

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

By Eric Howell

Matthew 22:34-46

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Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. And love your neighbor as yourself. This is one of those nice passages in the Bible. Winnie the Pooh might read it and say, "That is a pleasant sort of talking." It is. Love God with everything you've got. Love other people as much as you love yourself. Live like this and you'll be all right.

That is a pleasant sort of thing. Most religions think so, too. In most religious and philosophical traditions there are at least some elements of this sort of saying. Love that which is bigger than you. Love those who are near you. This is the kind of thing that convinces people that all religions are basically the same. Religion is about getting you in touch with something deeper and bigger than yourself and it's about treating other people well. It has a universal appeal.

The story goes that the Roman emperor read this sort of saying of Jesus in the early third century. He was not a follower of Jesus, but he was so impressed by the saying that he had it set in gold and written on his chamber wall. So in gold in the emperor's room was the saying, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." That's how it became the Golden Rule. So this is universally acceptable stuff.

Most of us are pretty familiar and happy with the idea that God loves and loves us. It's all through the Bible. "God so loved the world." "God is love." "Faith hope and love remain, . . . love." God loves. God is love. Nice. I get that. We learned that when we were kids, "Jesus loves me, this I know." So I'm humbled and comfortable confessing that God loves me so much that God desired a relationship with me and extended me grace and mercy to let a sinner like me become one with God and be invited on His journey to bring redemption to the whole world. No problem with any of that.

But I must confess that I feel a bit uncomfortable saying, "I love God" with much confidence. And I know I should embrace it. There is a rich biblical and interpretive tradition of expressing love to God in ways that are deep, passionate, and intimate. The Song of Solomon in the Old Testament is this passionate love poetry. It's so steamy that back in the day, boys were not allowed to read it until they turned 13. Whether it's simply a poem about human love or an allegory of love for God, it's hot stuff. But I suppose I just don't feel natural thinking about God this way. A psychologist would note that we didn't say I love you a lot in my house growing up. It was assumed, but not something we slobbered on and on about. And recently it seems like this way of expressing love for God is all you hear about. This very real biblical tradition has been romanticized by contemporary Christian songs that have altered what a generation believes Christianity is all about. Most of what has passed as love for God is sappy Christian pop songs that are just romantic odes in which the name "God" or "Jesus" is substituted for the girl as the object of affection. Now I happen to like quite a bit of contemporary Christian music, but I think some of these must have been regular love songs so vapid that no one in the regular music industry would sing them. So the writer went back and scratched out "baby," "honey," "sweetie," penciled in Jesus and shipped it to the Christian music industry where someone figured that hoards of sappy Christians would consume it. There's one song out that is particularly gross to me. The guy is

slobbering all over himself to wail, “you are a miracle to me, I feel you in the ocean tide; I feel you in the sunset in my eyes. You are the wind in my hair, the heartbeat in my chest, you are the waves on my shore.” Is he talking about the creator of the universe or his girlfriend? When listening to this drivel I imagine what the music video might be like: him and Jesus riding horseback along the beach at sunset, their hair blowing in the wind? It’s icky to me. And I don’t really think it’s what Jesus had in mind. This cathartic sappy version of Christianity is aimed right at the heartstrings, and turns a biblical “relationship with Jesus” into a “*relationship with Jesus*,” if you know what I mean.

Jesus’ answer to the question he was posed was to quote part of Deuteronomy 6, “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and might.” Everyone who heard him would have recognized that Jesus was quoting the Shema, a prayer that every Jew said when he woke up and when he went to sleep, twice a day, every day. If you are going to love God, you love God on God’s terms, not ours. God’s love is distinguishable from much of what we call love. To love God is to love the one who defines love. Who is love. When John’s gospel says that “God so loved the world,” it’s not talking about the quantity of God’s love. That doesn’t mean “God’s romantic heart was so full.” It’s talking about the character of God’s love. God loved the world in such a way that He sent his only son.

God’s love for us is completely unmerited, completely undeserved. It is a gift called grace.

God’s love for us is steadfast. There is nothing we can do that can keep God from loving us. Even should we choose to spend eternity separated from God, there is no reason to suggest that then God would stop loving us. (Romans 8)

God’s love is suffering love. From in the beginning onward, God’s love is not from a remote distance but God’s love draws God into the fabric of human life. Scripture throughout attests to God’s willingness to suffer with, and indeed suffer for, broken humanity.

God’s love knows no bounds. In one story, Jesus’ Samaritan is truly good precisely because he crosses boundaries that the good people would not cross. God’s love crosses to those who are different, those who are distraught, even those who are enemies.

So God’s love is unmerited, steadfast, suffering and boundless. Add to that all the beautiful descriptions of love in 1 Corinthians 13, “love is patient and kind . . .” Do you love God like that?

I just don’t know that anything I direct to God is sufficient to be considered love. It feels a bit like drawing a Crayola picture as a gift for Monet and then claiming to be an artist, or playing chopsticks for Mozart and calling myself a pianist. So maybe these are all reasons why I feel uncomfortable with it. But maybe it’s because I’m convicted by this.

When considered like this, loving God as a commandment seems either like a sappy sentiment or an inescapable trap. We are commanded to fulfill an impossible assignment.

And then add to the sense of inability to love God the way God is meant to be loved, the injunction in 1 John that anyone who says he loves God and does not love his brothers and sisters is, get ready for this, a liar.

But if we are serious about loving God fully and completely in the way we were created to love God, maybe this not an additional unbearable burden, but the starting place for a life

characterized and enriched by love. We can't see God to love God, but we can see one another. So let us love one another as an act of love for God and by that learn to love God.

If we struggle to get our arms around the first great commandment, let us be committed to fulfilling the second and let God do the work within us toward the first.

Let us love one another with a love that is unmerited. Show love to someone who doesn't "deserve it" and can't give you anything in return.

Steadfast. Love someone who is hard to love and commit to loving them through whatever happens or has happened.

Suffering. Love someone who is hurting. And who may have hurt you.

Boundless. Love someone with no strings, with no limits. Just love someone.

Maybe today you are just that person who says, "I want to love like that, but what I really need the most is just to be loved. I can't give anything back; I don't deserve it. I might hurt you. I might disappoint you. But I need love. I'm desperate to be loved to the core of my soul." Friend, you are welcome here. You are loved here. You are loved here by a God we can't see, and by the people around you whom you can see and who see you. You have come to a place where your heart can start getting mended, where your mind can be renewed, where your soul can be nurtured.

Jesus really lived this out. Just a few days after talking about God's love he walked God's love with a cross on his back.

In just a moment we will give and receive communion. This is not about how much or whether you love God. It's not about how good you are or whether you have fulfilled the commandments. It's about God's love for you. It's a gift and forms us.

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

In the giving and receiving of communion, we are reminded of our mutual commitment to one another and to the Lord. And by taking within us the very tangible reminders of the body and blood of Christ, we become the sort of people who, by receiving love, are set free to give it to one another and the world. We love because He first loved us. That it may be said of us, "These are people of faith, hope, and love. And the greatest is love."