

Good morning, I'm Stephen, youth pastor here at City Gates.

Pastor Jeff is taking a couple weeks away from preaching to work on two big projects for the church.

If this is your first time joining us, we generally do chapter by chapter book by book here at the City Gates Church, and are in the book of Mark, But this week and next, we are going to take a two week reprieve from that and look at love.

How do you love God? (it's on our logo?)

I'll never forget, back when I was in high school and attending Grace Baptist Church in Cedarville Ohio. I was a teen who was on fire for God. I was a total sinner, but I was a saved sinner who was reading his Bible, growing in prayer, leading the youth group leadership committee, and involved in personal prayer groups and Bible studies.

And one Sunday our music director, who was a warm man, with a soothing almost musical voice but that morning, he just leaned into the mic and said, "Don't you just love God today? . . . Don't you just feel your love for God?"

The room was very quiet, and I wanted to yell "not really" because I didn't. . . I didn't know what he was talking about. I think I felt like a lot of people in the room that day, and I think I probably felt like a lot of you feel often in your Christian walk. I don't really feel anything today. . . do I need to cry more, do I need to listen to more music? Do I need to meditate on joyful things more so I can *feel* love for God? Am I supposed to feel it?

How do I *love God*? Today we are going to look at 5 ways that we can love God. Next week we'll look at how you love your neighbor.

I thought it fitting. Valentines day was just last week, and it exemplifies how warped our understanding of love is sometimes. Like, if Jesus doesn't return, what will people think of us, in 500 years, as they excavate our cities and see our pop culture and wonder what movie franchises were and why they were so popular.

it made me think of a series of videos I watched several years ago. The idea was an archeologist, from another world, was explaining popular 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural touchstones, movies, philosophies, etc. . . from the perspective of a complete outsider. What he wrote would be something like this. . .

An excerpt from Alex Wormuloids book, *Historical Trends in the Holidays of 21<sup>st</sup> Century America*

Instituted by Hallmark, (SLIDE 1) A company that seemingly made a lot of money selling cards that made fun of people for getting older, Valentines day, celebrated on February 14, was an anxiety inducing holiday intended to prove that a business could ruin relationships by forcing people to prove their love to one another on a specific day of the year.

Commonly, (SLIDE 2) couples would throw rocks at each other, the bigger and shinier the better. Sometimes the rocks were in little boxes that had peoples names written on them. Also, the rocks were thrown at women much more than men.

If the man didn't have enough money for a shiny rock, he could also give a bundle of (SLIDE 3) decaying plants, (SLIDE 4) or the stuffed carcass of a dead animal.

Despite which gift was given it was also common practice to give the loved one a (SLIDE 5) box shaped in a human heart, which would then be torn open, its contents consumed, (SLIDE 6) and then tossed in the trash.

He may have missed some things. . .

But there's no question that our culture has confused the idea of love. In a way, it's been turned on its head. I see such a disparity between what the Bible teaches about love and what society teaches about love, that I made it one of the big three things I emphasize with our teens. 1. How to activate their faith 2. How to study their Bible, and 3. A Biblical definition of love.

Because it is our primary commandment. Love sums up the entirety of our relationship with God and people. How important is it? Look with me in Matthew 22:34-38. Jesus is being questioned by the religious leaders. Kind of like the lawyers and political leaders. When you think of Jesus in the temple being questioned by scribes, pharisees, and Sadducees, it may all be a bit less formal than in our day and time, but it would be like being on Capitol Hill, before senators and supreme court justices.

Jesus is being grilled with questions, "should we pay taxes to Caesar," "to whom is a woman married after the resurrection if she's had multiple husbands on earth?" and then this one, look at Matthew 22:34-38

But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. 35 Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, 36 "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?"

37 Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and great commandment.

Jesus' answer is simple. And to the Jewish people very familiar. Any Israelite would have known this commandment well.

It came from Deuteronomy 6. After receiving the 10 commandments and being told that these are the laws the Israelites are to observe when they go over and possess the promised land. . . there is almost like a break in the text, a pause and a sudden proclamation.

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength."

This became such an important part of daily Israelite worship It's reduced to and referred to by the first word, "hear," which in Hebrew is Shema.

So it would be their daily worship routine to say, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

For the Israelite this was all entrenched in the setting of the law and temple/tabernacle worship. The rest of chapter 6 is about not disobeying the laws, following the commandments, and teaching their children, every generation, why they are observing all these statutes.

For the Israelites, love meant obeying rules. They had plenty. . . Festival days, clothing and food restrictions, sacrifices, clean and unclean animals, the sabbath, and so many more rules and regulations laid on them, that much of their existence was defined by the rules they kept.

But what about us? Do we show that we love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and strength by keeping His commandments? Jesus thought so. Look at John 14.

John 14:15 Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." He reinforces the concept just a little further in 14:21 "Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him."

First, if we love God we will show obedience keep His commandments. But for a reason. . . Because of what Love is.

The rules can become a stumbling block if we lose sight of the fact that we're following them because of what love is.

Obedience can become the thing you love if your not careful. That is what happened to the Israelites. They lost sight of their love for their God and become lovers of the law.

We see that in Romans 9:31-32 "but the people of Israel, who pursued the law as the way of righteousness, have not attained their goal. 32 why not? Because they pursued it not by faith, but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone."

They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and served and worshiped the laws, rather than the creator of those laws. So much so, that when the creator of those laws came to liberate them in spirit and in truth, they rejected Him, on the basis of those very laws, they condemned him and crucified Him!

We can love God by keeping His commandments, but it's not about the commandments. It's about preferring what God wants to what I want. That's the love being expressed. Let me say that again, love is about preferring what God wants to what I want.

If it's about keeping the commandments, the little pharisee in each of us can take over, because we all have those areas where we find it easier to obey and excel, right?

If you take one sliver of what God has asked of you and say, "I can do that really well!" and you overlook the rest, you've missed the point of what loving God means. You're loving your expression of your abilities more than you're loving God!

You see how subtly you can shift and make doing the things God wants you to do as credit system and gives you currency to live your life the way you want? You can't think about it like that. God wants your whole heart, all your obedience, not just in certain areas of your life.

The second way we love God with all our heart, soul, and strength, is by abiding in Him. John 15 is a great chapter in your Bible for abiding. Hear what Jesus has to say, starting in verse 4.

John 15:4 says, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.

John 15:9-10 says, "As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my father's commandments and abide in his love"

There's no secret sauce here. It's just a simple reality; you want to hang around that which you love. It means you've found a place that you esteem as better than any other place. It's better. It takes a higher position. If it's the highest position, why would you want to be anywhere else? You prefer this place to all others.

Of course, this isn't just a reflection of the place, but of the people as well.

Peter, at the transfiguration, when Jesus appears with Moses and Elijah, Peter has a very natural response. It's good for us to be here! Let's make three tabernacles. Let's camp down right here. We've got Jesus in His glory and the two great prophets, it makes sense. This will be the center point of our compass.

Abide is where you consider your home, your abode. It's one of the reasons Sam and Frodo, from the Lord of the Rings, are so relatable. One of the reasons you have this thread of hope for them, is their connection to home. The Shire, where they really abide. No matter how dark and hopeless their current condition or location, the knowledge that their warm Hobbit holes await them is meaningful. And Tolkien knew it. That was why it was so devastating when they came back to see it devastated. And that is why the final scene of the book is Sam bouncing his daughter on his knee in his home.

Where you abide is an indication of where your heart truly belongs. (How do you abide?)

So I have to ask, and let it sink in. where are you abiding? In your thought life, your leisure time, even your physical presence? What is that thing or place that, when you're away from it, you long to get back to it? That is a genuine expression of love. You are preferring those things and places more than other things and places. Is

"One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple" Psalm 27:4

For very similar reasons, the third way you show you love God with all your heart, soul, and strength is by your gaze

Because of what love is, where you chose to look, just like where you chose to abide, indicates hierarchy of values.

Couples who don't look at each other are in trouble. Couples who are discovering each other, watch each other very closely. Juxtapose those two and you'll learn something about love.

a young couple, infatuated, who are gazing into each other's eyes for a sickeningly long amount of time, where it makes others uncomfortable, right? But there's a reason for that. They are interested in the other person. They are interested in what they want, what they like, how they are feeling. . . they are watching them closely for any clue because they want to play off the other persons reactions.

Generally, it is healthy because it indicates an attentiveness to the other person's existence, and the reason for it seems to be a willingness to change my own behavior to better interact with the other person's.

On the other hand, a couple who, for whatever reason, are dissatisfied with each other, or disassociated don't care, as much, what their partner is doing. Perhaps because they've come to know that they

disagree or because they just don't care. Either way, they no longer need to look because they prefer their own way to whatever their partner is doing, so they don't need to watch.

The most important thing to take away from these two sets of couples is this: I gaze at that which I love so that I can better understand it and adapt my entire being to be in greater harmony with it. (repeat)

How do we gaze? How do we show our love of God in our gaze?

We pay attention. We gaze at our God through His word, in prayer, in worship, in music, but you're noticing those things about Him that are pure, lovely, noble, excellent. You're noticing those things because you think they are better than any other things! You want to emulate them, so you have to watch them.

It's difficult to keep your gaze on God as you go through your day. One of my greatest challenges, and it has been hardest since I've lived in Northern Virginia, is having the events of the day, completely drive out the scripture I was reading and contemplating that morning. And I'm a pastor! If my job can cause me to occasionally lose sight of scripture during the day, I can only imagine what many others face.

I know guys and girls who put pictures of their spouse or loved one on their phone. Some of you have apps that will alert you whenever your team scores, your stock slips below a certain level, or someone specific drops a new tweet.

Do you have anything that helps pull you out of the all-too-familiar rhythms of your daily life? Do you have anything that lifts your gaze heavenward. To be reminded, even if just for a moment, that eternity is what you're living for, the upward calling of Jesus Christ. And that all your doing in this moment, is in light of that eternity.

You want to carry those reminders into your daily routine.

And it's all the more important because of the **fourth** way we show that we love God with all our heart, soul, and strength is by. . .

### **Proclaiming Him**

Spurgeon in his sermon, "The Secret of Love to God, put it like this, "If you ask me, 'Why ought this fact to be avowed?' I answer, first, because there can be no good reason for concealing it. I cannot imagine a true man saying, 'I love Christ, but I do not want others to know that I love him, lest they should laugh at me.' That is a reason to be laughed at, or rather, to be wept over..."

The truth is, just like where we abide and what we gaze at, we show what we love by what we talk about. We prefer talking about it more than other things.

Assuming the talk is positive. We talk about things we don't like all the time!

But assuming you are saying good things there are generally two criteria that will keep you going on and on about something. 1. It's changing and new and interesting, it's affecting the world.

Nobody talks about the google search engine that much anymore, but when it first came out, you felt smart just saying the phrase, "google it." But Google's been around for a while now, so there's not a lot new there, it probably doesn't dominate a lot of your discussions.

But what about chat GPT? I'll bet you know some people who can't shut up about that thing. It's kind of annoying, isn't it. But why are they talking about it? Nobody *loves* chat GPT, except for its creators who are making tons of money off of it. Why is everyone talking about it so much? Because there is a sense that it is changing things, some say for the better, some say for the worse, but very few will say nothing is changing. There is a sense that new things are happening and something . . . is going to be different. So you talk about it.

The second reason you tend to talk positively about something is simply, 2. you think It's just the best. Also, there is something like a bell-shaped curve graph for how much you'll talk about it, based on, how much you think it is the best, contrasted by how many people in the room disagree with you in the moment. So for example if you're a Michigan fan in a room full of soccer fans, you may say one or two things. But if you're a Michigan fan in a room full of Ohio State fans, someone is going to be persecuted unrighteously!

But with God and with Jesus, don't you see that we have all of that. We have a vibrant, living, God at work in our lives. His mercies are new every morning. His loving kindnesses are new every day. He's changing us and working in the world. We should be seeing, because of our obedience, our abiding, and our gaze, we should be seeing all the wonderful ways he's actively working in our lives. And God is simply the best. Jesus is the ultimate expression of God and His love. And you can be assured, that in most settings outside the church in our culture today, You're going to be a Michigan fan in a room full of Ohio State fans. . .

I'm sorry, I really didn't mean to conflate Michigan fans with Christians and Ohio State fans with pagans

We love God by talking about Him. Can you imagine finding out that a man was married with 4 kids after working with him for 5 years and never hearing anything about his wife and family? Wouldn't that be crazy? How many of your friends and colleagues know of your relationship to Jesus Christ?

Finally, the fifth way we love God with all our heart, soul, and strength through sacrifice.

You may have noticed that you've heard me use the word "prefer" several times this morning. It wasn't an accident. We obey because we prefer what God wants to what we want. We abide because we prefer God's abode to any we could construct. We gaze because we prefer that view more than any other, and we proclaim because we prefer to talk about our lord more than anything else.

If you want the simplest possible definition of love it is preference. I love Jazz, doesn't mean can't listen to any other music, it just means I prefer jazz over all other forms of music. I don't. . . but you get the point.

Hate is the opposite of love; something we'll look into next week as we discover what it means to love your neighbor.

But this week, as we look at the 5<sup>th</sup> and final way we love God, it's helpful to keep that simple definition in your mind. You simply prefer this to that. Sounds simple. . . but it is anything but simple.

God defines love for us in His son. Look at 1 John chapter 4. John is going to first define God as love, then he's going to show us that His son is the manifestation of that love. But it is all tied into the actions of what that love does.

1 John 4:8-10 says, <sup>8</sup> He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. <sup>9</sup> In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. <sup>10</sup> In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins.

Paul expands on this in Philippians 2:5-8 where he says, “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.”

This is love, God sending Jesus, the highest king, sending His son, to take up the lowest position. What does that mean? I mean, it means so much that you just can't make sense of it all in one take, it has to be broken down. God knew that.

God did break it down for us. There are dozens of times in the Old Testament that God prepared us to understand this unfathomable sacrifice. We won't go into all those ways this morning, but we'll hit a couple:

Abraham had to offer up his son, to show his faith in God, and what was the meaning of that? Well, Abraham had been called out of a safe place into a strange land that was promised to him, but it wasn't promised directly to him, it was promised to his progeny. Everything promised to Abraham was tied up in his offspring.


Then he asks Abraham to offer up that only child, that only begotten son. And what he's really asking Abraham to lay on the alter. . . is his entire future and hope, everything God promised him and every physical evidence of that hope.

We know from Hebrews that Abraham wasn't contemplating that he'd have another child, his whole future was tied up in Isaac, God had promised that through Isaac all his offspring would be reckoned. And we find out from Hebrews; Abraham figured God could raise Isaac from the dead. But that's faith! When you see that image of Abraham laying his son on the alter, you have to see it correctly, Abraham was laying his future on the alter.

You get the same image of “first born” tied up in the Passover.

It's the tenth plague and God's avenger is coming through Egypt and he's going to kill every first-born. Many commentators point out how very symbolic this was, why not kill indiscriminately? Why the first born? Because the first-born represented the continuation of the family. They'd get the lion's share of the inheritance; they'd be the prospective patriarch for that generation. They were the representatives of that family's future. And by striking down all the first-born, you are symbolically attacking the future.

Look at Exodus 13, because many people forget that, once Pharaoh lets Israel go, right before they cross the Red Sea, God institutes the law of the firstborn for Israel. Turn to Exodus 13:11-13. Listen to this passage.

<sup>11</sup> “And it shall be, when the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as He swore to you and your fathers, and gives it to you, <sup>12</sup> that you shall set apart to the LORD all that open the

womb, that is, every firstborn that comes from an animal which you have; the males *shall be* the LORD's. <sup>13</sup> But every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb; and if you will not redeem *it*, then you shall break its neck. And all the firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem.

Don't miss this. God SO wants us to understand what it means that he sent his son to show us love, that he tied it to Israel's founding father, their escape from Egypt and the Passover, and a continual reminder for every generation. . . v. 14

14 So it shall be, when your son asks you in time to come, saying, 'What is this?' that you shall say to him, 'By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. 15 And it came to pass, when Pharaoh was stubborn about letting us go, that the Lord killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of beast. Therefore I sacrifice to the Lord all males that open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.'

And while it was taken from Pharaoh, it was offered freely by Abraham, it is offered freely by the Israelites, and it was offered freely by God.

Think about that. Israel is God's first born. Jesus is coming through the lineage of Israel and Israel is to be God's first chosen people in the world. Pharaoh was being asked to "willingly" give up Israel and he wouldn't do it, which resulted in the destruction of Egypt. You can do studies through the plagues and see how symbolically complete was the destruction of Egypt.

Abraham was asked to willingly give up Isaac. He was willing to and it resulted in the nation of Israel. God willingly gave up His son, and Jesus willingly gave up His life and it resulted in the potential for life and forgiveness to everyone who believes!

But what is this love that God shows us in 1 John 4? What was being asked, what was being given?

It is a laying aside of what makes you *you*. *It's a willing sacrifice of your potential future*. It is a willingness to transform from whatever you are or whatever you hope to be, to whatever God wants you to be.

Jesus, God of the universe, takes up the lowest position of foot washer. He who knew no sin, became sin that we might become the righteousness of God.

Abraham put his future on the alter.

There can be no relationship with God, no life in you and no belief in Jesus without the willingness, on some level, for transformation. You can't obey or really abide, if you're not willing to sacrifice who you are.

"Jesus has a wonderful plan for your life" is an evangelistic phrase you hear sometimes. Yes he does, but it's His plan, and before accepting Jesus as your savior *your life* is a tower of Babel, of your own works! Of bad works, and good works, but they're YOUR works, you have to confess them and repent of them and turn them over to Jesus. And HE will begin a new work in you, a good work that He will bring to completion.

It's no accident that Isaiah said all his righteousness or *good* deeds or were as filthy rags. He didn't say his bad deeds, he said his good deeds. And you know what that image is, don't you? You know that the



filthy rags translate to menstrual rags? Hear this, because I always thought it was just garbage, empty milk cartons, dirty diapers and broken toys. But a menstrual rag is not just garbage, is it? It is the potential for life, unrealized.

Isaiah is saying that he did good things, again and again and again, but each time those good things came out into the world there was no life in them. Why? Because there was no life in Him.

So, yes, we are all building our own personal towers of babel, brick by brick, constructed of both good and bad deeds, but all of it dead, built on dead flesh. It's a monument to us. That's why Jesus could look at living people taking care of dead people and say one of the most chilling lines in the bible. . . let the dead bury the dead.

How do you love God? You have to be willing to put yourself on the alter first. All that you hope you could be and all that you think you are and all that you've already constructed. That's what God asked Abraham to do. That's what God did with his own son, so that we could get the image correctly. Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friend, but while we were still enemies, Jesus lay down his life for us, that we might become the righteousness of God!

Yes, it's a free gift that you could never earn, but it doesn't mean that you can accept it without being willing to change

You have to be willing to allow God to transform you, through Salvation in Jesus Christ. It comes in three phases. YOU confess that your ways are not His ways, that you've missed the mark, that even your good works are worthless. You repent, meaning you turn from your ways and follow God's ways. And you begin the process of sanctification, which is more and more of the old, fleshly, Tower of Babel, you, dying, so that Jesus Christ can be more manifest in you.

I struggled with putting sacrifice as the first thing in the list of ways we show love to God, because it is the necessary first thing, but it's also the heaviest and most difficult to comprehend. Lot's of people want to obey parts of the Bible. Lots of people want to abide with believers and gaze at the truth of scripture and the beauty of God almighty! Lot's of people like to proclaim many things about God. But if you haven't accepted Jesus, and submitted your life to Him. If you haven't given Him the right to remake your life as He see's fit, all the rest is meaningless. So hear, oh City Gates Church, The Lord your God is one. If you are going to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength, and you've never accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and savior, today is the day!

If Jesus is the Lord of your life. You continue in love by taking those little steps of personal deconstruction to allow for God's transformation in you. Sometimes you'll hear it said as "taking one more step to the right."

You can do it by obeying in new ways. You can do it by finding new ways and times to Abide in the word or in prayer, or gazing at God through Prayer, music or scriptures. And this should all lead you to more readily talk about God to others. Your praise shall ever be on my lips. God is glorified, and you're practicing your love for him. And that leads to greater transformation and so the cycle continues. To the glory of God.

If I could go back and talk to my high school self-struggling with why I didn't "feel" a love for God, I'd say,

Love is not about how you feel. In fact, much of the time, love is acting a certain way *despite* how you feel! Love is about what you do. And what you do, shows what you prefer. *How do you love God?* Prefer Him to you and prefer His ways to your ways. The more you do that, the more you're transformed. There'll be times of joy, there'll be times of misery, there'll be times of . . . meh. . . but as you're sacrificing and obeying, abiding, gazing and proclaiming, you'll be growing in the confidence that you're going to hear, "well done, good and faithful servant."

Let's pray



## Discussion and Application Questions

### 1 John 4:7-12 & Matthew 22:36-38 How Do You Love God?

**Summary:** Consider these 5 specific areas of your life that will help you assess how well you are loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

1. Matthew 22:36-38 Jesus said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment.
  - a. What helps you obey God?
  - b. What helps you abide?
2. Read John 15 and discuss what stands out to you from this chapter.
3. As you look at your life, where do you find yourself desiring to abide?
4. What helps you gaze at God?
5. What helps you proclaim Him?
6. Look at 1 John 4:7-12. How does God show love to us in what he prefers?
7. Is there anything you need to sacrifice in regards to your preferences?
8. Do you see a specific order these actions should fall in? If so, what is the order and why?