

**First Love**  
***Why “Love”***  
**July 21, 2019**

Wow, what a great opportunity!

Good morning everyone ... and welcome to those who are watching right now in our café and on our livestream – which is a great way to stay connected when you are unable to be here in the building.

Today we are beginning a brand new five-week series called *First Love* ...

And I need to say that when I picked that title, I realized that it might be understood *romantically* – as in “she was his first love; she was the first girl he fell in love with.”

But that’s not how I mean it. This series is not

going to be about romance or love in that sense.

Instead, this series is going to be about whatever takes *first place* among all of the things we love; whatever has top priority in our affections.

By “first love” I mean the one love that overshadows all other loves in our life; the love that takes precedence above all else.

And obviously, that could be anything, right?

- Our first love could be some possession – like our home or our car; maybe even our business.
- It could be our favorite team – like the Chiefs or the Royals (7 and 2 since the All-Star Break, whoo hoo!)

- Our first love could be a hobby – like softball or music or golf or riding horses.
- It could be our family – our kids or our spouse, maybe our parents.
- Our first love could be our country – our history, our values, our freedoms as a nation.
- It *could* even be ... *ourselves*.

In fact, if we were able to be truly objective about it, many of us would have to admit that what we love most is ourselves. *We* are our first love.

In any case, the point is that we all have a first love – something that we love more and greater than anything else. And that's what this series is going to be about.

Actually, it's going to be a lot more focused than that because, for those who are followers of Jesus, what we are to love first and most isn't up for debate. It's already been defined for us.

One day one of the teachers of the Jewish religion came to Jesus to test him with a question. He wanted to see if Jesus was a heretic; he wanted to see if Jesus was misleading the people.

**So he asked:**

*"Teacher, which is the  
greatest commandment in the  
Law of Moses?"      Matthew  
22:36 (NIV)*

In other words, "Jesus, of all 613 commands written in Torah, which would you rank as number one?"

## **Jesus replied:**

*“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.”*

*Matthew 22:37-38 (NIV)*

“The very first thing, the most important thing,” Jesus said, “is to love God most. With everything you have and all that you are, love God.”

Now, just to be clear, if you’re not a Christian, this doesn’t apply to you. You can love whoever or whatever you want with all your heart, soul and mind.

But, if you *are* a Christian – if you’re a follower of Jesus – God Himself is to be your first love.

## **Three Motives**

And on the surface, that idea seems to be so basic as not to warrant much of a discussion. “If you’re a Christian, of course you’re supposed to love God. Everybody knows that!”

However, a few things have happened recently which lead me to believe that maybe this idea *isn’t* as basic as it seems and that maybe we *do* need to talk about it.

## UPSTREAM PRECEDES DOWNSTREAM

One of those I mentioned during our recent series, *The Divided States of America*, where we looked at this incident of the guy asking Jesus the question about the greatest commandment.

In one of the messages, I made the point that a lot of Christians have, in recent days, have

taken *the second part* of what Jesus said in response very seriously.<sup>1</sup>

See, when Jesus answered the question, not only did He say that the first and greatest commandment is to love God with everything you have and all that you are ...

**He also added ...**

*"And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"*  
*Matthew 22:39 (NIV)*

Jesus was sort of giving a bonus answer. "You didn't ask for it but I'll tell you what number two on the list is as well."

And, again, many Christians have gotten very serious about that. We've gotten serious about what it looks like to love our neighbor who might be ...

- An illegal immigrant
- Or a woman with an unplanned pregnancy
- Or an unwanted child
- Or someone of a different race
- Or an addict who is trying to put their life back together
- Or a woman who has been trafficked
- Or a teacher who needs supplies their school can't provide
- And the list could go on and on

There's a lot of time and money and energy spent by Christians these days on making our world a better place in the name of Jesus. And that's a good thing.

In addition, there are many Christians speaking out with great passion concerning political situations and solutions they believe would accomplish those same kinds of goals. And that, too, is a good thing as long as it



doesn't turn into the hateful "us" vs. "them" thing.

But, as I said in that message, what there *isn't* a lot of – and maybe I'm just missing it – what I don't hear a lot of is "you know, as I think about all of these issues, I want to be guided most and first by my love for God. That love is the source of my thinking and my heart on the matter."

I'm not hearing that from Christians. I'm hearing and seeing passion over issues but I'm not hearing and seeing a lot of passion for God.

**And that's dangerous because what happens upstream eventually affects what happens downstream.**

And, for a Christian, what is upstream is loving God with all of your heart, soul and mind. What is downstream is loving others

like you love you – even those who are not like you.

And if you neglect the first and greatest commandment, eventually, the second one will get out of whack.

And I talked about that in that message so I won't go into it again today ... other than to say that it was after that message, I started thinking that maybe I need to do an entire series on what it means to love God.

## ALL ABOUT US

And then, a couple of weeks later, a second thing happened which made me decide that, "yes, I really should do this."

As you know, if this is your church, we've started doing a worship night every three months.

Our team was just beginning to plan the one that took place two weeks ago and as we were talking about what songs we might do – especially new songs, it hit me that so many Christian songs these days are kind of about *us*.

We sing about ...

- God's grace ... towards *us*.
- God's mercy ... towards *us*.
- How God "chases *us* down."
- How God's goodness "runs after" *us*.
- How God can make a way for *us*.
- How God can move mountains for *us*.

And those are all true and wonderful things to think about and sing about because they illustrate how much God loves us.

And we need to be reminded of that over and over. We need to root our identity in it ...

**... which is why the Apostle Paul wrote ...**

*"I pray that you will be able to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge."*

*Ephesians 3:18-19*

*(NIV)*

So, don't hear what I'm not saying. I'm not saying that singing about what God does for us and how God loves us is a bad thing.

But I do wonder if so much emphasis on *that* has the unintended consequence of making us think ...

**“It’s all about *us*; that God’s number one concern is *our* safety, *our* happiness, and *our* comfort.”**

Because, honestly, that’s exactly how most of us live our lives. It *is* primarily about us with a little bit of God thrown in whenever we need Him, like when ...

- Our plans don’t work out as we hoped.
- Or life gets too hard.
- Or we really, really, really want some specific thing to happen in our favor.
- Or we don’t understand why something bad has happened.

So we turn to him, call out to Him, but when the crisis passes, we put God back on the shelf ... until the next time we need Him.

And I know some of you might be thinking “wow, Rick, that’s kind of harsh, isn’t it?”

Maybe. But how else do you explain the fact that so many followers of Jesus frequently skip out on something as basic as coming to church without giving it a second thought?

And I understand that there are times when you just can’t make it, but more and more there is a take-it-or-leave-it attitude among Christians that says, “well, God will still be there. Church will still be there. It’s not that big of a deal. I’m doing pretty good right now. I’m topped off spiritually. I volunteered last Sunday and I’m off this week.”

“Plus, you *know* you *can* worship wherever you are. You don’t need to be *in church* to do that.”

And that's true. You don't.

But whenever people say that, I always wonder: does anyone actually do it? I mean does anyone actually stop what they're doing on a Sunday morning and spend some time in worship?

I could be very wrong, but I doubt it.

In any case, my point is ... for many of us – and I'm speaking of those who have accepted Christ and claim to be His followers – so much of our relationship with God is about *us* and specifically, God's love for us.

But the greatest commandment isn't "believe and understand and celebrate how completely and thoroughly *God loves you*" as necessary as that is. It's "*you love the Lord* as completely and thoroughly as you can."

So those are two of the things that happened that motivated me to do this series.

## THE BACHELORETTE

But another thing happened just last week on a TV show that confirmed to me that we really do need to talk about what it means to love God first and most.

And I debated sharing this with you because I don't want you to think I actually watch this particular show. In truth, I did watch it once for about 5 minutes and decided that was enough. Forever.

But, the reaction on social media and in the Twittersphere to what happened on this show was so over-the-top that an article about it popped into my Google News feed. And because the buzz literally had to do with the idea that "God loves us," I had to read it.



You know what show I'm talking about right?  
Some of you do.

**It's *The Bachelorette*.**

You know, that show where they follow a young woman around while she spends six weeks choosing a potential husband from a group of 30 guys. I think that's how it works.

Anyway ... from what I read ... not only did the woman in this season's show, Hannah B, claim to be a Christian, one of the guys, Luke P, was also a Christian. And, at some point in their interactions, the issue of having sex before marriage came up.

And it didn't go well.

Let's watch.<sup>ii</sup>

(B) Hannah B: "I have had sex."

(E) Hannah B: "I'm not gonna stand for that."

Now, if you've been following this story, you know that both Hannah and Luke are being supported *and* condemned on social media for their comments and actions.

And I don't really have anything to say about that other than I feel sorry for both of them and this is why I don't do personal social media. Overall, I just don't see how it makes us better people.

But that's another issue.

Instead, as I watched this clip and listened to Hannah's reaction, I had two thoughts.

First, *she really does understand grace*. She really does understand God's love for her because we really can do whatever we want

and Jesus will still love us. That's the gospel truth.

As we've said many times around here, God's grace towards those who believe in Christ and what He has done for us on the cross really is that amazing. It's shocking and it's scandalous and so against how the world works, which is why we have so much trouble believing that it's really true.

And yet, in spite of that – and this is the second thought that came to me – *the conversation between her and Luke as well as her later reaction misses the point* because ...

- The focus is on "what *I* can do or not do."
- It's on "how far *I* can go under grace."
- It's on "how much God really loves *me*"

...

... which is, again, a version of Christian faith where "it's all about me."

What's missing – and far more important according to Jesus – is the question of "what might it look like for me *to love God* with all of my heart, soul and mind in this situation?" (which, in my opinion, is incredibly foolish for both of them). But it never comes up. It's never an issue.

And the reason I'm even talking about this silly show is because it's not just the two of them who are missing the point. It's pretty much all of us who claim to be Christians these days.

I think we're missing the fact that God's love for us is just one side of the coin. The other side is our love for God.

And, according to one of Jesus' best friends, a guy we know as the Apostle John, you can't separate those two anymore than you can split a coin in half.

**He wrote:**

*We love [Him] because he first loved us. 1 John 1:9 (NIV)*

Side A of the coin is God loves us. Side B is we love God.

Point being ...

- A sign that we truly and accurately understand what it means to be loved by God ...
- An indication that we truly are experiencing His grace ...

... is that we will want to love Him back.

**When you mature in your faith, *loving God well* becomes as important to you as being loved by Him.**

You value both sides of the coin.

So, that's why we're doing this series and why I also have some passion around it.

If those of us who are Christians are going to grow and mature and become the people we were meant to be, we've got to increase our understanding of what it means to love God *first*; we've got to understand what it means for *Him* – and not anything or anyone else – to be our “first love.”

And we're going to talk about that over the next month or so but let me pause for a minute and make this personal:

**If you're a Christian, how often do you consider what it means for *you* to love *God*?**

Does that thought ever cross your mind?

Or, are you predominantly focused on what it means for *God* to love *you*?

Again, that's not a bad thing.

In fact, it's a *necessary thing* because God's love for *you* is upstream from your love for *Him*.

"We love Him" <the downstream reality> is "because He first loved us" <the upstream reality>.

-----

Now, having said all of that, in order to talk about what it loving God, we need to deal with

some questions – and this is where this series is going to go after this week.

First of all – and this is a really big barrier to a lot of people, especially those who are not Christians:

**Because the God of the Old Testament often seems cruel and vindictive, is He even worthy of our love?**

We're going to look at that next Sunday.

Another question worth considering is ...

**How do you show love to a supernatural Being you can't see, hear or touch?**

We'll look at that two weeks from today.

And then – assuming that it's even possible ... three weeks from today we'll look at ...

**What does it take to develop a**



## **relationship with God?**

And then in our final week, we'll look at ...

**The amazing downstream impact of loving God on everyone and everything else.**

So, that's where we're going in this series after today.

And I'm looking forward to it because I believe it will be a game-changer for many of us.

## **An Odd Command**

But today, in the time that remains, we're going to talk about an issue that can also be challenging to understand and accept: the fact that God actually *commands* us to love Him.

And, again, when I say “us” I need to qualify that because, if you’re not a Christian, this doesn’t apply to you. I think your life will be better if you do love God (obviously!) but, to be clear, when God first gave the commandment through Moses, He gave it to his chosen people, *Israel*, not the surrounding nations.

And when Jesus repeated it centuries later, it was still in that same context.

**Point being, if you belong to God, you are *commanded* to love God first and most.**

It’s not a suggestion. It’s an order.

And, by the way, not just in those two particular passages. We don’t have time to go into it this morning but, between the Old and New Testaments, there are about 50 passages where God’s people are told to love Him.<sup>iii</sup>

In addition, at one point in his ministry, Jesus actually raised the bar on this idea. Luke tells us that ...

*Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said:*

*"If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.*

*Luke 14:25-26 (NIV)*

Now, just to be clear, what Jesus is doing here is hyperbole. He's saying something in the extreme to get people's attention and draw a contrast: specifically, that your love for Him – your love for God – should be so far above the love you have for everything else that *those loves, by comparison, seem like hate.*

Now, let's think about all of this for a minute.

- If you heard of a parent who demanded that their children love them like that, how would you react?

Would you think that's kind of bizarre? At the very least, overly-controlling?

Would you think that maybe that parent had self-esteem issues or an inferiority complex?

- Or, what if President Trump (or, in the interest of equally offending everyone, President Obama) ... what if the President demanded that every citizen of the United States not only obey the law of the land but also *love* him above all else?

Would you suspect that he or she is a narcissist or an egomaniac? That there are some deeply-rooted psychological issues?

I mean, let's be honest about this. God's command that those who belong to Him love Him first and most seems at least a little bit odd by human standards.

Assuming for sake of argument that God is *not* narcissistic and *not* an egomaniac, and that God does not have control issues or self-esteem issues, what logical reasons – if any – could there be to make such a demand?

Turns out there are at least two.

And if you're a follower of Jesus, it is super-important that you understand them. And if you're not a follower of Jesus, it's even *more* important that you understand them.

One reason God makes this demand is that  
...

**God is actually *worthy* of being loved  
first and most.**

Now, think about this: *something or someone  
in your life and mine will always be loved first  
and most.*

We might not do it consciously, but  
subconsciously we're rank ordering and  
rating things and people in this way. We're  
thinking or saying or demonstrating that "I  
love this person, this possession, this hobby,  
this team, this whatever (maybe even  
yourself) more than anything else in the  
world."

Something or someone always has the  
position of first and most loved in your life and  
mine.

Now, here's the thing about that. *Whatever we put there may or may not be worthy of that position.*

He, she or it may or may not be worthy of the sacrifice and investment we make in them. But someone or something is always in the number one position on our list.

So when God commands those who belong to Him to put *Him* in that position, he's not being an egomaniac. He doesn't have self-esteem issues.

He's just saying "you're going to put something or someone there and of all the possibilities available to you, there is none more worthy than Me."

And if we had the time, we could go through all the reasons why that is true.

- God loves us with an unfailing love.
- God loves us and “ran after us” even when we didn’t love Him.
- God promises to provide for our needs.
- God promises to redeem our suffering.
- God has brought us from the Kingdom of darkness into the Kingdom of light.
- God has placed us in a family of other believers who love us and care about us.
- God has given us truth we can build our life on in the scripture.
- God is preparing a place for us in the life to come.



And the list could go on and on.

**... which is why King David of Israel once wrote:**

*Taste and see that the Lord is good. Psalm 34:8*  
(NIV)

And because He *is* good – because God is, in fact, the best of all – He is worthy of being loved first and most.

No brag. Just fact.

-----

Now, the second reason why God makes this demand of those who belong to Him is that ...

**It serves us best when we love Him most.**

And this is amazing to me. As I said a little

while ago, it's *not* all about us. God is not there primarily to meet our needs.

And yet, when we put Him first and love Him most, it actually serves us best ... which is one more example of why God is so awesome and worthy.

Think about this: *what kind of a God would allow us to love something first and most that isn't worthy of that kind of love?*

Forget God – what kind of a parent would tell a child it's OK to love something with all their heart, mind, soul and strength that isn't worthy of that kind of love?

What kind of a parent would say, "Sure, my son, if you want to love doing drugs that's just fine. Sure my daughter, if you want to love men who will ruin your life, no problem."

I'll tell you the kind of parent who would say that – an evil parent, a despicable parent – not a good one for sure because “loving most” anything other than what *is* “most” will lead to disaster.

A good parent, on the other hand, would say to their children exactly what Proverbs 4:23 says.

### **They would say ...**

*“Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.” Proverbs 4:23 (NASB)*

In other words, “be careful who and what you love first and most. Be wise about who or what you give your heart to because everything flows downstream from what you love.”

And that, friends, is precisely what God is

saying to us when he says “love Me with everything you are and everything you have because it will serve you best when you do that. It will serve you best when love Me most.”

What an amazing and incredible God we have ... and what an amazing and incredible invitation to love Him with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength.

Let's pray.

Lord, those of us who belong to You confess that we do not love You as we should.

- We want your benefits.
- We want your blessings.
- We want your wisdom.

But, so often, the sad truth is that we do not

want *You*. We do not love *You* first and most because we've made it all about us.

And we're thankful that when Jesus died to atone for our sins – all the ways we fall short of your glorious intentions for our lives – we're thankful that He atoned for that, too. We're thankful that you have forgiven our lack of love for *You*.

But God, we want to be more than just forgiven ... because we were made for more. We were made to know and love you above all things.

- So, change our heart O God.
- Put a new and right spirit in us.
- Give us a vision of who *You* are.
- Give us a taste of *Your* goodness.

And lead us to delight and rejoice in Your wisdom and concern for us that demands we love nothing or no one more than we love You.

Amen.

1. NHCC Story – camera in commons
2. Golf Tourney two weeks from this Friday  
- sign up
3. Offering
4. Blessing

May you experience the power and joy  
that comes from

Loving God with all your heart, soul,  
mind and strength.

# Endnotes

---

<sup>i</sup> See my message But First ... June 16, 2019, <https://subspla.sh/z8kx5pm>

<sup>ii</sup> The clip I showed was an edit of the clip found here:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=121&v=3KRuXwVIP30](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=121&v=3KRuXwVIP30)

<sup>iii</sup> See <https://www.robertjmorgan.com/devotional/what-happens-to-us-when-we-love-god>