leaning on a center table...with his legs extended outward**. So she was on the outside of the circle of those gathered around the tables.

**As Simon...the religious leader** who invited Jesus saw how this woman had come in and was so publicly showing honor to Jesus... he thinks this suggests that Jesus could not represent God... because... as he says... **she is a “sinner.”**

If you have read the Gospels... the living testimony of the life of Jesus...you know that these religious leaders were threatened by Jesus... and we may wonder why this one, Simon, would invite him. Likely to catch him in some way. He wonders how Jesus could be comfortable with such a sinner’s presence? How could one who represents of God seem to welcome this?

**To this Jesus explains**. He uses a **very simple analogy... that of two people who owe money... neither can pay their debt**.

**One owed five hundred denarii, and the other owed fifty**. Now a denarius was what you were paid for a **day’s wages**. So, to put it in today’s terms, if you owed fifty denarii, you were in debt about **two month’s wages**. But if you owed five hundred denarii, that would be close to **two year’s wages**.

**Which one could pay the debt they owed? (Neither)**

Essentially...they both face the same consequence.

**Luke 7:42-43**

**Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”**

<sup>43</sup> Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.”

“You have judged correctly,” Jesus said.

**By introducing forgiveness... Jesus is bringing out the cost of grace at hand**.

Forgiveness of a debt **always means somebody pays**. It just means the debtor doesn’t pay. It means the creditor pays. It’s going to cost somebody.

And if one realizes they are forgiven an enormous amount... they will be gripped by what one has done for them... the cost they paid. When such love is shown to them...they will naturally respond with love.

And then Jesus says that this is what explains what is at hand among them.

**Jesus draws three startling contrasts** between **what Simon should have done** for Jesus simply as a good host, and **what the woman has done** for him voluntarily and **from the heart**.

**First of all, Simon never gave him any water for his feet.** It was a basic act of hospitality in that day to wash the feet of your guests, whether you washed them yourself or had your servants do it. **Jesus says, “You didn’t give me any water for my feet, but this woman, she wet my feet with her tears and has wiped them with her hair.”** She not only washes his feet, but she provides the water from her own tears and dries his feet with her own hair.

**Secondly,** Simon did not give Jesus the **traditional greeting of a kiss.** When you welcomed a guest into your home in that time, you would normally greet them with a kiss on the cheek as a sign of welcome and respect. In our culture we tend to shake hands or perhaps give a hug if we know the person well. When Jesus entered Simon’s home, Simon neglected to give him a proper greeting. This would have been bad enough for just a normal guest coming into the home, but **Jesus was supposed to be the guest of honor.**

**Jesus says, “Simon, you did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet.”** To kiss another person’s feet was a sign of great humility, honor and respect.

And then **thirdly, Simon did not provide any oil for Jesus’ head.** A good host would put some oil on the head of their guest to sooth any dryness of the scalp. This was considered a thoughtful act of hospitality. Once again, **Jesus draws the contrast. He says, “Simon, you did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet.”**

In verse 47 Jesus says this is what is at hand:

**“... whoever has been forgiven little loves little.” - Luke 7:47**

The **difference between these two lives** is not that a sinner has come with such a response...but that another **sinner hasn’t understood that they are a sinner...** hasn’t realized their need for forgiveness...and **has no such love.**

As **John Ortberg** wrote [4]...

**There is great sin defiling this room. But it is not the sin Simon thinks.**

**It is the sin of:**

**Lips that don’t kiss**

**Knees that won’t bend**

**Eyes that will not weep**

**Hands that will not serve**

**Perfume that will not leave the jar**

**It is the sin of a heart that will not break, a life that will not change, a soul that will not love. - John Ortberg**

And **while I might be quick to judge** the religious leader... in his self-righteousness... and champion this women... **I have to consider how deeply I grasp my position.**

What Jesus brings before everyone there...and what is intended to be brought before all of us here...is that we are all sinners... in need of a savior.

What do I really feel when I hear Jesus describe me as a sinner?

He is saying that those who are forgiven much... love much.

This means that there is more than simply some intellectual agreement to having to accept this category...but something more deep and defining.

And there is some insight at hand here.

**Our need is not simply technical... but relational...and personal.**

**I am certain** that the **religious leader may have admitted** that he is **technically in this category** of sinner...he was well versed in all that God had made known in the Scriptures.

But when our condition is made relative to others...when it is defined by the social world around us....he can fashion himself as quite “upright”... nothing like her... a real sinner.

I think of how bound we are in dividing the world into the good people and the bad people. [5]

I need to really consider...am I merely accepting some technical category... some formal truth....or do I know that my nature... apart from God’s new nature now at work...is ultimately in rebellion from God...

### **Brennen Manning**

**“At Sunday worship, as in every dimension of our existence, many of us pretend to believe we are sinners. Consequently, all we can do is pretend we have been forgiven. As a result, our whole spiritual life is pseudo-repentance and pseudo-bliss.” — Brennan Manning**

***“God can’t forgive and bless who we pretend to be.”***

### **[My personal moment]**

I recall a day I was faced with the consequences of my own sin... what I had been hiding was known... at least to someone... and I have never forgotten sitting down... feeling utterly exposed. Looking back... it reflected what the Scriptures say when they say:

**“...you have sinned against the Lord, and be sure your sin will find you out.” Numbers 32:23**

The reality of being found out...not simply by another... they were safe enough...but of being exposed before God....and in truth... more exposed to myself... as myself.

As I sat down ...I found myself painfully present before God like I had never been before... the pretense was gone... I was facing the reality of my sin...the reality of my nature. I had never agreed with God so deeply about the nature of sin. [6]

In the very moment in which I felt I was done with... I realized that God’s Spirit was there...in this very work of conviction ... there was a sense of God’s presence like I had never known. It was bitter...and sweet. Bitter because I had to face my truer self....sweet because I sensed God there. And God’s presence became more precious than I had ever known.

In that moment I encountered the reality of grace for sinners... real sinners.

I began to understand that I am a sinner... **no longer merely a sinner**... but a sinner with a savior... and the work of that savior’s Spirit.

In our need as sinners... we are met by a saviors love... and whose Spirit is now at work.

But there is something to realize in this process.

## **There is something uncomfortable... in the very process of finding comfort.**

Who do you think was more comfortable in this story?

In one sense...the religious leader is in a nice and safe position....while this woman is facing the hard reality of her position.

She has found the deep comfort she has never known....the mercy where she is accepted. But the process has required facing her need... a deep honesty and humility.

***We must realize that our love for God comes not by looking for happiness...but rather for peace.***

What we call happiness can be many things... but often what is meant is simply a state of reduced anxiety ...in which there is some momentary elation...

**“I didn’t go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don’t recommend Christianity.” - C.S. Lewis**

This is a truth that can serve us well.

In a world trying to **self-medicate our souls in a thousand ways**... we do well to know that there is something within that is not at peace... something that must be faced....and that facing it is worth it. [8]

It is worth it because only then can we be truly loved as we are.

As Brennan Manning expressed [7]...

***Honesty brings an end to pretense through a candid acknowledgment of our fragile humanity. It was always unpleasant, and usually painful, and that is why I am not very good at it. But to stand in the truth before God and one another has a unique reward. It is the reward which a sense of reality always brings. I know something extremely precious. I am in touch with myself as I am. - Brennan Manning***

This is the power of the 12 step program's step of surrender.

***"Surrender is where pain and peace meet...when we finally allow our true selves... to be exposed in presence of God...and depend upon His grace and power."***

**Our need to turn around and be forgiven... is ultimately our need to come home.**

***Our need is not the despair of merely being sinners who are lost...but the joy of sinners who are found.***

What we see in this woman...is not one who simply asked for forgiveness... but one who valued Christ's presence.

It is not merely the removal of consequences we long for...but the presence of such love. This woman valued his presence.

There she found herself home...more truly who she was.  
She came home to God...and herself.

When she let her hair down... it was a moment that seemed to defy what anyone else thought of her. By giving up power, she got power. By surrendering to Jesus, she found that she never again will ever have to surrender to anyone else.

The Spirit of God testifies to our Spirit that apart from God... we are not home.... We are creatures who went our own way....and the Spirit of God is a work to call us back to God.

As St. Augustine once confessed

**"My heart is restless until I find my rest in Thee." - St. Augustine**

The presence and love of God is where our souls are at home...what we rise to...and what we rest from our conscience state.

**Is God calling us to be like this woman?**

**Is our goal simply to feel what she felt... or express ourselves like she did?**

No...there is **something far too personal** here **to simply try to copy.**

Each of us have a different personal life and a different personality...and there is no value trying to chase the particular story or feeling of someone else.

**God loves you. He wants you...not an imitation of someone else.**

I think it's safe to say that Jesus didn't hope that everyone in the room would be washing his feet with perfume.

BUT... what she understood...and what arose in her towards him... that is for all to know.

She captures a heart whose love knows what ultimate love is worth.

She is living in the awareness of being forgiven... in all it's pain and pleasure. The pain of what she has done... of knowing someone is going to bear the cost... and the deep gratitude that cannot find words to express her thankfulness. She pours out a bottle of expensive perfume on his feet... to reflect that this is worth more than everything she has ever valued.

That is where our love for God begins.

It is coming back to that first love... and realizing it is our true home...and worth everything.

## Closing

**This Lenten season is inviting us to seek the face of grace...the presence of God's love...and give our hearts in response.**

### **This week's practice – "I need God because..."**

Create some time and space to explore your need for God. Using a journal for writing...or a digital device... simply consider and respond to the preface: "I need God because..."

This will be served well by setting aside various times through the week to expand on your response...times long enough to listen deeply. Take a couple minutes to get centered... to become mindfully present with yourself and God... by taking a few long slow deep breathes. Consider how God is distinct from you. Consider how God is connected to you. Consider your relationship to God's love.

Invite us into worship with these words of King David...in Psalm 63...

**O God, you are my God; I earnestly search for you. My soul thirsts for you; my whole body longs for you in this parched and weary land where there is no water. I have seen you in your sanctuary and gazed upon your power and glory. Your unfailing love is better than life itself; how I praise you! I will praise you as long as I live, lifting up my hands to you in prayer. You satisfy me more than the richest feast. I will praise you with songs of joy. - Psalm 63: 1-5**

**May we seek a thirst for God like a drowning man needs air.**

PRAY

**For further reading:** [Surrender to Love](#): Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality (The Spiritual Journey) September 24, 2015 by David G. Benner

### **Notes:**

1. The first book of the Bible, first chapter, says that God made us in God's own image (Genesis 1:27). Theologians have debated through the years what this "image of God", *imago dei*, is. Some have said, "rationality", others have said, "the soul". I think that the *imago dei*, at its heart, is *our capacity to love and be loved*.

Drawn from Our Needs are Holy to God: the Need to Love and Be Loved by Stephan Shoemaker - [here](#)

2. Many have found they are drawn to a more reflective and contemplative spiritual life. There has been fears that which draws upon practices that arose within the Catholic traditions... of what some contemplative figures have shared about their experience of God...BUT... at the core of the draw many feel...is simply the deeper reality of connecting with our spiritual nature.

3. C.S. Lewis explains to a friend that only a personal power can forgive.

"You suggest that what is traditionally regarded as our experience of God's anger would be more helpfully regarded as what inevitably happens to us if we behave inappropriately towards a reality of immense power. As you say, "The live wire doesn't feel angry with us, but if we blunder against it we get a shock."

My dear Malcolm, what do you suppose you have gained by substituting the image of a live wire for that of angered majesty? You have shut us all up in despair; for the angry can forgive, and electricity can't." - Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer, chapter 18, paragraphs 6-7, page 96

4. From Everybody's Normal Till You Get To Know Them, by John Ortberg

5. Simon refers to her ..." what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner." But Luke refers to this woman: In vs. 37, he calls her a "woman who was a sinner." He identifies her first as a woman--a human being with inherent dignity—maybe someone's sister; someone's daughter; someone's mother. That doesn't mean she's not also a sinner, just that he sees in her first something he can relate to--someone made in the image of God like him, who came into the world with the same needs, hurts and desires.

We learn to **qualify any reflection of our own sin** ... saying things like: "**Well ...no one's perfect.**"...or "**Hey... I'm only human.**"

Of course we all want to feel decent... and none of us want to join a religion that just adds the weight of guilt to our lives. And even forms of so called Christian faith will bring when corrupted by moral religiosity. But the radical nature of life with Christ...is grace....and true freedom to find love. It is not that which demands that you identify as a particularly bad person. It is that which declares we have all gone astray....all have fallen short...and that there is a profound grace for all who will receive it.

Jesus was the savior in a room of sinners... but most were lost....lost in their goodness. Both figures might confess that they are a sinner. But the former... he was a good man...made some mistakes... and didn't really care about being saved. No one needed to die for him. And a woman... who had a sense of her need...and saw the presence of a savior.

6. 1 John 1:8-10

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

7. Brennen Manning, The Raggamuffin Gospel, p.138

8. This is what dependence always feels like: weakness and self-helplessness. Dependence never feels like self-sufficient strength. If we understand this, we will understand what Paul meant when he said, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong" - 2 Corinthians 12:10  
God used these things to push Paul to depend on the grace of Christ instead of himself, and so Paul learned to be grateful for them.