

Mission: Love God

February 2, 2020

Daily Devotions**Day One**

This whole week we are going to look at the first part of our mission as a church. Jesus told his followers that the greatest thing we can do is to **Love God**. That's one aspect of what we want to be ALL about as a church. But, in talking about loving God, there's more to that than meets the eye. This week's devotionals will help us dive into what that really means for us.

Love is a difficult concept to define. We use the same word in so many different ways. I love my wife, I love the mountains, but I also love pizza. We use the same word to describe how we feel about people, places, and things even though most of us would say that we don't love them in the same way or for the same reasons. So, when we talk about our love for God, what do we mean and why?

When the Pharisees tried to test Jesus, they asked him, "Which is the greatest commandment?" This was a tough question because there are over 600 Mosaic Laws to choose from. Which one would/should he choose as more important than the rest? Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the single most important thing God asks of us.

But it isn't enough to know that we should love God, at some point we have to stop and ask, "Why?" God does not demand our love out of some baseless sense of ego or selfishness. Our love for him is based in the fact that he loved us first and he loves us best. John says, "We love because he first loved us." When we see how God has loved mankind throughout history and how he continues to love us personally, it is only right and natural that we would love him. Paul said in Romans 5:8, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." We were lost and enemies of God, but he still loves us enough to allow his Son to be tortured, humiliated, and murdered so that we could spend eternity with him. Author Max Lucado said, "Nails didn't hold God to a cross. Love did."

The cross is the greatest example of love that has ever been and that will ever be. Author and Christian philosopher C.S. Lewis in his book *The Four Loves* defines the highest form of love as agape, and describes it as a selfless love that is passionately committed to the well-being of others. Jesus demonstrated perfect love because he sought our well-being at the expense of his own. This is why we love God.

We read Scripture and study the character of God not out of duty but delight. We will only find more reasons to love him and that will undoubtedly lead us deeper into love with him.

Questions for thought:

How is your love for God similar or dissimilar to your love for other things in life (family, food, etc.)?

Take a moment to write out the reasons you love God; you could list 1, 5 or 100 reasons.

Read Isaiah 53. Why would God allow this to happen to his son?

Do you love God out of duty or delight? Why or why not?

Day Two

The overwhelming majority of people who interacted with Jesus during his time on earth would describe him as loving, kind, and gentle. An exception would be the Pharisees. Jesus was notably harsh with them, calling them hypocrites, fools, whitewashed tombs, and full of greed. So, who were the Pharisees and why was Jesus so harsh with them?

The Pharisees were a devout sect of conservative Judaism that prided themselves on knowledge and strict observance of the Law. These men were the religious leaders of the early Jewish community. They held positions of authority, esteem, and influence. At first glance it seems strange that Jesus would have such an adversarial relationship with them. After all we're supposed to know the Scriptures, and we're supposed to live under the authority of the Word of God. So why on the one hand do we see grace and mercy when Jesus speaks with prostitutes, thieves, and social outcasts, but on the other we see him condemning religious leaders? What the Pharisees missed was that knowledge about God and correct doctrine does not equal love for God. They had lots of head knowledge and theological training, but the result was pride, not love. They knew about God, but they did not love him.

Jesus condemned their self-righteousness in Matthew 23:27 saying, "You are like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people's bones and all sorts of impurity." Yesterday we talked about duty and delight. A question we should continually ask is, do we approach our devotions with a sense of duty like the Pharisees or like the prostitute in Luke 7:36-50 who was so overwhelmed with joy at being in the presence of Jesus that she washed his feet with her tears? We pray that God would give us a heart like hers.

In Revelation 2 we see a church that seems to be doing everything right. They were known for their hard work, patience, calling out false apostles, and enduring trial after trial. In spite of all this Revelation 2:4 says, "But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first." They did everything right, but they had forsaken the love for God that they once had.

Greg Morse when writing about pharisaism says, "It is a scary reality that the road to hell is not only paved with good intentions, but good deeds and theological precision as well." We are all prone to wander as the song says but the reality is many of us won't wander into drugs, violence, or sexual immorality, but we might wander towards something just as deadly. That is, our knowledge about God will grow but our love for him will shrink.

Questions for thought:

Is your Bible reading and study growing your love for God, your knowledge of him, or both?

Read Luke 7:36-50. Do you resonate more with the prostitute or with Simon the Pharisee? Why?

Take some time to read and memorize Psalm 51:16-17.

Day Three

One day during Jesus' time on Earth, he was questioned by the Pharisees about which commandment out of ALL the commandments in the Old Testament was the greatest (this was meant to be a trick question). Jesus' response though...was GOLD.

Jesus responded to this question by saying that all of the commandments are summed up in loving God with your heart, mind, and soul.

Now, what did Jesus mean by that? Good question. When Jesus told the Pharisees that the greatest commandment was to love God with all of our heart, soul and mind, he was referring to a passage back in Deuteronomy (the fifth book in your Bible). In Deuteronomy 6:4-5, and in what is called the Shema, the text says, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." The parallels between the words of Moses and the words of Jesus are clear. But Jesus exchanges "might" for "mind" - not a contradiction of Scripture, but an addition. He *draws out* and *expands* on Deuteronomy. Jesus would have known the Shema and likely prayed it daily as was Jewish custom then and still is the custom for Jews today.

To the Hebrew writers of the Old Testament, the heart represented the center of a person's being. To them people thought with their hearts; an example would be Genesis 6:5 where the author references "the thoughts" of men's hearts. In Matthew 22:37-38, Jesus is drawing out that implication and adding another dimension. When he says heart, he means our passions, emotions, affections. When he says soul, he means our whole being, the totality of what makes us a person (according to the Bible, humans don't *have* souls...Humans *are* souls, but we don't have time to dig into that right here). When Jesus says "mind" he means our intellectual devotion, thoughts, and decision-making. In short, we are to love God with, well, our Everything.

On the surface, it seems like God is asking a lot from us. To love him with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind certainly seems like a tall order. Don't, however, allow the Enemy to convince you that the commands of the Lord are burdensome. 1 John 5:3 clearly says they are not. Author Jon Bloom says, "...we can only experience this greatest love because the greatest Lover loved us with an infinitely greater love first." God holds nothing back in his love for us. But what are we holding back in our love for him? God is not demanding our performance or even our righteousness but our passions, affections, thoughts, and ultimately our entire being.

The Center for the Study of Global Christianity has estimated that 900,000 Christians have been killed for their faith in the last decade. These men and women did not lay down their lives because of a sense of duty, obligation, or even obedience. They laid down their lives because of their boundless love for God. Has our love for God consumed our hearts, our souls, and our minds in that way?

Questions for thought:

How are you loving God with your heart, soul, and mind? Write out 1-2 sentences for each.

Are there aspects of your life where you are not loving God? What is holding you back? Explain.

Memorize the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:4-5, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart."

Day Four

According to Capterra, in the state of Indiana, 63% of people would say that they believe in God with absolute certainty, but only 37% attend church regularly. So why the disconnect between the two? At some point as a society, many are making the false assumption that you can believe in God and love God, and also not be part of his community. We live in a unique time in history, with our ability to travel and the busyness of life, we can “connect” with a different person every day without ever being in meaningful community.

Community makes people and the churches they are part of better. When we begin to see the strengths and gifts of our brothers and sisters, we see that they’re different from ours. There may be a tendency to rank them as “better” or “worse” but in reality, God has strategically made us different for the purpose of glorifying himself, building up his Church, and transforming our community. The beauty of a healthy love for God is that it has the unifying power to bind us together for one mission - connecting people to Jesus.

In the Gospels, Paul says, “We love God because he first loved us,” and John says, “If God loved us, we also ought to love one another.” John was talking about the Church. That’s the formula - God loves us, we love God, that results in loving the Church, and loving the Church means that we transform the world. Imagine visitors walking into our church and seeing thousands of people from all different backgrounds, ethnicities, genders, and classes loving God, loving each other, and living life together for our city? That kind of love makes God look glorious and that makes his Church look beautiful.

That kind of love is a preview of Heaven. God’s plan in Heaven is the same as his plan on earth, people from all backgrounds unified in their love for him. John says in Revelation 7:9, “After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” What we see in this brief look into paradise is unimaginable diversity, unified in love. When we pray the Lord’s Prayer and say, “Have Your will done on earth as it is in Heaven,” we are praying for that kind of love to be seen here on earth.

Author Tim Keller says, “Only if you are part of a community of believers seeking to resemble, serve, and love Jesus will you ever get to know him and grow into his likeness.” What will that look like for you?

Questions for thought:

Community means bearing one another's burdens. What would it look like for you to bear the burden of someone in your life right now?

Instead of just walking out of church this week, try something new: stop, introduce yourself, and make a meaningful connection with someone you don’t know.

Have you gone through Rooted or Deepen? Prayerfully consider joining. You can find out more at thecreek.org/rooted and thecreek.org/deepen.

Day Five

Growth in relationships never happen without intentionality, purpose, and trust. The same principle is true of our relationship with God. Distance does not make the heart grow fonder; it makes the heart grow colder. The reason we place such an emphasis on Scripture is that it is through Scripture that we see the heart of God revealed. The more we know about God the more reasons we'll find to love him. C.S. Lewis says in his book *The Four Loves*, "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken." Maybe you know this to be true from personal experience and you feel like even if you wanted to love, the painful memories of the past have shattered you in such a way that you don't even know where to start.

But unlike our relationships with people, there are no skeletons in God's closet, we never have to fear finding out some dark secret, he will never betray us in the way that our friends and families have. We are free to search out the heart of God with boldness because there is only beauty there. God is so passionate about a relationship with you that he said before you were even born, "I want that person in my family so badly that I will allow the murder of my Son if it means I can be with them." God assumes all of the risk; he has already extended himself to us. The only chance of rejection comes from us because he will never turn you away. God smiles when he sees you coming.

Psalm 16:11 says, "You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." Joy is a basic human desire regardless of culture, ethnicity, gender, or any other distinctive. We all crave soul-satisfying joy. This verse says the fullest and longest lasting joy is only found in the presence of God. It doesn't get any fuller than "fullest" and it doesn't get any longer than "evermore". Scripture tells us where that joy is, and that God will make that path to it known to us. God is passionate about a relationship with you and passionate about your joy in him.

To truly love and trust God means that we must continually strive to understand the love he has for us. Brennan Manning says in his book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-Up, and Burnt Out*, "There is an essential connection between experiencing God, loving God, and trusting God. You will trust God only as much as you love him. And you will love him to the extent you have touched him, rather than he has touched you."

Questions for thought:

Are there painful experiences in your past that have hindered your ability to love God? What would need to happen for you to give these experiences to God?

Write out 1-5 barriers keeping you from loving God better. It could be busyness, bitterness, or fear. Who will keep you accountable for removing them?

Spend some time reading through Psalm 42:1-5. We invite you to use a type of praying Scripture called "lectio divina," which simply means divine reading. You will read through the passage four different times, inviting God to speak to you through the text.

FIRST READING

Sit quietly for a moment before you begin. Ask the Holy Spirit to speak and show you what the Lord wants for you in this passage. Read through the Scripture passage. Mark words or phrases that stand out as you read.

SECOND READING

Read the passage again out loud. Are the same words or phrases you marked the first time still standing out? Write them down. How do these words or phrases apply to your life right now?

THIRD READING

As you read the text for a third time, ask yourself, "How is God inviting me to respond?" Sit quietly for a moment while you listen for his voice. Ask him how he'd like for you to respond. Write out what comes to mind.

FOURTH READING

Read the passage one last time and answer these questions: "Why is God showing me this now? What does this mean for my life?" Write a prayerful response to God.