



Ancient City  
BAPTIST CHURCH

# *40 Days of Love*



***“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’  
‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’  
There is no commandment greater than these”  
(Mark 12.30-31).***

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# Welcome to the ***40 Days of Love!***

The ***40 Days of Love*** begins Sunday, February 14, 2021,  
and goes through Thursday, March 25, 2021.

When Jesus was asked to identify the greatest of all the commandments that God had given, He was not able to limit it to just one. This is what He said: “The most important one is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these” (Mark 12.30-31). But how do we love God? Our neighbors? Ourselves? That’s what the ***40 Days of Love*** is designed for—to give practical encouragement in how to love God, others, and self according to God’s ideas of love!

We are excited that you will be joining us in this journey! **The format is simple: there is a short (one page) “chapter” for each of the 40 days.** We pray that it will both encourage you and equip you in your desire to love God, others, and yourself!



This emphasis is part of our plan of balanced Christian living we call **DiscipleLIFE**. Every Christian should grow in ***head, heart, hands, and feet***. Stated simply:

- **A Disciple Learns (HEAD)**
- **A Disciple Loves (HEART)**
- **A Disciple Serves (HANDS)**
- **A Disciple Shares (FEET)**

While the primary emphasis of ***40 Days of Love*** is the heart, you will notice that it includes all four components of growth.

Thanks, and may God bless us all through the ***40 Days of Love***.

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*He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*  
(Micah 6.8)

How are you doing in your walk with God?

That’s a tough question for many people. How do I even start answering it? Is it based on how I think God is treating me? Is it based on how I *feel*—whether things are going well in my own life or how closely I think I am keeping to the “straight and narrow” path? Who is the judge of how I am doing in my walk with God—me, God, the pastor, the church, all of the above?

In many areas of life, evaluation is easier. If my goal is to get my weight to a certain level, I can get on the scale each day to monitor my progress. In school, grades are given that evaluate our progress. Many jobs include periodic reviews and the possibility of bonuses for work well done. We measure our children in various ways to note their progress. If expected growth doesn’t seem to be taking place, we try to find out if there are underlying issues so that we can take corrective action.

It seems to be harder to measure spiritual growth, because it is, well—*spiritual*. It is not as tangible. But while it may be harder, it is not impossible to measure spiritual growth. We have put together a model that is simple, memorable, and (hopefully) helpful: **A disciple grows in “head, heart, hands, and feet.”**

Jesus said, “Learn from me...” **A disciple learns.** (Head)

Jesus said, “Love God... Love neighbor as self.” **A disciple loves.** (Heart)

Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant.” **A disciple serves.** (Hands)

Jesus said, “Go... and make disciples.” **A disciple shares.** (Feet)

Obviously, we can unpack these quite a bit more—and *must*, to insure these are major themes of Jesus and, indeed, all of Scripture and not just the picking out of minor themes that we seem to like.

Then there are stages of development: briefly, they are “pre-birth,” “infancy,” “growth,” and “maturity.” (See Ephesians 4.11-16.)

This model helps us evaluate our walk with God. From time to time we have a major emphasis on one of the components to help us focus our growth in that area. Earlier, we have embarked on **40 Days of Sharing**, emphasizing our need to reach out to others, and **40 Days of Serving**, emphasizing our responsibility to serve others with the gifts God has given to us. We look forward to **40 Days of Learning** in the future.

Today, though, we embark on a journey called **40 Days of Love**. As we begin, let’s pray for God to do a great work of love in us all. Do that now!

## I LOVE GOD! The Greatest Commandment

***Jesus answered, "The most important one is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. 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 12.29-30)*

One day one of the experts in the Law asked Jesus a question: "Of all the commandments, which one is the greatest?" Now, for us today, a question like that might seem to be merely an intellectual exercise or a matter of curiosity—kind of like asking a scientist which discovery most fascinated him or asking a movie critic his opinion of the greatest film ever made. But we must remember the context of this question. For the Jews—and especially for these scribes, these experts in the Law—the commandments of God were everything! They had counted the number of laws given in the Law. They were meticulous in seeking to obey each one to the letter of the law. In the commandments, those who were serious about them found their very life, their existence.

With this understanding, the question takes on a new emphasis for us. Essentially, the scribe was asking, "*What is the meaning of life?*" At least, that's the way we would phrase it today. This was no question of idle curiosity or the seeking of mere opinion. This expert, certainly desiring to "size up" Jesus, was asking Him the ultimate question of life itself. His answer would help the scribe make his own decision about this teacher named Jesus.

*What is the meaning of life?*

That's a question we all must ask. And the answer we give determines everything else about life—our goals, our ambitions, our livelihood, our values, our choices, our priorities—everything!

Jesus tells us that the ultimate meaning of life is wrapped up in love for God. He, of course, is quoting from words Moses had uttered to the Israelites as he was leading them out of slavery and into the Promised Land. And we are told *how* to love God—with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. I encourage you to meditate on each part of this phrase and how it applies to you. We will take a closer look at this soon, but this needs to be at the forefront of our thinking constantly! If this is the true meaning of life, surely we must ever give attention to it.

Think of it: we have been given all these commands to "do this" and "don't do that." While each is helpful, it can be easy to get bogged down in the minutiae of dotting i's and crossing t's. And many had gotten sidetracked in such "legalism"—and many still do. But Jesus tells us that the meaning of life is all about love. The God of the universe created you for love! Is love the true meaning of your life? Think about it...

## I LOVE GOD! But He Loved Me First

***We love because He first loved us.***

*(1 John 4.19)*

Someone may ask, “Why does God command me to love Him? Shouldn’t that be up to me? Why does God need my love anyway?”

We all have a desire to be loved, and God is no different in that desire. It would be more correct to say that *we* are like *Him*, because we are made in His image. And God has revealed to us that love is the supreme value for the eternal soul. The apostle Paul said it this way, “*Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.*”

But it is not just in *being loved* that we find meaning and purpose. It is also—it is more so—in our loving! When we love God with all of who we are, this transforms us! While God loves to be loved, He also knows that only as we love Him (and others) will we ever be all of who He created us to be!

Still, we must understand that God’s command for us to love Him is not at all like the demands of brutal dictators that their people love and submit to them—often at pain of punishment, imprisonment, or death. This kind of “love” is really fear, and God in His word tells us that there is no fear in love. Instead, it is written, “Perfect love casts out fear..”

No, God’s command to love arises out of a proper response to Him, for He loved us first. The apostle John writes, “*We love because He first loved us.*” He also says, in the same letter, “This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” Paul tells us that God loved us long before we loved Him: “God demonstrated His love for us in this: while we were *still sinners*, Christ died for us.”

A moment ago it was mentioned that there is no fear in love. Some may ask, “Well, doesn’t the Bible tell us to fear God?” Yes, it does. But this is best understood in the sense of reverence, awe, and healthy respect. Presumably, most of us love our parents, and this love does not preclude a healthy respect for their authority and even a healthy “fear” of their correction when we get off the path. In fact, as we get older, our love and respect grow when we look back to our parents’ loving correction!

We are commanded to love God. But He loves us first. He created us. He seeks to guide us in paths of righteousness. He wants to see us prosper in so many ways. We are told to cast our cares on Him because we matter to Him. Yes, God loves to be loved, just as we do. But He also loves to love, and He knows we will be our most complete selves when we love Him with all our hearts.

Love God for *His* sake. He deserves it! But know that loving Him will also result in your being the best that you can be! Tell Him now of your love!

## I LOVE GOD! Heart, Soul, Mind, and Strength

***“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 12.30)

We are commanded to love God. But lay that aside for a moment. We *want* to love God! But what does that mean? Is it just a feeling we have when we sing our favorite hymn or praise song? Is there more to it than that? *How* do we love God?

In Deuteronomy, as Moses gave the commands of God, His people were told to love Him with all their *heart, soul, and strength*. Interestingly, when Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment, He quoted that passage, but as He was translating it into the language He was speaking, he used four words instead of three—*heart, soul, mind, and strength*, giving fuller understanding to the breadth of the Hebrew words used.

When I was a young Christian, wanting to know as much about God and His word as possible, I sensed that this was a key verse for life. Perhaps that is obvious in the fact that Jesus calls it the first and greatest commandment! But there was more to it than that. I wanted to know *how* to love God—and this verse told me to do so with “heart, soul, mind, and strength.” Aha! These four words would surely teach me the essence of loving God. I thought of each word—they were all very familiar—and how I interpreted each word. And I realized that these words are not as concrete in meaning as I had thought.

For instance, what did it mean to love God with all my *heart*? Did that mean to have an emotional attachment to God—or was there more? What does the word *heart* really mean? It obviously has a figurative meaning based on the physical heart being the center of our lives in the way it pumps life-giving blood to every other area. And what do I make of the word *soul*? My innermost being? If so, how does that differ from heart? Is heart more emotional and soul more rational? And if so—well, Jesus inserted the word *mind*. At first glance, it signified to me that I should love God with my thinking—the pondering of my heart. Does that mean with my brain—or does the mind transcend the brain? *Strength*—that word seemed the most clear to me at first glance. It meant that I should love God with my physical being. Or does strength speak to inner fortitude—the power of inner convictions?

I think you can see that my meditation actually didn’t make things as clear as I wanted. In some ways, my meditation gave rise to even *more* questions about how to love God. I had sensed that the key to loving God was found in this sentence, but studying these words did not bring the clarity I desired. Then one day it occurred to me that this verse does indeed give me the key to learning how best to love God—but the key wasn’t what I anticipated. Let’s look at that tomorrow...

## I LOVE GOD! The Key to Loving God

***“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 12.30)

The greatest commandment of all, Jesus says, is to “*Love the Lord your God...*” And we want to do that, don’t we? Isn’t it our desire to achieve the main purpose God has given us in life? So the question comes: “How do I love God?” And, fortunately, the commandment answers that question as it continues: “*with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*” I mentioned before that I was convinced that the key to loving God must be found in these words, “heart, soul, mind, and strength,” and I embarked on a study of them. But I discovered that the meanings of these words were not as precise as I desired. One commentator helped me when he described these words as being “semantically concentric.” That’s a fancy way of saying they all in essence mean the same thing! It is perhaps in the breadth that we see nuance of meaning.

It was then that I was given a great insight: the key to *how* to love God was indeed found in this, the greatest of all commandments, but the key wasn’t in the words I had focused on—heart, soul, mind, and strength.

The key was in the word *all*.

Notice that the word *all* is mentioned for each of the other words, and it is the key in understanding how to love God; in other words, it is the key to our fulfilling the main purpose for which we have been created!

Most—hopefully all—of us in the church love God. Yet too few seem to consistently find the abundance of life that Jesus said He came to bring. Why not? Could it be because many days we approach God with *half-hearted* love? We love Him with *part* of our thoughts but reserve other parts of our minds to dwell on things other than what is “true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good reputation, excellent, and praiseworthy”? (See *Philippians 4.8.*) We keep parts of our soul that are off limits to God, parts that we don’t want to change or improve because of our own selfishness or laziness?

God doesn’t want our leftovers. He wants our *all*.

Do you really want to love God with *all*? Are you willing to spend a few minutes now—and the rest of your life—to meditate on what that means day by day? Will you take fearless inventory of your own heart, soul, mind, and strength, identifying what it means today to love God with *all* of who you are?

Don’t be afraid of God and what He wants to do with your life. Remember, He loved you first. Let’s try it. Let’s love Him just for today—with *all*! Spend a few minutes talking to Him about that.

## I LOVE GOD! Worship in Spirit and Truth

***“Come, let us bow down in worship,  
let us kneel before the LORD our Maker;  
For He is our God  
and we are the people of His pasture,  
the flock under His care.”***

(Psalm 95:6-7)

Talk is cheap. We say we love just about everything. “I love my parents.” “I love my spouse.” “I love my children.” “I love hot dogs.” “I love apple pie.” “I love that show.” “I love my team.”

How do we know we mean it when we say we love God? After all, loving God is certainly different from loving hot dogs... or at least it *should* be! Since to love God is the greatest commandment, it should be done at a higher level than any other love, including love for spouse or children.

But the way we love others may give us some hints about how we love God. How do you show love to the ones who are most important to you? Do you show it with time, attention, gifts, service, caring words, and/or loving touches? Do you give priority in life to those people?

One way we demonstrate love for God is in a practice we call *worship*. What does that mean to you? And is that the measure of real worship—what *I* think it means? Or is it something I should learn? If my spouse likes time and attention but I only express love through caring words, is that enough? Does she have to learn my way of showing love, or do I need to learn hers?

Worship comes from the word *worth*. When we worship, we tell God how much He is worth to us. Just how much *is* God worth to you? Does He get any of your priority time, or do you use the excuse, “I don’t want to be legalistic” to deny God His place every single time there is a scheduling conflict or something else that demands attention? Do you long to join together with others to worship within the community of faith, hope, and love? Do you carve out times of personal worship?

Jesus told us that worship is not so much a matter of where or when but of WHO and HOW. We worship the Father, and we worship in spirit and in truth. Spirit surely means there is life; truth means that we are authentic and we look for ways the Father desires worship.

King David was a man after God’s own heart, we are told. He understood that our physical posture alternately instructs and reflects our hearts. In the passage above, the king speaks of *bowing* and *kneeling*. Why? *He is our God!* To worship God, we must humble ourselves before Him, declaring that He *is* our Maker and that we are part of His flock—part of something bigger than ourselves. We belong to the body of Christ.

Will you spend some time right now worshiping God? Will you gather with His flock as He gathers them? These say, “I love God!”



***"If you love me, you will obey what I command."***

*(John 14.15)*

What is the test of love? How do we know we mean it when we say we love God? We asked that question yesterday, but we aren't yet through with it. Yes, we demonstrate our love for God in our heartfelt worship of Him, but there are other ways, too, for us to know that our love is authentic. Jesus says, "If you love me, you will obey what I command."

There are questions or objections that can arise at this clear, concise statement of our Lord. A question that arises is, "Are you saying I have to obey the commandments to get God's favor? I thought we were saved by grace!" An objection is thinking that God is manipulating us as others have done so when they have made statements like, "If you really love me, you will buy me what I want or do what I want, etc."

Yes, we are saved by God's grace through our faith, not by our obedience. No, God is not seeking to manipulate us. He is simply helping us to know if we really love Him. We are so easily confused and deceived! Someone may say, "I'm a baseball player." But he is not a baseball player if he never goes on the field. Someone may say, "I'm a musician." But if she never plays an instrument or sings a song, is she really a musician? If you say that you are a follower of Jesus, that you love God with all your heart but you never obey Him, are you really a follower? If you think so, in what sense are you a follower?

If you say you love a parent, a sibling, a spouse, a child, a friend, how do you know that is true? Is it just a *feeling* that you have inside yourself so that you are the only judge of whether you love? Or are there tangible ways that demonstrate to yourself and others that your declaration of love is authentic? Jesus is saying to us that a sure sign of love for Him is that obedience is the *habit* of our lives—not in an effort to earn salvation but as an expression of the love one has for Him.

Can you think of a single thing you have done this week *only* because of your love for God? Have you *wanted* to do something else from your own desire of the moment but remembered something Jesus has said and thus changed your mind so as to obey Him?

There are some people who love us so well that we love them in return very naturally. Sometimes we pat ourselves on the back, thinking we are proving our love for God by loving these people. But we don't need God to command us to love such people. We don't need God to command us to eat our favorite desserts. The test is this: do we obey God even when it is *not* what we want or when it is *not* convenient, just because we love Him with all our hearts in view of all that He has done for us?

Obedience: this is the test of love. Will you pass the test today? How?

## I LOVE GOD! His Commands Are Not Burdensome

***This is love for God: to obey His commands. And His commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith.*** (1 John 5.3-4)

Here it is again: a definition of love for God that is connected to obedience. The apostle John has been nicknamed “The Apostle of Love” because his writings emphasize both love for God and love for others—in other words, the Great Commandments! He was faithful to remind us of Jesus’ words in his gospel, and he expounds on those words in his letters. The verses above can be very liberating. Look at them again. Especially meaningful is the phrase, “*And His commands are not burdensome.*” That simple declaration can reopen our eyes to the beauty of God’s commands.

You see, it is easy to think of anything we are “told” to do as a “chore.” We think back to childhood when our playtime is interrupted by some burdensome chore imposed on us. We think of some of the drudgery that is inherent in pretty much any job we have. And somehow we are deceived into thinking anything that is *commanded* is by very definition something we don’t want to do.

How freeing it is to be reminded that it is our perspective that has become skewed by sin. Open your eyes: *His commands are not burdensome! Not only that, in obeying them is the key to overcoming the world!* Isn’t it our desire to overcome this sinful, wicked world?

Just look at the first commands given by God. “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over... every living creature.” We are told that God put Adam in the Garden of Eden “to work it and take care of it.” The man was told to name the animals. God said, by command, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.” From our sinful perspective, we concentrate on the one tree they *couldn’t* eat from. Do we miss entirely that this command starts, “*You are free...*”? Just how many trees would you guess were in the garden? Only one was off limits; the rest were to be freely enjoyed. His commands, indeed, are not burdensome!

In Proverbs, we are told the purpose for these commands: “for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight.” We are told that godly instruction “will be a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck.” Wouldn’t you consider these good things?

God’s commands bring joy and peace! Wouldn’t it be great to live in a world of faithfulness, a place without theft or murder or lying? Indeed, God’s commands are not burdensome; they bring joy. They are gifts from Him. Let us show God love by obeying His wonderful word!

## I LOVE GOD! Cultivating Love for God

***“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 12.30)

Let's return to Jesus' statement of the Great Commandment. Earlier we mentioned that the words “heart,” “soul,” “mind,” and “strength” are not as precise in meaning as we may want. They overlap. (Remember, one commentator said they are “semantically concentric.”) Still, with four words being used it is obvious that there is a reason for it. It seems clear that love for God is to be displayed with the totality of who we are—and certainly that would include both our thoughts and our emotions. Those who don't “feel” as much of a connection to God are often happy to find out that love for God is more than an emotion. They are glad to know it is something we can be commanded to do and therefore can decide to do (because you can't command an emotion!)

Still, when those who lean more to *thinking* than *feeling* see others overcome by emotion in, say, singing a worship song or coming to faith in Jesus, there may be a sense that something is being missed. Or there may be at least a sense that we would like to include more of an emotional connection in our love for and worship of God.

Two important questions need to be considered:

- 1) Are there ways to cultivate emotions of love for God?** and
- 2) Is there value in doing so?**

The answer to both questions is yes!

While we all want to obey the admonition to love, we also like the feelings that often accompany our love for God and others. When feelings of love wane in a marriage, for instance, it is entirely proper for each spouse to cultivate the feelings that they have had and want again.

How do we do that for God—cultivate *feelings* of love for Him? Let's take the next few days working on that as a project. It's okay if it doesn't really “work” for you. But if it helps, you will enjoy perhaps a love for God that is even more fulfilling. Just remember: you can love God with or without the accompanying feelings. It's just *easier* when the feelings are present—and most of us find it more gratifying as well. We will consider some examples we may find helpful when feelings of love for God don't seem present or are not as strong as they once were or as strong as we would like them to be.

For today, spend a few moments in meditation and prayer. Ask God to reveal to you some insights about your love. Do you love Him with *all* the aspects of your life—heart, soul, mind and strength? And do you love Him with *all* of each one of them? Meditate on what that would “look like” in your life. It needn't look like someone else's. This is yours. But ask Him to help *you* love more fully.

## I LOVE GOD! Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs

***It is good to praise the LORD and make music to Your Name, O Most High, to proclaim your love in the morning and your faithfulness at night, to the music of the... lyre and melody of the harp.*** (Psalm 92.1-3)

Music is an incredible gift that God has given to us for expressing both feelings and thoughts that perhaps may not be expressed as well in any other way. We all know that simply hearing a song can move us to a variety of emotions. Music can transport us to a different time or different place, bringing back all kinds of memories. While instrumental music alone can move us to be alternately joyful or meditative, sober or exuberant, combining the music with words is the most common way we as Christians express our faith. And it is a way that can help us cultivate the *feelings* of love for God to go along with our thoughts.

A man in a Bible study once said, “All that music and stuff is just wasted time for me. I come for the word!” While as a pastor I appreciated his love and appreciation for God’s word, we were studying a passage that included these words: “*Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord*” (Ephesians 5.19). Like many of us, he needed to cultivate a love for God, not only in his head, but also in his heart.

Do you find yourself at times needing to either cultivate or rekindle feelings of love in your heart for God? One of the ways to do this is by accessing this gift of music that is so prominent in Scripture, particularly in the book of Psalms, the hymnal of ancient Israel and a major source of inspiration for the modern church as well.

Think about one of your favorite hymns or spiritual songs. (Hint: that means pause a moment!) Got one in mind? Why is it a favorite? Is it the words? If so, what is so special to you about those words? Is it more the music? How does that music seem to move you? Does it lead you to exuberant joy? Contemplative meditation? Is it loud—or soft? Do the words and music come together in agreement?

Now, take a moment to sing the song from your heart. (No, I’m serious! If you can’t break out in song, hum it softly as you consider the words in your heart. Or put on a CD or listen from your computer or phone or however you can access it. Or do it all in your head—our minds are so powerful that we can “hear” it there. But take the time to actually do it!)

Let the music touch you. Let it move you. Let it cultivate in you and/or rekindle in you a warm, affectionate love for the God who first loved you. There is a reason we call the death of Jesus the “passion” of Christ. God is passionate in His love for us. Let us likewise seek to be passionate in our love for Him. Cultivate the habit of using song regularly—daily—as you practice loving God with all your *heart*.

## **I LOVE GOD!**

### **For the Wonder of Creation**

***The heavens declare the glory of God.***

*(Psalm 19.1)*

Before God was our Redeemer, He was our Creator. The first sentence of the Bible tells us, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” and we are—or should be—awestruck as we read the rest of the creation story in the first two chapters of Genesis. It is amazing that God did all this—for us!

What are some of your favorite scenes in nature?

Are you mesmerized by the rhythm and cadence of the surf as waves break at the beach? Does the night sky away from the city remind you of the vastness of our universe and the immensity of God? Have you ever been snorkeling in the clear water at a tropical reef? Felt that “good” ache in your soul as you contemplated the majestic peaks of mountains or viewed the wonder of the valleys from atop those mountains? Have you felt a gentle breeze bring welcome relief on a hot day? Have you admired the changing colors of the sky and the orb itself as you took in a sunset? Have you caught a glimpse of a falling star as it hurtles toward the earth? When is the last time you caught sight of the beauty of rainbow in the sky and thought to yourself, “What a blessing”? Have you been surprised by the way your heart has almost burst with joy in conjunction with the bursting forth of the blossoms of trees and flowers in early spring? Have you had the simple pleasure of walking by a babbling brook in the early morning and actually watching the early bird get the worm? Or come across graceful deer scampering through a lawn or wooded area? Do you remember how your breath was taken away when you first looked over the rim of the Grand Canyon? Have you felt so at peace when walking through the silence of a snowy day?

An even better question: have any of these scenes—or others from your own experience—been connected in your heart as a gift from God?

As we think about cultivating a warm, affectionate love for God, don’t overlook the power of nature. David said, “The heavens declare the glory of God,” but he could have easily pointed to the earth—and he did when he wrote, “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it.” As you recall that the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart and all your soul (as well as with all your mind and strength), connect the grandeur of creation with the love of the Creator! Let the awe of your soul go beyond the sunset to the One who painted the sky. Today, bask in the beauty of both creation and Creator. Give Him thanks and praise for these awesome yet simple gifts.

Sing with the hymn writer, “For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies... Lord of all, to Thee we raise, this our hymn of grateful praise!” Spend a few moments in thanksgiving—with all your heart!

## **I LOVE GOD!**

### **Remembering His Benefits**

***Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits.*** (Psalm 103.2)

We know that we can demonstrate our love for God even when we don't feel up to it at the moment, just as we can show love to a family member or a friend by performing an act of kindness because we ought to even when we don't feel like doing it. But it is always nice when our feelings and thoughts come together, when we show love to both God and others not only out of a sense of commitment but out of warm, affectionate feelings that arise from our mutual concern and care.

By the way, it is probably a healthy thing when we *don't* always feel like loving God. It is then that we can best evaluate if we really care for Him or whether we are always just responding to His goodness to us. I mean, it's easy to "love" someone who always serves us and does things for us! I find out if my commitment is real when feelings are absent. If I only participate in worship, for instance, when I think I will get something out of it but I don't show up if I think it is not going to fill my need of the day or I just don't feel like worshipping (though I would probably go to work, school, etc., in the same circumstances), it probably helps me to see the health and strength of my commitment—or the lack of it.

So it can be helpful from time to time that we don't always feel like it. But we don't want to constantly be stuck in a sense of spiritual drought—like David, when he compared himself to a deer panting for water when traveling over parched ground. He longed to have the sense of his soul being filled again by the glory of God. (See Psalm 42.) It is good to cultivate a sense of being filled, and David gave us another wonderful way to do that in Psalm 103. Here, David is "coaching" his soul to bless or praise the Lord, and he does it by recounting all the blessings of God.

Is it easy to begin to take for granted all that God has done for you in the past when you hit a tough patch in life? Is it easy to wonder why God doesn't seem to be "showing up" in the way you think He should?

What an impressive list David offers in Psalm 103. You will be blessed, I think, if you read over it all in his words. He speaks of God's forgiveness, healing, grace, slowness to anger, compassion; he says God remembers that we are but "dust." Again, please note David's eloquence, not this abbreviated list! Take a moment to read Psalm 103 right now.

David gets so excited that he begins telling even the angels, the heavenly hosts, and all creation—as well as his own soul—to praise the Lord.

Might that work for you? For today, let me encourage you to take a few minutes, using Psalm 103 as a template, to write your own hymn of praise that will rekindle your feelings of love for God. Then use it often, as you would other hymns. Use it as a guide for praising God in prayer, with all your soul letting God know just how much you love Him!

## I LOVE GOD! Remembering Your First Love

**[Jesus said,] “Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent, and do the things you did at first.”**  
(Revelation 2.4-5a)

The last thing we want to do is to forsake Jesus, our first love. How do we make sure this doesn't happen? First, we are called to *remember*. Take a moment to remember when you came to place your faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. How old were you? Where were you? What were the circumstances? Was there a sense of joy or relief? Were there tears of joy or simply a new attitude toward life as you began to follow Him?

Have you let that sense of love, joy, and peace dissipate? Jesus says to take another step: *repent*. In this passage, that means to repent of allowing your first love to subside. He says to “do the things you did at first.” When you have been closest to God in life, what are some of the activities that have accompanied that? A quiet time—Bible reading or devotional guide with prayer? Worshiping with others in the church with excitement? Being part of a small group of likeminded believers? Getting involved in ministry projects? Sharing your story with others? What would those kinds of things look like for you today?

Maybe your experiences with God have not been filled with a lot of emotion, but you can see how feelings, while not essential, can be a help in loving God. Here's an idea to try, whether cultivating or rekindling feelings of warm affection for God: As you read stories of encounters with God in the Bible, imagine yourself in the story. You may think of yourself as a man wanting his daughter healed or the woman at the well or the one caught in adultery. Perhaps you look at the story from another point of view, like that of one of the friends who lowered the paralyzed man through the ceiling or someone hurting listening to Jesus say, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” or a person listening to Jesus speak and then being further astonished by being a part of the multitude miraculously fed.

Ask questions like, “What would I likely be thinking or feeling during all this?” “How would this have impacted my life?” “How would I have reacted when Jesus said, ‘I do not condemn you; go and sin no more?’” Seek to understand why people were not only taken with the *message* of Jesus but even more so with the *person* of Jesus.

Let me give you a story to start with: **READ Luke 15.11-31**, the Parable of the Lost Son. Identify first with the younger son. Meditate on what his life must have been like at different stages of the story. Let it touch you. Later, think of the older son. Listen to the loving Father as he shows love to both. Putting yourself in the stories is another way to further cultivate feelings of love for the God who loved you first.

## I LOVE GOD! Filling My Deepest Needs

***“As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Now remain in My love. If you obey My commands, you will remain in My love, just as I have obeyed My Father’s commands and remain in His love. I have told you this so that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.”*** (John 15.9-12)

In the words above, we see that the Great Commandments were not simply a “Sunday School answer” for Jesus. Over and over we see the themes repeated: we are called to love God and to love others in response to God’s love for us. Also here we see again the intended correlation between love and obedience—they work together to bring joy to us and God!

Earlier we looked at the verse in 1 John that says, “His commands are not burdensome,” but it is easy to forget that! In our minds, love and obedience don’t always go well together. One seems free and the other seems forced.

If I commanded you to eat ice cream (or another favorite food), would you decide *not* to eat it just because I told you? (If so, it likely shows how deeply sin is ingrained! We don’t want to be *told* to do anything!)

God’s commands are intended to bring us joy in the long run no matter what your sense of the short run may be. I mean, wouldn’t the world be a better place if everyone worshiped God, kept the Sabbath, honored their parents, and there were no murders, thefts, adulteries, lies, or coveting? Wouldn’t we all have more joy?

The truth is, obeying the Great Commandments to love God and others actually fills our own deepest needs! Think of the first problem faced by man. What was it? Sin? Nope! That’s our *biggest* problem and the second mentioned in Scripture. The first problem: “It is not good for the man to be alone.” Loneliness. Adam needed someone somewhat like himself. Another common problem for man is fear. David said he didn’t fear the valley of the shadow of death because God was with him.

To fill our deepest needs, such as loneliness and fear, we need loving relationships with God and others. Even with God, Adam needed someone else who was like him. Today, we are likely to have the opposite problem: people have relationships with others but often have no loving relationship with God. And while either error is problematic, the greater problem is not to have a loving relationship with God.

So, let’s obey the command to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Besides proving our love for God, obeying this also fills our own deep need. Meditate on this today... and tomorrow, we will turn our attention to the second of the greatest commandments as we begin to focus on loving others as we love ourselves.



## I LOVE MY CHURCH! What Is the Church?

***Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.***

*(1 Corinthians 12.27)*

It's easy for most of us to say, "I love God!" It may be harder for some to say, "I love my church!" After all, look at the differences. God is perfect. The church is imperfect. God is always right. Most of us can find things to criticize in the way the church has done things, past and present.

The church has such a hard standard to live up to—Jesus Christ Himself. No wonder we hear so many sentences that start out, "The church ought to be..." and end, "but she falls so short." We can all recite many criticisms of the church we have heard. We may have echoed some of them ourselves: "The church is full of hypocrites." "I have been hurt by the church." "I needed help but the church did nothing." "The church is too condemning." "The church cares more about money than it does about people." "The church isn't filling my needs." "My family is not finding any fulfillment in the church." "The church sings too many old songs." "The church sings too many new songs." "The church is irrelevant to real life." I am sure you can add others to the list.

No, the church is not perfect. I think we all can agree on that. So why do we keep "doing" church? Why should we love the church? Why should we invest our lives and our resources into the church? Good questions. The most basic question about the church, though, a question whose answer will help clarify many of the other questions about the church, is simply, "What is the church?"

The New Testament gives us three primary images of the church.

**The church is the *body* of Christ.** He is the head, and we are the members—the arms, legs, eyes, nose, mouth, ears, hands, feet, etc. While the verse at the top of the page is very succinct, much more detail is given in Romans 12 and in 1 Corinthians 12, 13, and 14.

**The church is the *bride* of Christ.** We see this beautiful image in such places as 2 Corinthians 11, Ephesians 5, and throughout the book of Revelation. We will look more into this image tomorrow.

**The church is the *building* of Christ.** I hesitate to mention this one since so many already incorrectly think of the church as a building, but in his first letter Peter speaks of us being *living stones* that together are fitted together to make a spiritual house—a temple of God.

The emphasis of the first and last of these three speak especially of how the church only "works" when we are "put together" in the right way. The middle image will help us understand why to love the church.

Jesus said, "I will build My church." Pray today that we will understand what it means to be part of *His* church. What is *your* part in *His* body?

## I LOVE MY CHURCH! Jesus Loves His Church

***Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.***  
(Ephesians 5.25-27)

How would you feel if a group said to you, “We like you and welcome you, but we don’t like or want your spouse around!” Most of us would be offended, and rightly so. Each married couple comes as a “package deal.” That is, they come together. I sincerely believe that Jesus is offended when we say we love Him but we don’t want anything to do with His wife, the church!

Jesus loves the church, imperfect as she may be, and He wants us to love the church, too. More correctly, He wants us as believers to understand that we *are* the church, and if we don’t love the church, we don’t love ourselves. If we rightly understand Scripture, we will understand that we belong to God and have no right to “opt out” of church.

In the passage above, the church is portrayed as an imperfect “bride,” one whose husband, Jesus, doesn’t give up on in her imperfection. Instead, He works with her, giving His very life to make her holy and to present her as the radiant bride He knows she can become.

If Jesus is willing to love us and work on us and with us, we certainly should not give up on the church. We should be honored that He gives His life for us and perseveres with patience. How often He must shake His head, wondering, “When will they *get it*?” Yet, He never gives up. He is always willing to give us another chance. Jesus loves His bride.

Think of another of the images of the church we considered yesterday: we are the *body* of Christ. This image likewise reminds us that we can’t give up on church. Since our bodies have such different parts but make up a coordinated whole, shouldn’t that instruct us that it is okay to be different in some ways as long as we are working together toward the goal God has in mind? Aren’t some of our frustrations with the church the simple fact that we are different and don’t all do the same things? Yet, the image of the body lets us know that we need different functions.

If you quit loving the church and fully participating in her because of your frustrations, are you not doing further harm to Christ’s body? Will a body with an amputated foot be as healthy as one with a strong one? If you are not participating in the body, are you not crippling the body of Christ to the extent that you are not performing the work of that member? Let us recognize the imperfections of the church, but let us never quit on the church. Jesus is building *His* church. As we love Jesus, let us love *His* church, which is *our* church, which is *us*!

Pray today that God will give us a renewed love for Jesus and His church.

## I LOVE MY CHURCH! Things Go Better with Love

***Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.*** (1 Peter 4.8)

When Cain was upset because his brother Abel's sacrifice was accepted by God while his own was rejected, God was gracious enough to counsel him: "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at the door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."

Our circumstances may be different, but we often have conflicts that arise with our brothers and sisters in the church. Sometimes it may be that we don't like the direction the leadership is heading. At other times, we may have somewhat different standards of what we think is appropriate behavior. We may think some people are being favored while others—usually us, in our minds—are being ignored.

When that happens, sin is crouching at our door, trying to turn brother against brother, killing the unity of the Spirit. At that point, we have choices to make, choices similar to those faced by Cain so long ago. We can follow God's word that tells us to "be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to become angry," or we can lash out in words of gossip and criticism, talking *about* the person rather than *to* him or her. We can pitch in to help overcome the deficiencies we see in our ministries, or we can do nothing more than complain about what we see as wrong or lacking. We can "seek peace and pursue it," or we can display unkind attitudes, words, and actions.

Doesn't love always make things better? Wouldn't you rather have someone be kind and loving when they give you words of rebuke or correction rather than coming across harshly as if you are an enemy?

God doesn't tell us to ignore the imperfections in the church, but He tells us through Paul, "Speak the truth *in love*." Above, Peter reminds us to "love each other deeply because love covers over a multitude of sins."

Spend some time meditating on these verses. Be willing to honestly look into your own life and habits. When you feel the need to share difficult words, do you speak in love? Do you, as Paul counseled, rebuke others *gently*, remembering you own sins and how you would want to be treated if the situation were reversed? Are you loving others in the church deeply?

Think of someone with whom you have not gotten along with as well as God would want. What is God saying to you? How would He want you to take the initiative to make things better?

Pray, asking God to give you great wisdom and to help us all understand that love truly makes things better, covering multitudes of sin.

## **I LOVE MY CHURCH!**

### **How Have You Been Loved?**

***I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.... It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart... God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more...***  
*(Philippians 1.3-9)*

The apostle Paul had a special place in his heart for the church in Philippi. Why? The short answer is that they had a special place in their heart for him! Love so often reciprocates! And that's the way it is supposed to work.

Paul was special to the church in Philippi because he had brought them the life-giving message of the gospel. He had been wrongly imprisoned in their city, yet his holy conduct led to the salvation of the jailer and his entire family—and surely there were others who followed when they saw the joy and transformation in their lives.

In return, when Paul left to start churches in other cities, the Philippian church, though generally poor, sacrificed to help Paul. Besides the opening remarks printed above, most of the fourth chapter of Philippians is devoted to Paul's warm love and appreciation for the church there. In reading it, you will find Paul remark, "... you sent me aid again and again when I was in need" (Philippians 4.16).

How have you been touched in your life by the ministry of Christ's church? It is pretty easy for us to focus on the times we feel that we have been let down; likewise, we can quickly fall into the "what have you done for me lately?" kind of attitude when thinking about the church. When Paul thought back to the Philippians, he said, "I thank my God every time I remember you."

How has Christ's church touched you? If you are a believer, undoubtedly the church brought you the good news. Much of your understanding of the Bible and God's will has come through the church. Has the church been a source of friendship, comfort, and encouragement? When you have had needs, has the church come to your aid?

Some of you may be thinking, "No, certain Christians did these things, not the church." If any Christian has ever done anything for you, it was the church. The church is made up of the people of God. When someone put an arm around you to comfort you and pray with you, that was the church in action. When a believer gave you a gift to help you in some way, that was the church. When a parent or teacher told you about Jesus, the church of Jesus was reaching out to you.

Ponder today how you have been touched by Christ's church. Ask God to help you really see the church—and thank God for your memories.

## I LOVE MY CHURCH! How Have You Touched Others?

***If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.***  
(1 John 4.20-21)

John is called "The Apostle of Love," and it is easy to see why. In both his gospel and his letters, he emphasizes love over and over. He especially emphasizes the unique love for one another that is to be evident in the lives of believers. He records Jesus saying, "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another" (John 13.35).

In the passage above, he tells us that we are spouting empty words if we claim to love God but don't love the "brothers"—that is, fellow believers. While we are to love all, as we will see in the weeks ahead, there is still to be a special bond that should exist among believers.

Yesterday, you were encouraged to remember how you have been touched by the love of the church—whether in the sense of the church as a whole or simply by individuals or small groups who are part of the church. When members love you, you are being loved by the church! I hope that God helps us all to understand and appreciate this truth.

But we also need to look at the question from the other side: how are *you* touching others within the church? Another way to ask this question is, *How is the church better because of you?*

In our culture, it is so easy to have a consumer mindset about the church: "What service are you providing to me? How are you filling my needs and the needs of my family?" While I am not suggesting that we should not want to see our spiritual needs met through the church, I *am* suggesting that we are imbalanced or that we are being blinded by the evil one if we don't also ask the question, "What am I bringing to the church?" The apostle Peter tells us, "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms" (1 Peter 4.10).

How are you loving others? How are you serving the church? In what ways are you being a blessing to others? In what ways are you not only giving lip service but demonstrating love to others? There are so many avenues of showing love: teaching, encouraging, leading, greeting, ushering, working behind the scenes in worship sound and presentation, singing, playing instruments, heading a ministry of helps, training others, helping new believers grow in discipleship, participating on a team or committee—well, you get the idea. We all need to take our part in demonstrating love to each other through service. Meditate on what you are doing—and what you could be. Let's ask God to show us how we can touch someone *today*.

## I LOVE MY CHURCH! I Belong!

***Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.*** (Romans 12.4-5)

I recently heard the testimony of a woman sharing how the church had showered her and her family with love, comfort, and sympathy following the death of a child. She said, “I have never been more acutely aware of how much God loves me and how much others love me—just because they love me. I know my life is worth something, too, besides just how smart I am or how kind I am or how helpful I am or what I can do. I am loved for no other reason than my life is worth something to God, and I’m very thankful for that awareness.”

What she is so eloquently describing is a sense of *belonging*. We most often think about *belonging* in context of our families. We get to choose our friends—and they can choose us or not choose us—but we are born into our families. They *have* to take us. We *belong*. And while sometimes we don’t want others to like us just because they *have* to—we think we want to *earn* it—there are times we realize how comforting it is just to be accepted and loved because we belong, to know the peace that comes when we can realize that we don’t have to earn someone’s love every single moment of every single day. We are loved just because we belong.

Paul says about the church, “each member *belongs* to all the others.” We matter to God and each other because our lives are worth something to God. Isn’t it great to belong? The church is God’s family, and all of us who are adopted into the family belong!

Yes, belonging also brings responsibilities. We all have “chores” in the family of God. We are called to love and care for each other. We even have to lovingly rebuke and correct each other when we act ugly or when we make wrong choices. Discipline comes with belonging. While we do make allowances for each other, we are not allowed to take each other for granted or to run roughshod over each other, always insisting upon and getting our own way. But this too is part of the blessing of belonging. Those to whom we belong keep us honest and keep it real and can’t just ignore what is going on in our lives. Rather than abandon us they are willing to keep engaging with us.

I love my church because I belong. I am accepted for who I am. I can bask in the knowledge that I am loved just for who I am, but I am motivated by love and care not to remain just as I am but to grow and change and make progress. Together, we who belong form the body of Christ. Together, we unite all kinds of gifts and talents. Together, we can make a difference that we cannot make alone. Let each one of us ponder today the difference it will make when we understand that we *belong*.

## I LOVE MY CHURCH! Everyone Needs a Church

***[Jesus] is the head of the body, the church... For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things... by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation...***  
(Colossians 1.18-22)

Aren't you glad you are part of the church, the body of Christ? Because you are part of the church, you are no longer God's enemy. He has reconciled you to himself by the death of Jesus on the cross—and through His glorious resurrection. You were once considered sinful, an object of God's wrath; now, you belong to Him and are being made holy and are free from any accusation.

Do you remember what it was like when you were saved—when you confessed Jesus as your Lord and Savior? Think back to that time. You may have been a child, raised in a Christian home and in a loving church, and it was a natural step for you to embrace Jesus as Lord and accept His free offer of salvation. Others may have been older and have seen a more dramatic change somewhat later in life. You may have a “hybrid” story—you made the decision to follow Jesus early in life but experienced periods in your life when you left the path to follow your own way, but God was patient and gracious to bring you back once again to the place that you belong.

Aren't you glad that God rescued you and brought you into His body, the church? Don't you wish others had that opportunity? Everyone needs a church in which to live and learn and love and serve and share.

Some think it is okay to say, “I am part of the church universal, but I don't need to be part of a local church.” These people should not read Scripture if they want to stay secure in their error. Over 80% of the time the word “church” or “churches” is used in the Bible, it refers to local expressions of the church meeting in specific locales. Much of the instruction about loving, teaching, and serving one another, and using our different gifts for the common good makes no sense apart from the church being an identified group that has been brought together by God to worship and work together as people who belong to each other.

Who needs the church? Believers need the church and have the responsibility to take their places within her. Those who are not yet believers need the church to show them the love of Christ, take the gospel to them, and accept them into the family of faith. For this latter part to come true, we must embrace another love. I love my God! I love my church! And now... I love my community! Ponder today how you can love both church and community. Ask Him for wisdom.

## I LOVE MY COMMUNITY! Because God Loves My Community

***For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3.16)***

In *Esther*, the young queen struggles with whether to approach the king to try to rescue the Jews, a move that would put her life at risk. Her uncle Mordecai asks, "Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" We might ask a similar question about our being part of this church at this time: Who knows but that we have been placed in this church for such a time as this?

When I became pastor here, we embarked on a Visioning process to determine God's plan for our church at this time in our history. As part of that process, I wanted to know where we had come from. Of course, I had the history book from the beginning, but I wanted more personal information. I conducted "Congregational Conversations" with as many of our members who would do so. One question I asked was, "What brought you to Ancient City Baptist Church?" Most of the responses, especially from our older members, included, "We moved here and were looking for a new church." Some went further: "We were looking for a *Baptist* church, and this church filled our needs."

How different it is today for most people. It seems much harder as a church to grow than in past generations. People who move here are not, generally speaking, looking for a church to join. Yes, some are, but fewer and fewer are looking for a church. Fewer and fewer grew up in a healthy church. Fewer and fewer see the need to be an active part of a church.

So, how do we respond?

Some might say, "They know we are here. When they get ready to search for God, they can find us." Some of us may be wary of this new breed of people whose values seem so different from our own. We might not like the way they live, some of their lifestyle choices. Again, "when they are ready to search, we are here."

But the Bible paints God as one who is not content to wait for people to come to Him; we see that He is the God who is on mission. He is searching for us, reaching out to us. He demonstrated his love for us "*in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us*" (Romans 5.8). Our verse today, the most well-known and beloved of all verses in the Bible, tells us that God loves the world so much he sent His Son to rescue us. God loves the world. He loves our community. Because God loves our community, we must love our community also. This week, we will focus on God's love and our love for our community. Let's begin today by meditating on John 3.16 and asking God to help us love our community as God does.



## I LOVE MY COMMUNITY! God Is Concerned for the City

***The LORD said, "Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"*** (Jonah 4.11)

Jonah was told by God to go preach to the great city of Nineveh, warning them of impending doom. Instead, he ran away from Nineveh—and from God. But a big fish got Jonah's attention, and he finally but reluctantly did what God asked. He preached, "Forty days and you will be destroyed!" Incredibly, the people repented! You would think Jonah would be happy, but that was not the case: "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee... I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

Are we ever like Jonah? Rather than wanting others to repent, we would rather see them judged because of their sinful behavior? Do we long to see the wrath of God come down on the ungodly?

If so, we are very different from God himself. He says through His prophet Ezekiel that He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He would much rather see people come to repentance and live. God cares for us, too, and He desires that we come to see things from His point of view. Note in the verse above how God reaches out to Jonah. He wants Jonah to see His heart. He reasons with him and gives him an object lesson with a vine. (Jonah is a short book—read it all the way through if you have the time.) God's final question I am sure He would ask about our city as well: "*Should I not be concerned about that great city?*"

Yes, He is concerned for the great, historic city of St. Augustine, and therefore we should be, too. He would much rather see the people here turn to Him and live than judge them for their sins.

When you look at our community, what do you see? Take a few minutes to really think about that. What do you consider our community? If you are a long-time resident, what are some of the changes you have seen in your time here? What are some of the good things about our community? What are some of the challenges? Who is moving out? Who is moving in? How do you think our community might change in the future? Should not God be concerned? Should not we be concerned?

Tomorrow we will try to see our community as Jesus sees it. If we can learn to see the people around us with the eyes of Jesus, it will transform the way we look at our community. It will help us to love our community both more and better. We don't know Jonah's response to God's question. Spend some time with God now, praying that we all will respond, "Yes, God, you should be concerned, and I should be, too."

## I LOVE MY COMMUNITY! Seeing with the Eyes of Jesus

***Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”***  
(Matthew 9.35-38)

Do you like to “people watch”? It is interesting to do—to see what people do, the way they are, wonder what else might be going on in their lives, wonder why they do the things they do, why they don’t make different choices in life.

Jesus was obviously a people watcher. When He looked at the crowds, He saw more than a blur of humanity. He saw people who were harassed and helpless, people without a vision of what real life could be. Rather than His first sense being anger or disappointment, Jesus looked on the people with compassion. He wanted these people to learn the right way to live, to achieve a better life and purpose than what they were doing.

Just as sheep need shepherds to lead the way, people need the guidance of Jesus. And He wants to lead them home to “green pastures” and “still waters,” as King David mentions in Psalm 23. He wants to restore the souls of people to what they ought to be, to what God intended in the beginning of creation. He wants to give rest to those who are burdened.

It is easy to look at people in our community with judgmental eyes. It is easy to decide that they will reap what they sow. And so they will. But Jesus says that first of all, they should be considered part of the harvest. He maintains that many of them are reachable—“the harvest is plentiful”—if there were but enough workers to go to them.

Surely we realize that we who are in the church, we who are His disciples are called to be the answer to the prayer for “workers.”

We really want to make an impact on our community for the kingdom, don’t we? That will begin when we become people watchers—as long as we are looking with the eyes of Jesus, eyes of compassion. Yes, there is a time for judgment. But it is preceded by days of mercy and grace. Today, look at people around you. Those who are making wrong choices—see them as people in need of a shepherd, in need of a Savior. Think of how their lives might change when they begin to walk with Jesus. Smile at the thought of it. Wonder how you—we—might make a difference, how might we reach out to them. What ministries might touch them? What acts of kindness might speak to them?

God wants to touch our community through His church. Let’s pray for the eyes of Jesus to see our community the way He sees them.

## I LOVE MY COMMUNITY!

### Connecting with My Community

*Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.*  
(1 Corinthians 9.19-23)

You will not cast eyes on anyone today that God does not love and wish to redeem. Peter writes, "He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3.9). He wants *us* to be patient with them, too, and point them toward the kindness of God, which leads to repentance.

What are some ways you think we might be effective in encouraging those in our community to repent? Clever slogans on the church sign? Street preaching on the corner with a bullhorn? Wearing sackcloth and ashes with a sandwich board that proclaims, "Turn or burn!"? Leaving a gospel tract in the restroom of a busy restaurant for someone to find after you leave?

I am sure that people have come to faith by some of these methods, but the passage above shows the apostle Paul's own strategy for reaching the communities he entered: rather than focus on all the differences—in values, thinking, behavior, priorities, etc.—he looked for ways to *connect* with those he encountered. People are most responsive to people they find some commonality with, people they like, and people by whom they feel liked. Years ago I read a book with a title that pretty much sums up what Paul is saying: *Making Friends for Christ*.

Who makes up our community? Who lives here? Who works here? Who shops here? Just how far does our community reach? What are some of the needs of our community? What are some of the interests? How might we get to know some of them that we don't run into in the normal traffic patterns of our lives? Are their civic clubs or organizations we might join? Are their opportunities to volunteer so that we might work alongside others? Can we offer volunteer opportunities that our community might want to join in even though they are not yet believers? Are their needs in our community that we can meet? Are there events we can host? These are the kinds of questions we must answer individually and as a church during our **40 Days of Love**.

Pray and meditate on these thoughts today. Jot down your ideas...

## I LOVE MY COMMUNITY! It Proves My Love for God

***If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.***  
(1 John 4.20-21)

We began our **40 Days of Love** with the declaration, "I love God!" That is the absolute right place to start, for our highest calling and purpose in life is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. The verse above helps us see if we *really* love God. It's easy to say, "I love God." The Scriptures are always leading us to test the truth of what we say. The word of God, we are told, is sharper than any double-edged sword and "judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4.12). In other words, it helps us know if we really are doing what we say we are doing. Do you say you love God? Well, do you love your community? John says we can't love God without loving people.

You might point out that the passage above says to love our "brothers," not the community, and that John is writing about other believers. And as far as the verse above goes, you would be correct. The emphasis John is making above is indeed love for those who share the faith.

But remember the commandment that Jesus said is the second greatest of all and is "like" the command to love God? It is to "love your neighbor as yourself." When Jesus was asked to define "neighbor," he used the story of "The Good Samaritan," which clearly shows that loving our neighbor goes beyond simply loving fellow believers. If the story doesn't make that clear enough, Jesus told us elsewhere that we are to go beyond the generally accepted definition of neighbor and to even love our enemies! We will look more specifically at that later on, but for now let's simply accept the truth that if we say we love God, the proof of that claim will be shown by our loving those He loves—those in need of a Savior.

Let me give you some good news: you don't have to particularly *like* someone to *love* him or her! Sure, it helps, but the kind of love that God has for us and that we are to show to the community is a love of care and concern. It is a love of choice: you choose to do good at the moment whether you feel like it or not. Think about your family. There are times you may not *like* your child at the moment, perhaps because of bad behavior or hurt feelings or disappointments, but you still feed, care for, and otherwise show love. Even your discipline, if done in the right spirit and for the right reasons, is a sign of love.

Do we like the people in our community? I hope we can cultivate that, but we can love them anyway! Pray today, asking God to show you by your love for others if you really love *Him*.

## I LOVE MY COMMUNITY! A Transformed Community

***All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money... and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.*** (Acts 4.32-35)

Marvel at the description above. It is not unique to Jerusalem. We see such transformation everywhere the gospel was planted and blossomed. There is never a community, I don't think, where each person decided to follow Jesus. After all, He said himself, "Few are those who find it." But a community can be transformed when enough people place faith in Jesus and begin to live out that faith.

In the book of Acts, we see that these believers were "highly regarded" by the people. In her early history, we see the church taking care of their own in extraordinary ways, as indicated in the passage above, and showing love and concern for outsiders so that they would want to join this band of followers of Jesus. Communities were transformed as people began to put the teachings of Jesus into practice through the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Whether in sitting by the bedside of the sick, offering compassion and prayer, or establishing hospitals in cities across the world, the church has impacted individuals and communities by her commitment to the way of Jesus, who said, "It is better to give than to receive."

What could our community look like if we are able to learn anew how to love our community in this day and age? How might the community be transformed? Might we see churches once more filled with vibrant worshippers week after week? Could we see burdened people finding rest? Would people have a new vision of what life is really like and delight in learning God's plan for everything from sharing Christ to handling finances to correctly handling the word of God? What can you imagine might happen if all the Christians in our community, all the churches concentrated on loving our community with the love of God?

We might think that we are too small and insignificant to make much of a difference. That's for Jesus to decide. He told a church in Revelation that in spite of their weakness, he would place before them an open door that no one could shut. Someone has asked, "How do you eat an elephant?" The answer? "One bite at a time." Or as a pastor once said to me: "Think big. Start small. Move with the moved." As God moves us in our hearts, we can move forward in our community a step at a time.

What might God be saying to you? To us? Let's listen for his voice!

## I LOVE MY COMMUNITY! I Will Serve My Community

*Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.*  
(1 Peter 4.10-11)

Earlier, we highlighted Jesus' words, "If you love me, you will obey what I command." While our greatest purpose is to love God, Jesus also puts a premium on serving. We demonstrate our love through obedience, and Jesus not only teaches us to serve but sets the example: "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Yes, if we love God, we will obey Him. In a similar vein, if we love our community, we will serve our community. We are each to use our gifts to serve others, being faithful with God's gifts, using the strength that he provides. Often times, our gifts must be combined with the gifts of others so that the ministry can be most effective and God can be glorified in the eyes of others.

Today, let's do some holy brainstorming. Give some real thought, and jot down some of your conclusions, remembering them for yourself and for sharing them with others appropriately...

**What are some of the gifts God has given you?** (Yes, His word says each believer has gifts, so don't be shy. If you need help, ask others what they think you do well. And since this is hard for so many, take the step to go ahead and tell others the giftedness you see in them...) Jot down some of your gifts...

**How can you use your gifts in the day to day of life?** (Many forms of service to the community are best when well planned, but often God sends us opportunities in the day to day of life, and we are called to "make the most of every opportunity.")

**What are some needs you see in our community?**

**What are ways that you could be involved in meeting those needs?**

**What are some needs your Life Group** (or other ministry group) **could meet together?** Who do you need to talk to about these?

**What are some needs that perhaps could be addressed by the entire church?** With whom could you share this idea?

Not every opportunity we discover is a call, but God wants us to serve our community, and we begin by doing inventory and then asking His guidance to show us what we can do most effectively in His name...

## I LOVE MYSELF! *Should I Really Love Myself?*

***Love your neighbor as yourself.***

*(Mark 12.31)*

In these **40 Days of Love**, we have made several declarations so far:

"I love God!" "I love my church!" "I love my community!"

But... "I love *myself*? Should I really love myself? I thought the self was full of sin... I thought that selfishness was the epitome of sin... I have been trying my whole Christian life to *deny* myself and follow Jesus... now you tell me that I am supposed to *love* myself?"

These are such good questions, and I am so glad they came to your mind. We have to walk a finely balanced line when we talk about loving ourselves. It is true that much of the sickness of sin is played out in selfishness and that we are told to "do nothing out of selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves" (Philippians 2.3 NASB). So often the Bible tells us, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." And we often mistake self-love for selfishness.

But they are not the same.

Proper self-love, which we will look at in more detail later, is what God wants *from* us and *for* us. How do we know this? It's simple. It's included in the second of the two greatest commandments, but we often miss it because the primary emphasis is elsewhere. Jesus, quoting from the Law of Moses, said the second most important command is to "love your neighbor *as yourself*."

Do you notice the standard? Love your neighbor as you love yourself. If you don't love yourself very much, then you don't have to love others very much! That is obviously not God's intent. He is giving us a high standard for loving our neighbors—love them as much as you love yourself! Paul helps us understand it in Ephesians 5, though his emphasis there is husbands loving their wives as themselves and as Christ loves the church. He more specifically speaks of the way we take care of our bodies as part of self-love: "After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church..."

Self-love is about taking care of our bodies physically and nurturing our souls spiritually. It's not about being selfish, prideful, or arrogant. It is perfectly consistent with being humble. It is about appreciating who God has made us to be and growing into that potential.

Some of us needed to ask, as we did today, "Should I love myself?" Yes, you should, God says. For many others of us, the question is different when we see our many flaws: "*Can* I love myself?" Let's look at that next time. Right now, ask God to begin to help you love yourself properly so you can love your neighbors the way He intends.

## **I LOVE MYSELF!**

### **Can I Really Love Myself?**

***For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.*** (Psalm 139.13-14)

Many of us—almost all of us—struggle with our self-image. It may have something to do with the way we look in this very visual, airbrushed world where the human body is practically worshiped. We may feel that we are too fat or too thin, too tall or too short. We may not like the color of our hair—or the fact that we don't have as much hair as we once did! It may be more of our physical accomplishments—we feel deficient because someone else is a more accomplished athlete or musician or student or speaker. Often, our sense of failure comes more from our attitudes and our behavior. We just don't like the way we have thought or acted. We don't like the way we seem to give in to sin over and over.

So, the question goes beyond, “*Should I love myself?*” and goes to the heart of the self-esteem question: “*Can I love myself?*”

Stop and consider: what do you *not* like about yourself? Are these things that can be changed? Should they be changed? Do you concentrate more on outer beauty or inward character? If you could make some of these changes, would you automatically like yourself more? Would your difficulty with self-love be overcome?

Now, I want you to think about five people that you love. Name them to yourself—yes, right now. (I'm waiting.) Have you got them in mind?

I guess since you love them, they are all perfect, right? What? Not all five are perfect? Hmm. Okay, then which ones *are* perfect?

Are you kidding me? *None* of them are perfect? But isn't that your standard for liking and loving someone? No? Then why do you insist on that standard for loving yourself? Can't you like yourself and love yourself while you are a work in progress?

Look at our Scripture for today again. David knows his flaws (see Psalm 51 if you don't believe it), but he believes that he is “fearfully and wonderfully made.” He accepts himself as made by God. So should you.

Perfection is not required for you to be loved by others or to love yourself. It's not even a requirement for you to be loved by God. Jesus was sent to die for us “while we were still sinners.”

Do you believe the Bible? Really? Then you must believe that you are fearfully and wonderfully made. Someone has rightly said, “I know I am lovable—God don't make no junk!”

You are not perfect, but you are loved by God, you are loved by others, and you can love yourself. Let's delve further into that tomorrow. At this moment, pause and thank God that He considers you so wonderful!



## I LOVE MYSELF! What Is Proper Self Love?

***For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.***  
(Romans 12.3)

In the verse above, we often focus on the words, “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought,” and miss the balance of “rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.” You see, Paul could just as easily have begun this verse, “Do not think of yourself *more lowly* than you ought...” Why, then, did he say it this way? Two things were probably at work. First, as humans, we *do* in general have a tendency way too often to be selfish and prideful. We all want our own way. Second, Paul was writing to the church in Rome, the capital city of the empire, and they likely struggled even more with this.

Proper self-love includes knowing that God made us wonderfully, as we noted yesterday. We love ourselves just because. We take care of ourselves. We nurture ourselves. We allow God to “restore our souls” daily as we live in this often difficult world. We go to Jesus with our needs, casting our cares on Him and finding rest in Him.

But self-love also comes as we make a sober self-assessment of who we are. It’s just as wrong to feel more lowly about ourselves as too highly. Proper love for self acknowledges and appreciates our own strengths without ignoring or denying our foibles and sins.

It is hard to get past our own points of view and biases, but one writer made the point based on this verse that a painter should be able to view his own painting in a gallery with others and matter-of-factly judge it as better than some and not as good as others simply because it *was* and with no sense of pride or jealousy regarding the other painters and paintings. He is able to soberly assess his painting just as he soberly assesses the others based on his training and expertise.

Similarly, God wants us to appreciate the gifts, the talents, and the growth we make in life. He wants us to love who we are and who we are becoming. He doesn’t want us to put others down to make ourselves look better, nor does He want us to feel devalued because the gifts of others surpass our own. We are not in competition with others to feel good about ourselves. We should not compare ourselves with others. If anything, we can compare who we *are* to who we *could be*, using that comparison as a motivator to make continual progress.

Do you love yourself? Love yourself for who God made you and for the simple fact that you belong to Him. Beyond that, learn to treasure the progress you are making as you grow in Him. Think on these things...

## I LOVE MYSELF! What Is Improper Self Love?

***Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*** (Philippians 2.3-4)

While the last few days we have been advocating that we should have a healthy self-love, since we are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, we certainly want to maintain the proper balance. Since our Lord teaches us to be humble, we sometimes can fall into the error of self-loathing rather than self-loving. Yet, we need to remember that there is a ditch on both sides of the road. Many of the teachings of our Lord have dangers when taking an extreme position on either side. We err, as we have seen, when we fail to have proper self-love. But we likewise err when we don't truly understand God's idea of proper self-esteem or proper self-love and move into selfishness. And it must be admitted that this is the error that so much of the world falls into most of the time.

That's why Paul said in Romans 12, "don't think more highly of yourself than you ought," and why he says in the passage above, "do nothing out of selfish ambition." It's why Jesus taught us that greatness in the kingdom is much different from greatness in the world. In the world, greatness is power and authority; in God's kingdom, greatness is humility and service.

Improper self-love elevates your own desires above those of everyone else. Improper self-love is always looking out for "number one" to the exclusion of others. Improper self-love is manipulating others to get your way. Improper self-love is doing unto others so they will do something for you. Improper self-love is always putting yourself first and doing something for others only when it is convenient. Improper self-love shows up when all your prayers center on what you want and how you want things to turn out for you. You get the idea.

Paul is being very practical in his advice in the passage above. He knows the struggle to get beyond ourselves is powerful. That's why he says, "Consider others better than yourselves." They are not better; but if you *consider* them better, you are more likely to think of ways to serve them. We naturally look after our own interests. Paul says, essentially, when you love your neighbor as yourself, you look after his interests, too. If you saw a pipe burst in your neighbor's yard, you think, "I would take care of that if it was in my yard. I should make sure someone over there knows." Loving others as self means looking out for each other.

So here is the balance: Don't think too highly of yourself. Don't think too lowly, either. Think just right! Love yourself. Take care of yourself. And then love your neighbor that way, too. How can you do that today?

## I LOVE MY ENEMIES? Why Would I Do That?

***Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."***

*(Matthew 5.43-48)*

"You're taking this a bit far, aren't you? 'I love God.' 'I love my church.' 'I love my community.' Even 'I love myself.' I can get on board with all of these. But 'I love my enemies'? What does that even mean, realistically? Why would I even do that? Jesus often exaggerated to make points. How do we know He wasn't doing that here?"

Honest thoughts and good questions. Let's start with the obvious question: Who do you consider your enemies? Loving your enemies is probably a rather meaningless exercise if we think of little more than enemies of our nation at any time in history. We rarely have the opportunity to show love or hate other than to spout off our opinions about whether certain groups of people should be accepted or rejected in our midst or what we should do in response to what they do to us.

While surely included, Jesus seems to be talking more about those we come into contact with on a more regular basis in our personal lives. His listeners probably thought about Roman soldiers in Israel, tax collectors taking their money, Samaritans they might see as they traveled back and forth from Galilee to Jerusalem, business people who were taking advantage of them, and simply those in the community that they didn't like and didn't get along with! And here's the deal: *Jesus meant it.*

Why? Why would He tell us to love our enemies? Two main reasons are given: 1) Because God does, and 2) It proves your faith. Think about it:

You were God's enemy. He loved you enough to send Jesus to live and die and be raised for you. But He shows love for enemies every day. Sun doesn't just shine on God's friends. He sends it to His enemies, too. Rain doesn't just fall on the crops of those who love Him. Rain also is sent to the crops of those who are unjust. God loves His enemies. Be like God.

God came to transform us. He says we are to be "perfect" or complete, like God. If we love only those who love us, big deal! Evil people love their own! But when you love an enemy, it is a potent sign that God is really at work, and it can soften the hardest of hearts. God has proven that to you; He wants to use you to show others, too, as a witness to them. Who might you consider an "enemy"? Identify some who might be thought of in some ways on some days to be "enemies." Pray for them.

## I LOVE MY ENEMIES? How Do I Do That?

***Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.... Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*** (Romans 12.14,17-21)

Yesterday you were asked to think of those from everyday life who might be considered "enemies," at least from time to time. This may include people you just don't always get along with or whose opinions are different from your own. Perhaps you have learned to simply ignore them or stay out of their way. Maybe you leave them alone when you can, but when they come at you, you give it right back to them. Now, for some on the periphery of your life, you may not have the time or opportunity to do much about, but for those who are constantly in the traffic patterns of your life, God says there is a better way than ignoring those "enemies." That better way is to love them. I'm not talking so much about trying to engender a warm, syrupy feeling toward them; I'm talking about tangibly showing care and compassion and seeking their good.

How do we do that? The passage above gives some good advice of how to demonstrate love. It tells us things to do and not to do. Meditate on these regarding your day-to-day "enemies." Seek to bless them. Do a good deed. Say something nice when you are able. Don't curse them. In other words, don't wish evil on them or call them names or speak badly about them. When they treat you poorly, don't reciprocate. That just amps up the bad feelings on both sides. You are the more mature, so act like it! Bear with them as much as you can. Pour out your heart to God about them, asking for wisdom and trusting Him to avenge their treatment of you. It's His job, He says. Pray that God would touch their hearts. We may actually begin to feel compassion when we pray for those who mistreat us. We may have pity that their lives must be so miserable that they go around hurting others and putting them down, perhaps to make them feel better about their own failed lives!

Hopefully, putting these commands into practice will ultimately make them feel ashamed. While there is no guarantee, it will often happen, and it is the right thing to do. Are there exceptions? I am sure there are. Some ill treatment is terrible abuse and must be dealt with. We humbly ask God to give us wisdom and seek the counsel of trusted friends.

Look again at the last line of our passage: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." That's why we love our enemies! We will not let them drag us down to evil. Pray about these things right now...

## I LOVE MY ENEMIES! Turning Enemies into Friends

***Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”***  
*(Matthew 5.9)*

As we think more deeply about why God tells us to love our enemies, we must conclude that it is more than simply a matter of obedience, as important as that is. We have said that we are being like God as we love our enemies, for He demonstrated His love for us in that “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5.8). He showed love to us when we were His enemies. Likewise, our willingness to love our enemies shows the authenticity of our faith, which centers on love for God and others. Anyone can love those who love him. We show we belong to God and have His Spirit when we can have this magnanimous love for even those who persecute or mistreat us.

But the long-term purpose in loving our enemies is the hope of turning them into our friends—and into friends of God if they don’t know him.

We can often give up too easily on those with whom we have conflict. Sometimes we even play silly mental games with ourselves when we think of Jesus’ command to love enemies: “He is not really what I would call an *enemy*. We just don’t hit it off.” We think that if we don’t categorize them as our enemies, we aren’t under the compulsion to love them. Hey—if we are called to love our enemies, certainly we are to love those “neighbors” who don’t quite reach that standard as well!

Even if you never develop what you would consider close friendships, loving our enemies is a way to make peace. And reread the passage above to see what Jesus said about peacemakers.

Back when I was in seminary, I had the opportunity to put this into practice. I had just begun to date Cindy, and she had a roommate that for some inexplicable reason didn’t like me at all. (Yes, I know it is hard to believe; there actually were some other issues, but that’s a longer story!) I was meditating on the passage we looked at yesterday that said we should “bless those who persecute” us. While “persecution” might have been too harsh a word, I began to pray that God would allow me to bless this roommate in some way. A couple of weeks later, as I was visiting in their apartment, this roommate left to go to work. She was back an instant later, saying that she had a flat tire. Oh—and it was *pouring down rain*! I smiled, thinking to myself, “God, you sure have a sense of humor, but I am going to do it, because this is a direct answer to my prayer.” Aloud I said, “I’ll go out and change it for you.”

Well, she couldn’t believe it, and I will have to say that this was one of those “best case scenarios.” Her attitude changed immediately, and we made peace because of obedience to Jesus. Are you willing to ask God to give you the opportunity to bless an “enemy”? Talk to Him about it now...

## THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE

### *Everything Is Nothing Without Love*

*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.*

(1 Corinthians 13.1-3)

Have you really stopped to consider what the apostle Paul is trying to get across in the verses above? He has been writing a long letter to a church that has a lot of problems. One of the major problems was a misunderstanding and a misuse of spiritual gifts. These gifts, designed to build up the body of Christ (the church) and bring unity, instead were a source of division! Apparently, members were arguing over which of the gifts were the “better” ones, and they thought if you had one of these “better” gifts, it was a sign of spiritual maturity. (I’ll give you a hint: most people thought their own gifts were the best and signs of maturity.)

Paul pleads with them in chapters 12-14 to understand that spiritual gifts are given as needed in the body, not as rewards for spiritual maturity. And just because one had one of the more flashy or noticeable or supernatural gifts doesn’t make it more needful or more important than the more “behind the scenes” gifts.

In the midst of this section, he tells them a more sure sign of spiritual maturity: *love*. That’s right, love. Paul says, “I can have the supernatural gift to speak in languages I haven’t studied... I can have such a gift of understanding and sharing God’s word that I know the depths of the mysteries of God... I can have so much faith that I can actually move a mountain by simply believing... I can give all my money to the poor and die a martyr’s death in the fire...—these are all pretty impressive, aren’t they?—but if they are not practiced in the Christian grace of love, each of these things is *meaningless*.”

Let that sink in for a few moments. Meditate of the verses above again.

Paul is getting to the heart of the issue, and we should know that the heart is the seat of love. **40 Days of Love** may not sound so special to you. You may not find this series of daily devotionals very “powerful” or “deep.” And my own writing about it may leave much to be desired. But love itself is what it is all about. The Greatest Commandments are all about love. And in these verses today, Paul is giving us a breathtaking truth, hoping we will receive it and understand it: *Everything else is nothing without love*.

Our degrees, our accomplishments, our giving, our performances—without love, they mean nothing and profit us nothing of real value.

It’s true: the greatest of these is love. Meditate on what that means...

## THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE

### Is It Really Love? (Part 1)

***Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.***

*(1 John 4.8)*

We use the word all the time: *love!* We love people. We love food. We love ideas. We love conveniences. We love pets. We love technology. We love that television show. We love, love, love! At least, we say we do.

Is it really love?

You may think it's a little late—we are on Day 37 of 40—to be giving a working definition of love, but it may be just the right time to focus on what we really mean by love. For some, love is an emotion. It's something you feel. That's why talk of loving enemies sounds like such nonsense. That's why a command to love God and others seems so out of place. We may ask, "How can you command a feeling?"

Many—maybe most—words have a breadth of meaning. We have a sense of what they mean based on how they are used in a sentence or paragraph. Likewise, our word *love* communicates many different things to different people in different contexts. Because of that, other languages might have several different words that all might be correctly translated into English as *love*. In the Greek language at the time the New Testament (NT) was written, for instance, there were four or five unique words that could all be translated legitimately as *love* in English, and three of those are in the NT: *storge* is a love of belonging, as a parent for a child, which is found a handful of times in the NT; *philia* (and *philadelphia*) speak of warm affection, a brotherly love, which is used often; and *agape* is the primary word we see when the New Testament speaks of God's love for us, our love for God, and our unique love for one another. This word is also found throughout the NT. Since it didn't have many other connotations, Christians "adopted" *agape* as its own unique descriptor of God's kind of love and gave it a rich definition. (By the way, another Greek word that would be translated as *love* in English is *eros*, which signifies the love between a man and woman. *Eros* was the Greek counterpart to the Roman *Cupid* in their pantheon of gods, if that gives you a better picture. This word is not used in the NT.)

The way *agape* is used in the Bible, it is clear this love is different from simple emotion—a strong feeling of affection or attraction. Unlike some of our kinds of "love," God's kind of love is unconditional. He loves us no matter what—even when we disappoint Him. It is a love of commitment that stays steady and always seeks the best for the object of love. It is a love of action—what we *choose* to do. That's why it can be commanded, and that's how we can even love enemies. In the next couple of days, we will look more at the characteristics of this love. For now, meditate on your own understanding of God's kind of love...

## THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE

### Is It Really Love? (Part 2)

***Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.***  
(1 Corinthians 13.4-5)

Yesterday we began asking the question about our love for God and one another, “Is it really love?” And the answer depends on what kind of love we are talking about. The highest and greatest love is signified in the New Testament by the Greek word *agape*. This is the true standard of Christian love. It is the kind of love displayed for us in God sacrificing His Son that we might be forgiven of sins and receive eternal life.

We said yesterday that this love is a love that is demonstrated. We recall yet again the truth of Scripture: “God demonstrated his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5.8). Since this love is something we *do* and a way we *act*, it can be commanded. And that lets us know it is more than an emotion.

But that is not to say that emotion is absent from God’s love. We often feel the warmth of love as we experience the love of God and others for us and as we express love to Him and others. It’s just that emotions are not required to practice God’s kind of love. We are thankful when they are attached, but out of our commitment to the Lordship of Jesus, we practice love even when the feelings are absent.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul gives an expanded definition of God’s kind of love. Let’s note some of them today from our passage above.

***Love is patient.*** It is willing to wait. Do you want to know if you really love someone with God’s kind of love? Well, are you patient?

***Love is kind.*** It looks for ways to help and tries to communicate care with words, tone, and posture that go along with actions. Are you kind?

***Love is not proud.*** How many times does our pride get in the way of saying “I was wrong” or “I’m sorry”? (Especially if we feel the other person was more “wrong” than we were!) If it’s really love, we must learn to practice humility.

***Love is not rude.*** Do we sometimes say the “right” words—so we can hide behind them—but say them rudely and sarcastically so that the meaning is the opposite of the words themselves?

***Love is not self-seeking.*** Love seeks what it can give, not what it can get.

***Love is not easily angered.*** How short is your fuse?

***Love keeps no record of wrongs.*** Do you find yourself, when in a “discussion” with someone else, bringing up past wrongs in an effort to turn the tide and score points? Didn’t you forgive? Is it really love?

Are your toes bruised? Mine are just from writing this. And we are not through! But enough for today. Contemplate your life: Is it really love?



## THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE Is It Really Love? (Part 3)

***Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.***

*(1 Corinthians 13.6-8)*

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul continues above with his descriptive definition of the *agape*’ love—God’s kind of love, His unconditional love that can be shown with or without accompanying feelings. Look at some of these additional characteristics of love. They help us evaluate if our love is God’s kind of love—the kind He shows to us and the kind He is wanting to build into us through His Spirit and His word.

*Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.* Do you seek to understand true motives—those of yourself and others? Are you always seeking God’s best and God’s truth rather than what seems easy or convenient at the moment?

*Love always protects.* Are you protecting or hurting those you love?

*Love always trusts, always hopes...* Are you showing trust to those you love? Are you living in ways you can be trusted? Have you given up on love, or do you continue to hold out hope for the future?

*Love always perseveres. Love never fails.* It is easy to give up on people. It’s easy to give up on God. True love doesn’t treat God or others as disposables—using them for a while before tossing them aside. Love hangs on. Love doesn’t give up. Love never, ever fails.

We have only scratched the surface. Truly meditate on these passages of Scripture and others about love. Use these to evaluate your own life. Is it really love that you have? More precisely, is it really God’s kind of love?

I mentioned earlier that God’s kind of love can be practiced with or without what we consider the “warm and fuzzy” feelings that we so often associate with love. Many struggle with this idea. They wonder if they are not being hypocrites when they *show* love to others if they don’t *feel* any “love” toward them. That’s a good question. Let me tell you the way I see it.

Imagine a scene in heaven. God and one of his angels are looking down on earth. They are watching you being patient and kind with someone you don’t really like a lot, helping him even though you could be doing something else, something you might rather be doing. I can imagine God pointing you out to the angel, saying, “Do you see the way that he is showing love to that other person?” “Yes, Lord; it is wonderful!” the angel might reply. “You know something? He doesn’t even like him! He is showing love for only one reason: because I asked him to!” Marvelous!

It is easy to show love to lovable people. The test of God’s kind of love is how we treat those who aren’t lovable to us. Think about those you love. Do you love out of your own self—or is it really God’s kind of love?

## THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE

### Yes, the Greatest of These Is Love

***And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*** (1 Corinthians 13.13)

What is the defining characteristic of the believer in Jesus?

Let me encourage you to read all of 1 Corinthians 13. While we have looked at most of it the last few days, it would be good for you to read it all at one time. It's short; take a moment to do that right now...

So, now that you have reread it, is there any doubt as to the defining characteristic of the believer in Jesus? Perhaps, though, we had better revisit what Jesus Himself said. When asked about the greatest commandment in the Law, Jesus gave two in His answer: "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. **Love** the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: '**Love** your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these" (Mark 12.29-31).

Jesus also said this: "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you **love** one another" (John 13.35).

That apostle John wrote about the preeminence of love over and over in his letter we call 1 John. This apostle is referred to as "the disciple that Jesus loved" in the gospel of John, and he was given the moniker, appropriately enough, "The Apostle of Love."

John was a pastor in Ephesus for many years in the first century. There is a tradition that is told of him teaching a group of disciples there. He met with them day after day, teaching them about Jesus and the eternal life we have through Him, teaching them to follow Him in all things. His emphasis in teaching these disciples was always love—God's love for them and their love for God and one another; the same emphasis we see in the letter of 1 John. One day one of the disciples, eager to learn more and a bit frustrated by what he considered repetition, is said to have complained, "Brother John, all you ever talk about is love. When are you going to teach us something else besides love?" The apostle John is said to have looked at this disciple with patience and kindness and replied, "There is nothing else except love... love... love."

The apostle Paul said it this way: "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

The Father loved us and sent His Son. The Son loved us and gave His life. Let us love, too! Let us say, "I love God!" But let us also say, "I love my church! I love my community! I love myself! I love even my enemies!"

Yes, it is true: the greatest of these is love. Live in love today and every day, for this is the defining characteristic of our life in Christ... forever.



## ***40 Days of Love***

Thank you for participating in ***40 Days of Love***.

Do you have any comments about your experience? Any insights to share? Any suggestions for future emphases?

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May God bless us all as we love him and one another!

Pastor Fred

