

**Mission: Love God**  
**317 Vision Series**

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A few weeks ago, I had the chance to travel to Hawaii for a master's program that I am in. I was stunned and overwhelmed by the arresting beauty—75 degrees, sunny, the entire island green and lush, tropical plants everywhere you look—unlike any place I've ever experienced. I started dreaming about being able to visit other breathtaking places in the world. Like the Rainbow Mountains in China [photo of colorful mountain range]. Like the Patagonia Mountains in South America [photo of rugged mountains]. Like Bora Bora in French Polynesia [photo of tropical beach]. How many of you want to be there right now?

This world is filled with so much beauty, and so much creativity. For example, this is an ordinary honeybee [close-up photo of bees]. Do you know that when a bee locates food it travels back to its hive, and in order to communicate to the other bees where the food is, it does a dance, it moves around and around in a figure eight pattern, and the amount of times it spins indicates how far away the food is. (I was thinking about playing some BEE Gees and dancing to Staying Alive, but I decided to save you from that painful experience! You're welcome.)

How about reindeer [photo of reindeer in snow]? Did you know that the reason reindeer eat moss, which has little nutritional value, is because moss has a chemical in it that when mixed with the acid in a reindeer's stomach warms up all of the body fluids within the reindeer, keeping it from freezing to death. It literally produces its own antifreeze to keep it alive in sub-zero climates!

Think about this lizard found in the jungles of the Amazon [photo of lizard running on water]. Anyone know its name? It is called the Jesus Christ lizard. This lizard literally walks on water!

Now clearly this is not intended to be a geography or zoology lecture, but I begin today with those few examples to tell you this: Friends, the God who designed this world and made bees who dance and reindeer who don't freeze and lizards who can walk on water also made you and me. And when he made humanity he had a goal, he had dreams and hopes in mind. And I just have to believe that when God created us, he had so much more in mind than what we experience day in and day out. I think God wants to blow the roof off our miniscule faith and see us do something with our lives that might actually provide a challenge for him! And as a church we want to be those sorts of people! We want to be a part of something that is significant, that is miraculous, that actually changes eternity. Something that actually lines up with God's intent when he created us. Something so big that God is the only one who could possibly get the credit for it!

In his book *The Unstoppable Force*, author Erwin McManus writes,

Those of us who live in this window of history must consider ourselves uniquely appointed by God. God chooses not only the places but also the times in which we live. He has privileged us to live not only in the greatest expansion of human population but also with the greatest opportunity for the spread of the Gospel. I am convinced that God would not allow us to live in a time of such great opportunity if he did not have on his heart the desire to pour out the greatest movement of the Spirit in human history. We must consider strategies for incremental growth or nominal growth as inadequate, and we must re-examine our assumptions of how the Spirit of God desires to work through the church. We must not be

satisfied until we enter into an explosion of global transformation that matches the challenge that has been entrusted to us.

God wants to do something great. He wants to do something great through us. The real question is: are we ready and willing? That is why we have taken the last 18 months and sought God for the vision, mission, and priorities he wants us to pursue as a church.

I know we have some newer people here today; you have seen this 317 stuff all over town. Thanks for being here! We began last week by talking about the 317 being so much more than an area code—it represents God’s heart for us as followers of Christ here in Indianapolis. We want to carry out a three-fold mission (3), a singular vision (1), and seven priorities (7). Last week we talked about the 1, our singular vision: **To connect people to Jesus**. Today, we want to talk about our mission: **Love God, love people, make disciples**, and specifically to hone in on the first part of it, what it means for us to have a mission to **love God**.

As we talk about loving God, we have to remember that our love for God flows from his love for us. It says in **1 John 4:19**, “**We love because he first loved us.**” It’s not just that God loved us first, it’s that he shows us what love is about. **1 John 3:16**: “**This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.**” So God initiates love for us and defines love for us.

In fact, the very word that we use for love is overflowing with God-centered meaning. The Greek word for love used in those passages is *agape*, a fairly well-known Greek word. In the ancient world, however, *agape* was a seldom-used word, an almost forgotten word. The Greek language had other words for love: *storge*, to talk about love for your family. *Philia*, to talk about love for your friends. *Eros*, to talk about intimate love. And those were the words most frequently used. There was one word that was left on the curb and almost never used: *agape*. And when the Christians wanted to find a word that described God’s love, none of the other words worked. It’s not the same as love for family, or a friend, or a spouse. They appropriated the word *agape*, because it was used so little, its meaning was a bit vague and generic. And they infused that word with brand new meaning by using it to describe who God is, what he is like, and how he has responded to us in our need.

This is how the Christians used the word *agape*: a wholehearted commitment to the good of another, regardless of personal cost. That is how God has loved us! In **Ephesians 3:18-19** Paul prays for believers and says this, “[**I pray that you**] **may have the power...to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.**” Paul wants us to know just how great the love of God truly is.

It was put well in this classic hymn about the love of God:

The love of God is greater far  
Than tongue or pen can ever tell.  
It goes beyond the highest star  
And reaches to the lowest hell.

Could we with ink the ocean fill,  
And were the skies of parchment made;  
Were every stalk on earth a quill,  
And every man a scribe by trade;

To write the love of God above  
 Would drain the ocean dry;  
 Nor could the scroll contain the whole,  
 Though stretched from sky to sky.

O love of God, how rich and pure!  
 How measureless and strong!  
 It shall forevermore endure—  
 The saints' and angels' song.

That is what the love of God is like. He first loved us. And in turn, he invites us to love him with all that we have, with all that we are. In Mark 12, a teacher of the law approached Jesus and asked him this question: **“Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”** Jesus answered, **“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 12:28-30).** Of every command in the Bible, Jesus himself tells us this is the most important thing we can possibly do. And since Jesus said it was most important, it is at the highest place in our mission. This is what we want to be about.

Now it's easy to think: Loving God, that's easy. Well, let me use the analogy of a marriage. When people stand before each other on their wedding day and promise to love each other for the rest of their life, they usually think it's going to be pretty easy, too, don't they. And it is, for the first few days, or weeks, or maybe months. But then what happens? Real life happens. Bills happen. Sickness happens. Kids happen. And the love you had for your spouse, which you thought was the most natural, easiest thing in the world, dwindles and fades. Obviously sometimes there is a divorce, but even when there's no divorce, it's not that uncommon for the passion to die down.

Listen to what Jesus said to the church in Ephesus in the book of Revelation: **“I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary” (Revelation 2:2-3).** Did you see all those commendable, inspiring things that Jesus has to say about the church in that city? He commends their deeds, their hard work, their perseverance, he commends them for being wholesome and not tolerating wicked people, for caring about faithful theology, testing and exposing false apostles. He says they have persevered, they have endured hardships, and says in all of that they have not grown weary, they are still in the fight! That's remarkable.

But after saying all of those wonderful things, do you know what he says next? **“Yet I hold this against you....”** And do you have any guesses what he is going to say? What his chief concern for them is? **“You have forsaken the love you had at first” (Revelation 2:4).** Jesus is saying it's not enough to commit to a life of good deeds and hard work, a life of moral purity and of doctrinal integrity...if we have everything else right but lose our first love, we have lost it all. And to see just how serious Jesus says this is, he goes on to say: **“Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place” (Revelation 2:5).**

When Jesus says he will **“remove your lampstand,”** the lampstand all throughout Revelation represents the church. Do you realize the severity of Jesus' threat? He's saying, “If you don't

begin to love me like you did at first, if you don't put loving me above everything else, then regardless of all the other good things you are doing, I will personally come and bring an end to your church." This is not Satan bringing an end to the church. This is not a religious terrorist bringing an end to the church. This is Jesus himself. Jesus is not interested in a church that does not put the love of God above and before everything else!

We never want to make that mistake. In the Old Testament book of Jeremiah the Lord spoke against his people and said this, **Jeremiah 2:13: "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water."** I know I've been there at times in my life, and maybe you have, too. Where you stopped putting God first, stopped pursuing him and worshiping him with all you have. And instead of looking to him for joy and meaning and sustenance, you looked to lesser things, fleeting things: work, education, hobbies, success, wealth, appearance. The Bible says those are broken cisterns, they can't hold water, they leak. He wants us to choose him. He doesn't just *contain* living water, he's the *source* of living water!

As a dad, one of the most heartwarming things I ever get to experience is when my son responds to me with delight and joy. A few weeks ago, when we were in Hawaii, I was at the beach with my son. Whenever I'm around water I grab my son and play with him, and he loves, loves, loves when I throw him in the air. Keren snapped a picture that she posted on Facebook [photo of Dan and son]. Usually, when people see this, there are one of two responses. Most of the dads are like, "Yeah! That's what we do. We throw our kids. Awesome, man." Then there is a constituency of people who say, "Oh no, that's horrible, you might kill him!" And I just want to ever so kindly say to those people: relax. Now I wasn't expecting this, but a couple of people from church took this and decided to photoshop it. One person decided to take me out of it, so it looked like Hudson was falling from the sky. Another person decided to pretend that all of a sudden I got super strength, and could throw Hudson 20 feet in the air [photoshopped image]. Do you see his little feet there dangling? People have way too much free time on their hands!

When I walk into a room, my son has a number of different reactions. Sometimes he's playing with his toys, looks up, sees me, and goes right back to playing with his toys. Sometimes he sees me, and turns and runs to his mom. But every once in a while, he'll see me, he'll completely forget whatever else he was doing and run into my outstretched arms, ready for me to give him the biggest hug in history. There is nothing that brings a dad greater joy. And that's what we want to do with God. Even though there are trinkets we could be amused with, even though there are other people we could turn to, we want to run into his arms. As John Piper says, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him."

God wants us to love him the way we read about in the Psalms:

**As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. (Psalm 42:1)**

**You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water. I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands. I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you. (Psalm 63:1-5)**

That's how we want to love God, passionately, wholeheartedly, from the depths of our being. Not loving God for what he can offer us and the good things he can do for us, but simply loving him because of who he is.

There was a man in the Old Testament by the name of Job. He was a man who was blessed with a large family: he had 10 kids. He had great wealth: seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred oxen, five hundred donkeys. And he had great honor. The Bible says, **“He was the greatest man among all the people of the East” (Job 1:1-4)**. He was a righteous man who loved the Lord with all of his heart, soul, mind and strength—even to the point of causing God to brag about him to the angels in heaven. Can you imagine that? Can you imagine living such a devout and faith-filled life that God literally was talking about you to the angels? That's what Job was about. We read in **Job 1:8**, **“Then the Lord said to Satan, ‘Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.’”** So God is talking up Job the way a farmer talks up his wife's cooking, the way an Ohio State football fan talks up his team *every single year*....you've never seen anything this good!

And what does Satan do? Satan says to God, you know why he loves you, he loves you because you've protected him and blessed him. Who wouldn't love you if they had everything Job does. He's not interested in you, he's interested in what he can get from you. Take it all away, and I'll guarantee he'll curse you. God says ok, take it away, and let's see what happens. You may know the story. In one day everything was taken from him, everything he had was stripped away. His children died, his property was confiscated. He was left with absolutely nothing! And what did he say: **“The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised” (Job 1:21)**. God, I don't love you because of the good things you have done for me, or for the blessings you have given me. Even if every precious thing in my life is taken away, in my heart and on my lips, may the name of the Lord be praised. That's the kind of love God wants from us. Love that flows from the center of our hearts! Love that joyfully offers God all we have and all we are. Not out of a sense of duty or obligation, but out of delight.

Think about it this way: Keren loves flowers. When I say she loves flowers I don't mean she loves flowers the way most women love flowers. She really *loves* flowers. They are some of her favorite things in the world. Now, imagine since, because I know that, on Valentine's day I go to the florist and buy three dozen of her favorite flowers. And when I come home I walk through the door and she says, “Dan, oh my goodness, thank you so much, why did you do that?” Imagine her response if I said, “Well, I kind of had to. Everyone else is doing it. I knew you'd be mad if I didn't. The flowers were expensive but I wanted to appease you.” What would those flowers mean to my wife then? She'd probably have just thrown them out. But what if I walked in, she had the same response, “Dan, oh my goodness, thank you so much, why did you do that?” And I said, “Keren, you are the love of my life, you bring me more joy, more happiness, more delight, than anyone in the world. I adore you. Happy Valentine's Day.” How would she respond then? Her heart would be filled with warmth because of the depth and sincerity of my love.

That's what God wants from us. As a church, that's what we want to offer him. **1 Corinthians 13:13** says, **“These three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.”** What is our mission as a church? To love God!