

LOVING GOD

A country preacher sold a mule to a friend, and told him the mule was trained to go when the rider said "Praise the Lord," and to stop when the rider said, "Amen." The buyer mounted the beast and commanded, "Praise the Lord," and the mule shot off like a rocket. The startled rider panicked. "Whoa!" he screamed. The mule was headed straight for a cliff, "Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!" At the last second he remembered the minister's instructions. "Amen!" he shouted, and the mule screeched to a halt right at the edge of the cliff. As the new owner peered over the precipice, he wiped his brow and sighed, "Praise the Lord."...

Words are important, especially the words we say and sing in worship. We have sung many words during this service already today. Did you mean what you sang? Today we start a new series entitled No Longer Strangers. Over the next few weeks we will be talking about why we as a church should be reaching out to our community.

Have you ever wondered why you were born? Why do you exist? God created you to love you. We exist because, out of the overflow of love in the heart of God, we were created as objects of His love. Our first purpose as individuals and as the church is to learn to love God back. One day Jesus was out with His disciples and someone asked Him, "which is the greatest commandment".

Matt 22: 35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 36 Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law? 37 Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 38 This is the first and greatest commandment."

Notice Jesus says that this is the first and greatest commandment. In other words, if you get nothing else right, make sure you get this! This is my first message as your pastor. Can I say this to you, if you never hear another word I speak for the next 20 years of sermons, make sure you listen to what we are talking about today. Our mission in life is to learn to love God back, because God loves us and created us to love Him and know Him.

This is what worship is. Worship is knowing God and loving Him back. Today worship is misunderstood. When you say the word WORSHIP most people think of singing, prayer, ritual or communion - going to church or something you do in church. But worship is more than all those things. Our first purpose in life is to worship God. It is our primary objective, our highest priority.

Romans 12:1 Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to *offer* your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God -- this is your *spiritual* act of worship.

The key word here is OFFER. Worship is all about offering ourselves to God. Why do we worship? It says here that we offer ourselves to God IN VIEW OF GOD'S MERCY. Worship is our response to God's love. God made the first move. It is up to us to respond.

What does it mean when it says offering ourselves is our "spiritual act of worship"? The word in the NIV for SPIRITUAL is LOGIKOS which means reasonable and is where the word LOGICAL comes from. In other words, worship makes sense – it is the logical response to God's love. What do we offer God. We offer Him our love. How do we do that? The verse we have already read from Matt 22:37-38 tells us how to do it.

God wants us to love Him 3 ways:

- a. God wants us to love Him thoughtfully – with our minds
- b. God wants us to love Him passionately – with our heart and soul
- c. God wants us to love Him practically – with all our strength

God created the entire universe and He created you but there are three things God does not have unless you give them to Him. He doesn't have your attention (mind) or your affection (heart) or your ability (strength) until you give them to Him.

1. Focusing our ATTENTION on God - mind

One way of expressing love to another person is by giving them your attention. We see this in God's great love for each one of us. Do you know that God is always focused on you?

Psalm 139:1 O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. 2 You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. 3 You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.

God notices everything I do and everywhere I go. He has focused his attention on us and never takes His eyes off of us. He never stops thinking about us. We do not understand how God can focus on every person all the time because we are limited. You may think, "God has so many other things to occupy His focus, why would he be interested in me." He does it because He loves you.

The greatest expression of love is often that attention. This is very convicting for me because I am not always very good at this. Just ask my wife. I think a lot of men are like this. You are sitting at home and your wife walks into the room and says "well, what do you think" and you freeze because you know the wrong answer will get you in trouble. Is she talking about her hair or new shoes or a new outfit? The right answer is "you look beautiful!"

Remember the first time you fell in love? You just couldn't get that person off your mind? You memorized everything about them.

A woman entered a Haagen-Dazs store on the Kansas City Plaza for an ice-cream cone. After making her selection, she turned and found herself face to face with Paul Newman. He was in town filming a movie. Newman's blue eyes caused her knees to buckle. She managed to pay for her cone, then left the shop, heart pounding. When she gained her composure, she realized she didn't have her cone. She went back to the store to get it and met Newman at the door. "Are you looking for your ice-cream cone?" he asked. She nodded, unable to speak. "You put it in your purse with your change." When was the last time the presence of God so captured your focus?

Worship is focusing our mind and thoughts (our attention) on God. In many religions the idea of worship is to put your mind into neutral, sort of lose your mind to the universe. However, the truth is that God wants us to worship Him thoughtfully. That takes energy. That means not just going through the motions but really thinking about what you are saying and doing. That isn't easy.

Have you ever prayed on autopilot? You pray before a meal and auto-prayer kicks in so you say "blah, blah, blah -- Amen"? If someone asked you what you just prayed, you'd have no idea. Have you ever done that in church? You find yourself mouthing the words to a song realizing that you have no idea of what you are saying. It takes energy and attention to focus on God.

Jesus called thoughtless worship "vain repetitions" (Matthew 6:7 KJV). Even biblical terms can become tired clichés from overuse and we stop thinking about the meaning. It is so much easier to offer platitudes in worship instead of making the effort to honor God with fresh words and ways.

Martin Luther had a puppy who was at the table looking for some food from his master, and watched with open mouth and motionless eyes. Luther said, "Oh, if I could only pray the way this dog watches the meal! All his thoughts are concentrated on the piece of meat. Otherwise he has no thought, wish or hope."

God wants to teach us to focus our heart and our attention on Him but that's difficult for us. Like steering a car it requires constant effort. The easiest thing to do in life for us as human beings is to lose our focus. We're not like an auto-focus camera that you just point and shoot. We have to decide to focus. We have to choose to focus on things. So how do you do that?

The first thing we can do is establish a daily time with God. Just a few minutes every day to spend with Him. It doesn't matter what time you do it. Just pick a time and place to be with God. The place you choose should have as few distractions as possible.

Matt 6:6 Find a quiet secluded place, so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense His grace. (MSG)

A second thing that you can do is to develop a constant conversation with God. The Bible tells us to pray without ceasing. People do that in a lot of different ways. One guy sets his watch to go off every 30 minutes so when it beeps, it reminds him to think about God and pray, maybe for the person he's talking to. Another every time they get into their car, they pray the first couple of minutes they are in their car as they are going somewhere. It just reminds them to focus on God throughout the day. Work out your own system.

2. Expressing our AFFECTION to God – heart

We are told to love God with our heart and soul. This means that worship engages our emotions. I know that for many this is difficult. Many grew up in religious traditions where worship was an intellectual thing and emotional expression of any kind was frowned upon. I find it so funny that people can yell and scream and get worked up at a meaningless baseball game but then come to church before the God of eternity and spend the whole time looking lifeless and asleep. I think that sometimes in the church we have sacrifice joy on the altar of reverence.

Ever heard the story of the boy and his mother who went to church. Before the service everyone was in quiet prayer. The mother reached the pew and then bowed her head. The son asked "mom, who are we hiding from?"

In many religions God is an angry tyrant that you have to appease. The trick is to avoid God and run from his wrath - you have to be afraid of God. But that's not God of the Bible. It says that God wants to have a close relationship with each one of us. He wants to be loved. When was the last time you said, "I love you" to God? This is the underlying message in the book of Hosea. Even though Gomer ran away from Hosea he still loved her. In Hosea 2:16 God says that his will is that one day we will not call Him 'master' but ISHI which means 'my husband'.

Hosea 6:6 I don't want your sacrifices -- I want your love! I don't want your offerings -- I want you to know me! (MSG)

I've been married for a few years now. How about if I walked up to my wife one day and I say, "Honey, here are some flowers for you. And I am giving you these flowers for three reasons: Point No. 1 - I am your husband. Point No. 2 - it is our anniversary. Point No. 3 - husbands are supposed to give their wives flowers on their anniversary. So here."

Wouldn't she be thrilled? I don't think so. Why? She wants me to love her passionately. She doesn't want duty. She wants desire. God doesn't want our duty. He wants our desire. God doesn't want – "Oh, okay. It's Sunday so I had better go worship." We get there and sing "Oh, I love you, God" [monotone voice]. "As a deer pants for water ..." He doesn't want ritual and religion and rules and regulations. He wants a relationship. He's passionate about it and about you!

As I mentioned, I grew up in a conservative church. People did not express emotion. No one ever lifted up their hands or anything like that. In Seminary I started attending a church that had a much freer expression of worship. Lifting my hands was difficult because of my upbringing. One day I was in worship and was standing and I had my hands up and eyes closed. I suddenly thought about an elderly woman in the church whose name was Fern. She was so crippled with arthritis that she could not walk and had only a little use of her arms which she used to control her scooter she got around in. I thought to myself, poor Fern, she cannot stand and lift her hands like I am now. I turned around and saw her in her scooter. With one hand she was making it rock forward and backward and with the other she was flicking on and off all the lights. She was using what she had to worship.

I am not saying that if you did not lift your hands today that you were not worshipping. What I am trying to say is that passion is all about throwing everything you have into something. You use everything you have as an expression of your love. As you worshipped today did you throw everything you had into it?

One of the things I love about this church is the diversity. With diversity you see different people worshipping in different ways. It is also what I loved about Kuwait. You would see a Nigerian couple doing the African shuffle. A group of Filipinos with hands high caught up in the moment. A British man standing with arms crossed looking very proper. An Indian lady standing clapping hands and smiling. It is a taste of heaven. Expressing our affection may look different to different people but the principle is this; are you ALL IN or are you holding back?

If you are not all in then what is holding you back? Again, worship is our response to God's love for us. Passion flows out of a true heartfelt understanding of God's love. If you do not love the real issue is that you do not fully comprehend (not just in your head but in your heart) how much God loves you. Worship is always a response.

1 John 4:19 We love because he first loved us.

God has said, "I love you" in a thousand different ways. He created you. He's taken care of you. God has said over and over and over to you, "I love you." His love letter to us (the Bible) is full of examples. The most important thing you can know is that God loves you and the most important thing to do in life is to love Him back. So when you get up every morning before you get out of bed, say something like this little prayer. "God, if I don't get anything else done today, at the end of this day, I want to know You a little bit better and I want to love You a little bit more."

If you do that your day was a success. No matter how bad the day went or how many plans fell apart. If at the end of the day you know God a little bit better and you love Him a little bit more then that day was a success.

How do you express your affection? A good way to start is by just saying "thank you." Start looking around at everything and start thanking God. "God, thank you for a beautiful sky today" "God, thank you for green trees." "Thank you for clean air." "Thank you that I'm still breathing." "Thank you that I woke up this morning." "Thank you that I had something to eat." You could go on and on.

3. Using our ABILITIES for God - strength

One way we declare our love for God is by using our abilities for Him. This is loving God with all your strength. God wants us to see Him with our minds and sense Him with our heart and soul but he also wants us to serve Him with our strength. One of the ways I express my love to my wife is by doing things for her. Yes she likes to hear it and yes she like to feel it, but sometimes you just need to show it. Sometimes there are chores to be done. Sometimes there are things that need to be fixed and errands to be run. These are practical things I can do to show my love. Not just with words but with action. This is part of worship.

Remember the song of Eliza Doolittle in My Fair Lady when she says "words, words, words; I am sick of words - show me!"

Col 3:23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men

Some may be thinking that if my greatest purpose in life is to get to know and love God then I should join a monastery and spend all day everyday in church.

There is nothing wrong with going to church, but you don't need to live here. You simply have to change who you're working for. Many try to compartmentalize their life thinking that worship is something that only happens on Sunday mornings in church or mid week bible study and that the rest of the week is for their secular career and social life. This is not true.

Get this one truth, because it will revolutionize your life. In life it is not what you do that matters; it is who you do it for. You give it all to God. And all of your work can be turned to worship. I don't care if you're a butcher, a baker, a candlestick maker. You can do it for God. You say, "I'm going to do this as if I'm doing it for you, God." It really doesn't matter what you do. It's Who you do it for.

Steven Curtis Chapman has a song I love called Do Everything:

Maybe your sitting in math class, Or maybe on a mission in the Congo
Or maybe your working at the office Singing along with the radio
Maybe your dining at a 5-star, Or feeding orphans in the Myanmar
Anywhere and everywhere that you are

Whatever you do It all matters So do what you do don't ever forget

To do everything you do to the glory of the One who made you, Cause He made you
To do Every little thing that you do To bring a smile to His face

And tell the story of grace With every move that you make
And every little thing you do

Rom 12:1 So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life--your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life--and place it before God as an offering.
(MSG)

Remember that the word “offer” is the essence of worship. We offer our lives to God. This includes everything we do. This isn't just in church. It happens in the ordinary, routine, mundane, things of real life where you say, “God, I'm going to do this for You” whether that is taking out the garbage or making beds or milking a cow. Everything can be turned into an act of worship if you do it with all your heart and soul as though you were working for the Lord.

The greatest temptation in life was when Satan told Jesus “Why don't you worship something else?”
The biggest temptation in life is always going to be to worship something else other than God, to give your attention, your affection and ability to something other than the Creator who made you.

The greatest mistake we as individuals and we as a church can make in life is to miss our primary purpose. So let me ask you a question, what do you think about most? What do you think about when you just let your mind drift? Whatever that is, is what you worship. Did you know that your checkbook and your date book are theological documents? Without even knowing you, if you were to show me your checkbook stubs and you were to show me your schedule, I could tell you right now what you love, because the way you spend your time and the way you spend your money shows what you love the most.

You were made to know and love God. So I challenge you to make as the No 1 goal of your life before everything else.

The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever -- Westminster Confession of Faith.

May that be our confession as well.