

What It Means To Love God Supremely

by David Bayne

As a result of studying James 2:1-13, I began to ponder anew what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves. In this portion, James is dealing with the sin of partiality among believers and especially within the gathering of believers. Acknowledging that not everyone in the church is guilty, he says: "If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin . . ." (James 2:8-9).

The more I considered what it means to love others as ourselves, the more it became clear that loving God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength is a prerequisite. In other words, the second – loving others as ourselves – cannot happen on a day by day and situation by situation basis without the first – loving God supremely. This brought me to Mark 12:28-34:

One of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, "What commandment is the foremost of all?" [29] Jesus answered, "The foremost is, 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord; [30] and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' [31] "The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." [32] The scribe said to Him, "Right, Teacher; You have truly stated that He is One, and there is no one else besides Him; [33] and to love Him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as himself, is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." [34] When Jesus saw that he had answered intelligently, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

In relation to the two commandments on love, Jesus did not speak something new, but rather something God spoke to Moses and Israel many years before. This is why the scribe knew what Jesus was talking about. Interestingly, this commandment to love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength was stated or referenced five times in the Old Testament, with all five occurring in Deuteronomy (6:4-5; 11:1; 11:13-17; 13:1-4; 19:8-10). In contrast to these five references, the command to love your neighbor as yourself is given once in Leviticus 19:17-18.

When asked to identify the most important commandment of all, Jesus put the two commandments together, with loving God coming first and loving our neighbor coming second. The reason for this order is because the second commandment rises out of the first. It finds its reason in the first. It gains its defining boundaries in the first. And it remains genuine as long as we continue loving others out of the first commandment – that is, loving others for God's sake and not our own sake or for some other lessor reason.

Why would I say that the commandment to love others as ourselves rises out of the commandment to love God supremely? There are three reasons for saying this. First, Jesus put them in this order. Second, the wording Jesus used about the first commandment (note the use of the word “all”) makes it clear the first is all consuming so that the second must find its life from the first. Third, who or what we love the most, we please the most. This means that loving God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength will have a profound effect on the way we treat others – be they those who are nearest and dearest, or those we have only just met, or those who have made themselves our enemy – because we will love them for God’s sake.

In other words, the natural outcome of loving God more than anyone and anything else in your life is living to please God more than anyone or anything else in your life, including yourself. Therefore, when you love God the most, you will love others – not on the basis of how they are treating you, or whether you feel endeared to them, or even know them, but on the basis of pleasing the One whom you love the most. Or to say it just a bit differently: if you love God more than yourself, and more than anyone or anything else in your life, then you will love others as God would have you love them – which is as you love yourself.

Now it is true that you can be self-centered and selfish and still treat others in loving ways – especially when you want something from them. However, treating others in loving ways from this mindset means your loving ways will always be limited or restricted by your selfishness. In other words, you will only treat others in loving ways as much and as far as your self-centeredness will allow. And as ought to be obvious, treating others in loving ways for your own sake is not love.

Therefore, God has made loving Him the first commandment, and loving others as ourselves the second commandment. If we keep them in their proper order, we will love God more nearly as we ought and we will love others as God wills us to love them, because we will love them for God’s sake and not some lessor, more easily corruptible motive.

With these truths fresh in our mind, let us turn our attention to what it means to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Simply stated, to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength means two things. First, it means loving Him with all our being or with all our energy or with all that we are and have. Now the emphasis on the word ‘ALL’ is not mine, but God’s. He placed it before each of the four parts of our being with which we are to love Him. Therefore, we ought to give serious consideration to the implication of this word ‘ALL’ included these four times, for it implies nothing is to be left over or can be left over for loving anything other than God. It is as if we are to love God so intentionally, so fervently, so sincerely, and with so much passion and energy that we have nothing left over for loving anyone or anything else.

And yet in spite of the word ‘ALL’ in this first commandment, the scripture makes it plain that loving our neighbor as ourselves is just as important as loving God with all our being. How can this be? The answer is both simple and clear when understood within the framework of loving God in such a way that we long to please Him in everything. Therefore, when we love God with all our being, we will love our neighbor as ourselves for God’s sake, for that is what

He wills us do. And it is in this way that we love God with all our being, yet still love our neighbor as ourselves.

Therefore, the first thing it means to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength is to love Him above everyone and everything else so that nothing stands in the way of loving God supremely.

Second, to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength means loving Him for himself, which is significantly different from loving God for our own sake. When we love God for our sake, we love Him for what He has done, is doing, or will do for us. This makes us as much – if not more – of the focus of our love as God, himself.

Now to love God for any other reason than Himself, is to love something other than God more than God. Let me demonstrate this. When I love God for what He has done and is doing for me, the focus of my love is still me. I may speak of what God has done or is doing for me in very spiritual terms. I may give Him great praise and thanks for all His benefits. It is even possible that my heart feels deep appreciation for all His doings on my behalf. Yet if that is why I love Him, then it is not Him I love. Rather, I love what He is doing for me, which makes me the primary focus of my love.

Therefore, the second thing it means to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength is to love Him for himself.

At this point you may be thinking that loving God for himself seems like religious jargon or an idea that is simply out of touch with reality. After all, it seems that we all start our Christian life coming to God because of what He has done in the cross and resurrection, and what He will do in giving us eternal life. And what about the scriptures, don't they speak at great length about what God has done, is doing, and will do for us? And besides that, is not most of our worship and admiration and exaltation of Him focused on His many and varied gifts to us?

Those things are all true. Therefore, I am not saying we are to overlook or forget about the love God has for us and continues to bestow on us. Indeed, we ought to be eternally grateful for His love, benefits, and grace toward us. Yet at the same time, we ought to focus our attention on the fact that God is worthy of being loved for himself because of His many attributes and qualities, such as His holiness, righteousness, love, essential goodness, and the fact that He is our Creator, our Lord, and our loving Father.

However, it is my experience that very few Christians love God for himself. Most of us love God for what He has done for us and what He gives us. In the right context, this is not wrong any more than it is wrong to be of grade school age, of middle school age, or of high school age. But if after growing into our adult years we continue thinking, speaking, behaving, and loving as a grade-schooler or middle schooler or even a high schooler, then we have a serious maturity problem that needs correcting. In the same way, if we continue on and on loving God for what He does for us and gives us instead of advancing toward loving Him for himself, we have a spiritual maturity problem that needs correcting.

With that being said, I want to give us as real a picture as I know to give of loving God from the first days of repentance and saving faith to the more mature years of living the Christian life.

Since we begin life as self and flesh focused beings – that is, since we begin life looking out for our own well-being and seeking our own happiness, it is only natural that we begin the Christian life loving God for what He has done for us, what He is giving us, and what He will do for us. Why? Because at this stage of our Christian life, we still love ourselves for our own sake. In other words, we do not come to salvation as mature Christians. We come as babes who are still highly influenced by our flesh, the world, and the wiles and temptations of the devil. Therefore, we come to repentance and faith in Christ still looking out for ourselves, first and foremost. Even our Christian faith has more to do with what we are going to get out of God than what He is going to get from us. And so, in the early days, months, and sometimes even years, we love God for our sake, and we seek after the things and ways of God for the sake of our welfare and happiness.

But changes begin to take place as a result of seeing the faithfulness of God in our lives over a period of time. It is in this stage that our faith grows to the point of becoming convinced that God is good and we are safe in His hands. It is in this stage that we see character traits and qualities of God that motivate and compel us to adore and worship Him for himself, that is, for that which is beyond what He does for us and gives us. In other words, our focus of love begins to change from being primarily self-oriented to being a combination of self and God oriented.

We begin to move out of this second stage when we become convinced that the only reason we disobey God is because we do not love Him, coupled with a growing, inward, zealous longing to love God as we ought. We continue moving out of the second stage and into the third as we value dying to self and denying self for God's sake, and when in true humility we realize we are nothing and He is everything. We press forward into the third stage as we kill off and put away the last of our fleshly sins – whatever they may be – and vigilantly guard our mind so that fleshly desires and unholy thoughts no longer – or at worst rarely – have their way with us. This does not mean that we have become perfect at this point, but it does mean that we have come to the place where we no longer treasure any sin in any way that might motivate us to willfully return to a once treasured sin or sins – even on rare occasions.

It is at this point in our spiritual growth that our own selfishness seems as abhorrent to us as the selfishness of others. It is here that the glory of God and the fulfilment of His will becomes a precious treasure to us. It is at this stage that we genuinely delight in searching the scriptures, meditating on God's word, praying often throughout the day, and vigilantly guarding against returning to old, sinful ways. And it is here that being holy because God is holy, and being holy as God is holy is a driving motivation within us.

As we grow in these things, we discover that we are drawing near to God as never before, and He is drawing near to us in ways we never before imagined. In this new found intimacy with God, we discover we have great adoration for God, a deeply moving sensitivity to the heart and mind of God, and a never before experienced joy in our ongoing fellowship and communing with God. All this strengthens and affirms that we love God for himself.

Now let me be clear about this. Loving God for himself does not mean we no longer see or appreciate or give thanks for what God has done and is doing for us. The truth is, we cannot be in love with God without seeing His great love for us demonstrated in various and numerous ways day by day, and year after year. We cannot see ourselves as we truly are without weeping over the undeserved gift of God's grace and mercy shown to us over and over again. We cannot look back at our past without thanking God, repeatedly, for not giving up on us or abandoning us to our foolishness and sinful ways. We cannot hope in heaven without longing for the changes that will free us eternally from our flesh with its evil desires. And we cannot see, hear, smell, touch, and taste the beauty of our world without eagerly praising Him for such a thoughtful, generous gift.

And yet, in spite of seeing and being deeply grateful for all that God has done and is doing, that is no longer the basis for our love. Why? Because in this third stage, selfishness is mostly dead, our flesh is primarily subdued, humility is strong, and we are no longer important because God has become everything to us.

We sing the song, YOU ARE MY ALL IN ALL. In this third stage, you will not only sing this song, you will experientially know the truth of these words and the sweetness of communing with the One who is your All in ALL.

If you do not yet love God for himself, may you move on from lessor things to greater maturity so that you may be a child who loves his Loving Father for himself.

In summary, it seems most, if not all of us begin the Christian life loving God for what He has done, is doing, and will do for us. Though this is acceptable, it is not desirable for us to remain in this condition. Our goal as Christians is to love God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength, and in so doing, come to love God for himself. May we press on toward this goal, doing those things that are necessary to arrive at this goal in our lifetime.