

First Love
Show Me
August 4, 2019

Good morning everyone – and welcome also to those watching from the café as well as on our livestream broadcast.

Today is the third week of five in our series *First Love* ... and to catch everyone up to where we are ...

As I said in week one, this series is not about romantic love; as in “he was her first love” or “she was the first girl he fell for.”

Instead, it’s about whatever takes *first place* among all of the things we love; whatever or whoever has top priority in our affections.

And that could be anything or anyone.

- A possession.
- A hobby.
- A job.
- Our kids.
- Our spouse.
- A team.
- Maybe even *ourselves*.

And the reason we're talking about this is that, for those who are Christians, this is a matter of utmost importance.

Jesus said so.

When He was asked to identify the greatest of all the 613 commandments written in Torah ...

Jesus answered:

"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, as I pointed out two weeks ago, 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. You are to love Him first and most.

And part of the reason we're doing this series is that I think we sometimes forget that. I think we focus so much on the fact that *God* loves *us* – and we should focus on that because, as we sang earlier and we just saw in the short

video, God's love is the foundation of who we are as Christians, it's what our identity is to be rooted in ...

But sometimes we focus so much on that – on God's love for *us* – that we forget that we're supposed to love *Him* in return.

The principle is:

We love [Him] because he first loved us. *1 John 1:19*
(NIV)

God's love for *us* is just one side of the coin. The other side is our love for God.

In fact, a sign that we truly 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.

Because when you mature in your faith, *loving*

God well becomes as important to you as being loved by Him.

So that's what we're talking about and why we're doing this series.

And two weeks ago we began by looking at one of the greatest *philosophical challenges* to loving God: why it is that God actually *commands* His people to love Him.

See, what's written in the Torah and affirmed by Jesus isn't just a suggestion. It's not merely a good idea like "hey, you might want to do this. You might want to love God first and most."

Not at all. This is a *command*. It's an *order* which, on the surface, sounds a little bit arrogant and maybe even needy on God's part.

But it's not and in that week's message we saw why it's not.

Then last week we looked at one of the greatest *moral challenges* to loving God, which is that God sometimes does seem very lovable; that God is actually (in the words of the new atheists) "a moral monster."

And we looked at why someone might come to believe that and then, some of the reasons it's actually *misinformed* to think that ...

... the greatest being that for those who are Christians, what we believe about God is ultimately based not on the Old Testament but on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The claim of Christianity is that He is the exact representation of God. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus.

And if you missed either of those messages, as always, you can watch, listen to or read them on our app, website or podcast.

Potential Pitfalls

But today we're going to move away from the philosophical and moral challenges to a more practical one.

Specifically, what exactly does it look like to love God? How exactly do flesh and blood human beings show love to a spiritual Being we can't physically see, hear or touch?

And I think what we're going to talk about will be very helpful in answering those questions but I also know that there are ...

- Some potential pitfalls ...
- Some traps we might fall into if we're not careful ...
- Some inherent dangers ...

... that are almost always present whenever there are lists of things to do and not do ... which is where we're eventually going to go in this message.

But before we get to that, I think it would be wise for me to lay out these dangers and traps and pitfalls right at the very beginning so that hopefully we can avoid them.

By the way, if you're a Christian, as we go through these things, you might want to make a note of which ones are characteristic of your thinking, because it's likely that this is where, if you're not already messed up when it comes to loving God, you will be.

So, here we go.

One potential pitfall when it comes to thinking about how to love God in everyday life is ...

1. Discouragement – “no one can ever love God perfectly, so why even try?”

“Whenever I try to do what God requires of me, I fail. And I feel like a terrible loser. So, please don’t even talk to me about it.”

Ever felt like that?

And a lot of people do. And some of them, sadly, actually turn away from the Lord.

The second potential danger is similar to the first but with a different outcome. Let’s call it ...

2. Lowering the bar – the thought that “no one can ever love God perfectly, so let’s just minimize its importance.”

“I know I can’t do all of those things that express love to God as much as I *should*. But that’s OK because we Christians are under

grace, right? All of our sins and failures – past, present and future – are forgiven and wiped away by what Jesus did for us ...

... *which means* – and here’s the twist – that maybe those things that say ‘love’ to God really aren’t that important ... because it’s not like I’m going to get in trouble with God.”

That’s true. You won’t get in trouble.

But it’s also immature thinking about the purpose of grace. Jesus didn’t shed His blood so that we can safely ignore God!ⁱ He did it so that we could come closer to God and grow in love for God – not so we could lower the bar.

Another potential trap is a ...

3. “To-do list” mentality – equating love for God with a checklist.

Not that a checklist is bad in and of itself. After

all, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments as kind of a checklist of things for the People of Israel to do and not to do.

But it's possible to do all the things on a checklist without having your heart really in it. Just think back to last April when you did your taxes.

A more pertinent example ... if you were getting married and some counselor told you "now, if you really want to show love to your spouse, just keep doing these five things over and over" you would think, "OK. But there's got to be more to marriage than that" ... and you'd be right because there is!

It works the same way with loving God. In fact, one of Jesus' main criticisms of the religious leaders of His day, the Pharisees, is that they worshipped God with their lips but their

hearts were far from Him.ⁱⁱ

They had a to-do list mentality. They were good at checking the boxes.

And speaking of the Pharisees ... another potential pitfall when we define what it means to love God in everyday life is ...

4. Spiritual pride – the thought that “because I do these things that express love to God, I’m better than those who don’t.”

That was the main problem of the Pharisees. They constantly looked down on those who did not keep the law with as much diligence as they did. And they were constantly and severely chastised by Jesus for it.

But not just because their spiritual arrogance was unwarranted (they were sinners just like everyone else).

Instead, Jesus chastised them because when you're proud about what you do for God – when you find yourself thinking (even if you never say it out loud) “look at me and how wonderful I am at loving God, how much better I am than everyone else” – when you think that, you're not really loving God.

Instead, you're actually loving yourself. You're using God to make yourself look good.

That's the pitfall of spiritual pride.

The final danger in what we're going to talk about is a ...

5. Contract mindset – that “because I do these things that express my love for God, God owes me.”

The greatest example of that is in the story Jesus told which we call the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Most of the time, we focus on the younger son who rebelled and then came back but the real punch of the story comes in the reaction of the older son who never did anything wrong.

When the father forgives the younger son and welcomes him back into the family with a huge celebration ...

The older son says – and this is so terribly sad:

"All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends."

Luke 15:29 (NIV)

What's he really saying?

“I’ve not become discouraged and walked away. And I’ve not lowered the bar like this son of yours. I’ve been checking the boxes all these years. And I *deserve* to be treated far better than I have been; far better than you’ve treated this loser who wasted all your money on prostitutes.”

That’s a contract mindset.

Ever find yourself thinking like that? “I’ve done all these things to show my love for God and I deserve better. God owes me.”

Or what about discouragement? Since you can never love God perfectly, why even try?

Or lowering the bar?

Or equating love for God with a checklist of “to-dos”?

Or spiritual pride?

Those are real dangers and real traps and real pitfalls when it comes to what we're going to talk about right now ... what it looks like to express love to God.

So beware.

An Intentional Omission

And in the time that remains I want to give you seven practical ways to show love to God.

And some of you are thinking, "wow, seven??? That's a lot."

And it is. I don't usually lay out this much information in a message but it's necessary this time. And I'll do it quickly. We'll finish on time, I promise.

Also when I give this to you, some of you who are biblically astute are going to say, "but Rick, you left off a really, really big one."

So, I'm going to go ahead and get that out of the way up front and say that I'm intentionally leaving it off today because we're going to devote an entire message to it in the final week of this series.

Here it is. In the words of one of Jesus' best friends, the Apostle John ...

*If someone says, "I love God,"
but hates a fellow believer,
that person is a liar; for if we
don't love people we can see,
how can we love God, whom
we cannot see? 1 John
4:20 (NLT)*

... which hearkens back to what Jesus said to all of his disciples - and which, obviously,

made a huge impression on John ...

*"A new command I give you:
Love one another. As I have
loved you, so you must love
one another." John 13:34
(NIV)*

And of course, there's Jesus' saying that whenever we love and care for the least of His followers, we're doing it to Him.

Point being ... a very practical way of expressing love to God is in loving others, including your enemies – people who aren't like you and who don't like you and may even hurt you. That idea is at the heart of Christianity and you simply can't ignore it.

However, as I said in the first week of this series (and also in our last series), I think we've gotten so focused on loving our neighbors as ourselves (which is a good

thing) and even loving our enemies (which is also a good thing) ...

We've gotten so focused on loving others that we overlook that Jesus said that was the *second-most* important commandment ... not the *first*.

In other words, ...

Our love for God (if it is genuine and authentic) *will* overflow into love for others *but* there are aspects of loving God that are not directly *related* to others.

And that's what we're going to talk about.

Seven of them.

Right now.

I promise.

Seven Expressions

And as I thought about how to explain this, I kept coming back to two ideas.

- First, I thought about what Jesus was referring to when He talked about loving God with all your heart, soul and strength. That idea (as well as loving your neighbor as yourself) wasn't random – it pointed to something very specific in the law of Moses.
- And second, I thought about the idea of loving God in terms of what love looks like in a human relationship – specifically, between a husband and a wife.

I think that's a reasonable approach because one of the prevailing metaphors Jesus often used to describe

the relationship between God and His people is *marriage* – where He, Jesus, is the bridegroom and His followers – collectively – are the bride.

So, I'm going to do both. Actually I'm going to smash them together to hopefully get a more complete and practical picture of what it means it to love.

And let's start with what Jesus was referring to when He talked about the commandment to love God first and most.

Many biblical scholars have noted that the Ten Commandments are actually *two* sets of commandments where the first four describe what it looks like to love God and the final six define what it means to love others.

So, let's talk about those first four and I'll just list them out for you as they appear in both

Exodus and Deuteronomy. ⁱⁱⁱ

- No other gods.
- Don't make idols.
- Do not misuse the Lord's name.
- Set apart the Sabbath.

Point being ... if you want to show God that you love Him, do – or don't do – those four things with all of your heart, soul and strength ...

And, by the way, we could break down what is meant by *those* words, too (heart, soul and strength) but, really, what they mean collectively is simply "everything you are."

Alright, now keep those four ideas – the first four of the Ten Commandments – in the back in your mind for the next few minutes as we talk about seven ways that love works between a husband and wife ... because this

is all going to come together.

First, when a husband and wife truly love each other, there is exclusive devotion.

No other woman can take the wife's place in the husband's affections and no other man can take the husband's place in the wife's affections. That even applies to their children – in a marriage that is as it should be, no child takes the place of affection that belongs to the spouse.

Loving God is like that.

1. It means that you allow no one else and nothing else to take His place in your life.

Now think about this. *What does a "god" – generically speaking – actually do?*

Basically three things:

- A god defines what is good and what is evil.
- A god has the right to demand your worship and allegiance.
- A god has the ability to save and rescue you.

And God – our God, the God – in the first of the Ten Commandments says “that’s me. I do those things for you. And there is no other.”

And to love Him means we agree and we give him and him the right to do those things.

Second, in addition to exclusive devotion, when a husband and wife love truly each other, they accept one another for who they are. They do not try to change each other.

Loving God is like that, too.

2. It means letting God be God; not forcing Him into our “box.”

That’s why the second of the Ten Commandments forbids making an image or an idol.

Back when God first gave this commandment, it was common practice for people to make some kind of image of wood or stone or metal and say, “this is our god. This is what we are counting on.”

And they would define for themselves the characteristics of that god. And wherever they went, they would haul that idol around with them.

And God said, “you’re not to do that because *I AM who I AM*. My ways are higher than your ways and I do what I please. You cannot put

me in a box.”

And when we love God, we accept Him for who He is. We don't try to shrink Him down to something we can manage. We don't use Him as a good luck charm or divine dispensing machine.

In addition to exclusive devotion and accepting one another, when a husband and wife truly love each other, they also honor and respect each other. They don't demean each other. They don't profane each other.

Loving God is like that, too.

3. When we love God, we treat Him with honor and respect.

... specifically, when it comes to the use of His name in our conversation and, more generally, in how we represent Him to others.

The third commandment of the Ten is literally "do not take the Lord's name in vain" which means not throwing "God" or "Jesus" around as an exclamation. "Oh my God" or "Jesus Christ!"

It means not using "God" as an introduction to a stream of profanity.

It means not using God as your witness or swearing to God that something is true or is going to happen.

If you love God, you will avoid doing those things because you want to treat him with honor and respect.

In addition to exclusive devotion, accepting one another, and respecting one another, when a husband and wife truly love each

other they also make time for one another on a regular basis.

And guess what? Loving God is like that, too.

4. When we love God we regularly make time for God.

... which is why the fourth of the Ten Commandments is to “remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy” or, set apart from all the other days.

Now, if you’re a Christian, you probably already know that you are not obligated to observe the Sabbath (from sundown Friday through sundown Saturday) like the People of Israel were. And you probably already know that you can – and should – spend time with God on your own.

That said, it’s important to note that the first Christians still did make time for God every

week. They called it “The Lord’s Day” – Sunday, on which they gathered together to worship, to learn and to encourage one another.

Now, their culture was a lot like ours – the whole world was busy doing something else on Sunday and sometimes they had to work or do whatever. But the goal was – *always* – to be part of what happened collectively with other believers on the Lord’s Day.

Why? Because when you love someone, you make time for them. You show up on a regular basis.

I mean, can you imagine a wife regularly calling her husband and saying, “hey, I’m not coming home tonight. I have to work. I’m going out with the girls. But don’t forget that I love you.”

Or can you imagine a husband regularly saying, "I might or might not come home tonight. It depends on what else comes up, if I've got better things to do. But don't forget that I love you."

If that kind of thing was going on, if a husband or wife only showed up when it was convenient or when there was nothing else going on, you would be right to wonder if they really *do* love each other because loving someone means making time for them.

And it works the same way with God. Loving God means regularly making time for God, ideally on The Lord's Day – Sunday.

As I was preparing for this message I came across an article that said that statistically speaking, the vast majority of people who leave the faith of their childhood do so because "they gradually drifted away"- 71

percent, according to one study.

They aren't angry at God or have huge intellectual objections to Christian beliefs and practices. They just gradually drift away.^{iv}

They stop showing up. They stop making time for God. And they stop loving Him.

It's kind of like what happens in a lot of marriages where the couple doesn't love each other anymore. They just gradually drift away because they don't make time for each other.

Ok, for the final three let's branch out a bit from the Ten Commandments.

When a husband and wife truly love each other they say it. Often.

Loving God is like that, too.

5. When we love God, we verbally express it.

We pray it. We sing it. We write it.

That's part of the reason why we include in every service a time of singing together. It's to give us the opportunity to put into words what's in – or should be in – our hearts.

When a husband and wife truly love each other, sometimes they don't just say it – they express it with extravagance. They make sacrifices to make that extravagance possible.

<Shannon & Price 25th anniversary>

Their families went to a lot of trouble and

expense to pull it off. What? Because they love them.

Loving God is like that, too.

6. When we love God, we sometimes spend extravagantly.

<Woman washes Jesus' feet with perfume>

*"Why this waste?" they asked.
"This perfume could have
been sold at a high price and
the money given to the poor."*

*Aware of this, Jesus said to
them, "Why are you bothering
this woman? She has done a
beautiful thing to me."*

Matthew 26:8-10 (NIV)

When we love God, we give to God. And sometime extravagantly.

Someone has said "if you want to know what

a person really values, just look at their calendar and their checkbook. The way people spend their time and money reveals what is really important to them.”

It’s one thing to claim we love God, but the Bible says our giving “tests the sincerity of our love” (2 Corinthians 8:8, NIV).

When we give to God, whether it’s a regular offering we make or something special that is over and above, that’s evidence that God holds first place in our hearts.

As Jesus said, “Wherever your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21, NIV).

Finally, when a husband and wife truly love each other, they put each other’s preferences

ahead of their own.

The husband, for example, goes out of his way to do things that please his wife even though it might not be how he himself would do it.

And the wife does the same kind of thing even though she may not fully understand why the husband cares about it.

And – and this is really important – when they do those things they don't huff or roll their eyes. They don't make a big deal about what a burden it is. They just do it because that's what their spouse wants or likes.

And loving God is like that, too.

7. When we love God, we do things His way ...

... even if we don't always understand ... even

if it's not natural to us.

That's why the Apostle John once wrote:

Loving God means keeping his commandments, and his commandments are not burdensome. 1 John 5:3 (NLT)

And John was for sure remembering the day that Jesus said ...

"If you love Me, you will obey My commandments." John 14:15 (NLT)

Of course, to obey Jesus' commandments and to do things His way, we have to know Him. We have to have a relationship with Him.

And that's what we'll talk about next week.

Conclusion

But for today there you have it, if you want it:

- Seven ways a flesh-and-blood human can show love to a spiritual Being who we can't physically see, hear or touch.
- Seven ways that those of us who are Christians can love Him because He first loved us.

And whether you're a Christian or not, I hope you will use this list to think about your life and your love for God. Is it real? Is it growing?

And as you do these things are you falling into the traps of ...

- The contract mindset: "because I do these things, God owes me."

- And the “to-do list” mentality that equates love for God with a checklist.
- And the spiritual pride that makes us think less of others who don’t do what we do.
- Or lowering the bar and minimizing the importance of loving God.
- Or discouragement that no one can ever love God perfectly, so why even try?

... which, by the way, is not actually true. It’s not true that no one can love God perfectly because Someone did. *Jesus of Nazareth* loved His Father perfectly in all ways and at all times.

And that’s really, really good news for you and for me for two reasons:

1. First of all, because He loved God perfectly, He was without sin ... which meant that He could take on your sin and mine. He who knew no sin was able to become sin for us so that the Father could be justified in forgiving our lack of love.

Because Jesus loved God perfectly, He was able to be the perfect substitute for us in his death on the cross.

Somehow, in a way I don't completely understand, His death paid the penalty for our lack of love and all of our sins. And that is good news.

2. Second, because Jesus loved His Father and Our Father perfectly, those of us who are Christians really can grow in our love for God because His Spirit now lives within us.

That's the clear and compelling message of Paul and the other leaders of the early Christian faith: that the Spirit of God gives us the power to do what Jesus did which, in this case, is to love God first and most.

Let's pray to that end.

<Prayer – worth it.>

CLOSING COMMENTS (1)

1. Growing in love for God is part of the maturing process. And we'll talk about that next week.
2. Offering at the door

Endnotes

ⁱ See <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/have-you-left-your-first-love>

ⁱⁱ Matthew 15:8

ⁱⁱⁱ See Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5

^{iv} <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/july-web-only/leaving-faith-church-christianity-falling-away-josh-harris.html>?