

Loving God and All Else Appropriately

We have talked about loving God ultimately. We have considered how we can love others and other things for God's sake. In other words, we have considered the *why* of loving God, the *what* of loving God, the *when* and *where* of loving God. What we haven't considered is the *how*, or the way of loving God. What does love for God look like?

There are many different opinions, and not a lot of clarity. In some ways, this is one of the biggest controversies of our day. Not too long ago, I was forwarded a link online to a rather outrageous example of the problem. It involved a worship leader who had everyone take off their socks as the band began to play, wave them over their heads, singing, you spin me right-round, Jesus, right-round. Most of those who consider themselves conservatives will express some kind of outrage. They know it is wrong, but they cannot really put their finger on it. They can't find a Bible verse to condemn that exact practice. And those who produce that outrageous stuff turn around and say 'where does it say in the Bible we can't do this?' And the issue that Christians cannot avoid is the matter of appropriateness. Is there is an appropriate way to love God, and an inappropriate way?

In recent years, we've seen a kind of polarisation between groups which has made it even harder for people to judge this question. On the one hand, we have groups who do not want to talk about the issue of appropriate affections for God, because they can't find a proof text to discuss the matter. Emotion is frowned upon. This side of Christianity today tells us that a sound, biblical, expositional theology by itself will solve our problems, because it will shape all else. Such people think the affections are quite dispensable and cosmetic, and that the faith of our fathers sails in the steel ship HMS Doctrine.

The other extreme in Christianity are groups who prize emotion, of any kind for its own sake. They appeal to the mere appetites and passions of man through various techniques: pseudo-spiritual experiences, mood-music, dynamic and entertaining presentations (including the preaching). The passions are ignited, it feels 'real', 'exciting', 'passionate', but it is a sad substitute – like giving someone a pulse-raising drug to make them feel that life isn't boring. As long as there is some form or emotion, they feel superior to the 'dead' church down the road. For them, as long as the boat's motor is revving, nothing much else matters.

And so, with these kinds of extremes, we're afraid to even ask the question of appropriate love. One group says emotions are a non-issue, because the Bible doesn't seem to say anything, the other group wants them no matter what they look like.

This is not a side issue or a peripheral matter. The *way* we love God, *how* we love God is not a matter of preference, but ultimately a matter of truth.

Charles Hodge, addressing students at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1829, said, "Whenever a change occurs in the religious opinions of a community, it is always preceded by a change in their religious feelings. The natural expression of the feelings of true piety, is the doctrines of the Bible. As long as these feelings are retained, these doctrines will be retained; but should they be lost, the doctrines are either held for form sake or rejected, according to circumstance; and if the feelings again be called into life, the doctrines return as a matter of course."

In other words, Christianity requires that we have three things. We need right doctrine or right thinking, call that orthodoxy. We need right conduct practice – call that orthopraxy. We also need right affections, right feeling – right loves – orthopathy. Some churches emphasise right doctrine

very strongly. Some emphasise right conduct very strongly. Some emphasise what they think is right feeling. But in fact, we need each one. Each of these exists in a mutually dependent relationship towards the others.

Right doctrine without right feeling is scholasticism.

Feeling without right doctrine is actually bigotry – emotionally invested, but without informed knowledge.

Right thinking without right conduct is the dead faith James condemns.

Conduct without right doctrine becomes very much like a cult.

Conduct without right feelings is legalism.

Feelings without conduct is hypocrisy.

The only way any of them remain *ortho*, is when the other two are present.

So we know that the emotions or affections are vital and at the centre of our Christian lives.

But the problem is, not all emotions are created equal. Emotion is central to the Christian life, but emotion is also very quickly perverted and warped. Fire is enjoyable in a fireplace, but it is terrible when it sweeps through a house. Water is wonderful when contained in pipes and coming through taps, but it is terrible when bursting the banks of a river and swamping a town. Love, when considered as an affection, as an emotion is a wonderful thing when it is directed. When love is trained, when love is ordered, it produces two things. It enables you to approve the things that are excellent, and it enables a blameless life until the day of Christ. The big question is not, do we need emotions in the Christian life. The real question is, what kind of emotions are needed?

So how do we know what is appropriate love for God? We see part of the answer illustrated in Paul's prayer for the Philippians. Philippians is a book with much to say about the affection.

When Paul writes to the Philippians, one of the first things he writes is a prayer. Here is his prayer:

Philippians 1:9-11 And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, ¹¹ being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Paul's prayer consists of a request, with two results.

His request to God is that the love of the Philippians would abound more and more, which is to say – he wanted their love to grow. Paul wanted the love of the Philippians to thrive, to grow and blossom and overflow. Love for who? Well, it isn't stated, but we'd assume, love for all those they ought to love – God first, then one another, then their neighbour. The love they presently have for God, believer and neighbour, he wants that love to exceed, to burst its present limits. This seems to be a request for their love to grow in its quantity.

But then notice how he qualifies that request. He says, I pray that your love may abound more and more **in knowledge and in all discernment**.

Paul did not merely want the Philippians love to increase in *quantity*, but in *quality*. He wanted their love to be growing, but its growth was to be guided and directed and trained by knowledge and judgement. He does not want their love to become an unbridled passion. He does not want their love to become an uncontrolled fire.

So Paul wants the love not merely to grow stronger, but to be more precise, more appropriate.

Here we're going to see the way to appropriate love for God. There are two parts to gaining

appropriate love for God. Appropriate love for God is rooted in the knowledge of revelation. Appropriate love is rooted in godly discernment.

I. Appropriate Love is Rooted in the Knowledge of Revelation

And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge

Paul's first request is that the love of the Philippians grow in its knowledge. What kind of knowledge would this be? Knowledge of what?
Necessarily, it must be knowledge of the objects loved.

How do you love God appropriately? If our love is guided by knowledge, the knowledge of God supplied by the Scripture, it will be appropriate. We've already seen that the Scripture teaches us what God loves, and what He hates. It teaches us how much God loves things. With this knowledge we can love what God loves, and love each thing to the degree it deserves.

In order to love appropriately, you need to know what or who it is you are loving, and you need to be able to then judge what degree, and what kind of love it deserves. We must love God with the kind of love appropriate for His Being.

Not only does the thing loved have a correct degree of love relative to all others, every thing has a correct kind of love based on its nature. You have to **know** the nature of a thing to know how you ought to love it.

There is a kind of love you have for each created thing. There is a love you have for chocolates. There is a love you have for sunsets. The kind of love you have for sunsets is not the kind of love you have for chocolates.

There is a kind of love you have for wives. There is a kind of love you have for pets. The kind of love you have for pets is not the kind of love you have for wives. It is not simply that you must love your wife more than your pets, it is that the way you love a pet is very different from the way you love a spouse. We use the same term – love – but in fact we are doing quite different things when we love different objects.

The same is true of other emotions.

Look at a biblical example:

John 12:42-43 Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³ for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.

Would you agree that Jesus loved the praise of God more than the praise of men? The Pharisees had it the other way around. When Jesus loved the praise of God, and the Pharisees loved the praise of man, was that the same kind of love, just different targets? No. To love the praise of God is a very different kind of love than to love the praise of man. It is an entirely different act.

C.S. Lewis said, “The form of the desired is in the desire. It is the object which makes the desire harsh or sweet, course or choice, ‘high’ or ‘low.’ It is the object that makes the desire itself desirable or hateful.”

The kind of love is contained in the object towards which it is directed.

When you give a kind of love for a person or object that does not fit it, the first word that comes to everyone's lips is: **inappropriate**. You do not love the president of your country the way you love your buddy. You do not love your brother the way you love a small child. If you direct the kind of love you have for your younger brother towards someone in high authority over you, you will be in

trouble.

Let's say 5-year-old Johnny is at the dinner table. He wants the salt. So he says to his father, "Daddy, gimme the salt right now!" What will their parents say to him? "Johnny, you do not talk to your father that way!" Why do they say that? Johnny wants the salt. Daddy has access to the salt. Johnny even specified the time-frame when the salt should be delivered to him. What's wrong with his request?

The answer is that Johnny, as a son, is not speaking to his Father in a way that is appropriate. It is not the content of his request that is the problem. It is the *kind* of request – the *way* he is making it that is totally inappropriate given the relationship between son and father.

The same is true of God. There is a way we love Him, and a way we do not. It is not true to say that because God is all-knowing and everywhere present that He is just like this ocean that absorbs everything directed towards Him, and transforms it into something good, as long as the people are sincere. If that were the case, God would not be so specific about how He wants to be worshipped. God would not have been so detailed about His Person and Works.

Let do a thought experiment here.

Is God a Cosmic Grandfather? No. Is it possible to have a kind of love for God that treats Him like a Grandfather? Yes. That would be inappropriate love. It would be unorthopathy.

Is God a Legal Tyrant? Is it possible to have a kind of love/response to God that treats Him like a Legal Tyrant? Yes. That would be inappropriate love.

Is God a Romantic Love-Interest? No. Is it possible to have a kind of love for God that treats Him like a Romantic Love Interest? Yes. That would be inappropriate love.

We talked about loving something too sweetly. There is a kind of love for God which is sentimental. It treats God as if He were someone you might hold hands with while walking on the beach.

Is God a Buddy You Party With? No. Is it possible to have a kind of love that treats God like a party-goer? Yes. That would be inappropriate love.

Is God a Therapist? No. Is it possible to have a kind of love for God which treats Him like that? Yes.

Appropriate love for God comes from knowledge of Him. God Has revealed Himself to us in Scripture. Most often, He does so using images. He is a Shepherd, Father, King, Lord, Captain of an Army, Vine. In fact, it is exactly those images given in Scripture which God wants us to use to understand what He is and isn't, and therefore, what kind of love we give Him. Contained within those images is the kind of love we have for Him. When we hear – God is a King, contained in that image is a set of responses. We love Him the way loyal subject love a good King. When we hear – God is a Father, there is a kind of love contained in that. We love Him the way obedient children love a dignified and good Father.

This is why Paul wants our love to grow in knowledge. Knowledge supplied by revelation will guide and direct and train our love.

Knowledge of Scripture, correctly unpacking the imagery in which God reveals Himself, be it in narrative, or poetry, or prophetic literature, or in the epistles (in which the writes continue to use imagery all the time), guides us to understand who God is, and what He is like. He is actually unlike anything exactly, but by giving us a huge book full of images, He is helping us cross the bridge to the unknown using the known.

Let me put it another way. Once you have learned the truth of who He is, there is a corresponding

truth of what He deserves.

That leads us to Paul's second way that our love is to grow in quality.

II. Appropriate Love is Rooted in Good Judgement

And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment,

Discernment is another way of saying good judgement. The word in the original speaks of insight, perception. The ability to judge, discriminate, sense what is appropriate and what is not. Once we know who it is we are dealing with, we need good judgement to know what love is appropriate before God.

Question? Where do we get that judgement? Where do we get that discernment?

Obviously, since this is a prayer, we know it comes from God, just like the knowledge does. But the means God uses to supply the knowledge is the Word of God. What is the means by which He supplies discernment?

You see, the problem is, the Bible doesn't spell out the affective truth in black and white.

The Bible tells us our love is to be a reverent love, but it never spells out for us what that reverent love looks like. It tells us we are to rejoice in the Lord, but it does not tell us what appropriate joy in the Lord looks like? How are we supposed to know?

Do you realise God tells us not to take His name in vain, but never once spells out what that looks like or means? How are we supposed to know?

Post-modern answer: if God hasn't spelt it out, it must be because it doesn't matter. It's all relative. It's all in our personal universes. It is up to us to colour in between the black lines of propositional truth with our own personal, cultural preferences.

The correct answer is, God hasn't spelt it out for us, because He expects us to know it another way. He expects us to pursue discernment, judgement and taste through His appointed means. Primarily it means being regenerated and walking with Him in an obedient relationship (Heb 5:14).

But God has also set this world up that we learn those kinds of things by exposure and example.

Good judgement is shaped by exposure to, and the example of, those who have good judgement.

Matters of taste, sensibility, discernment are matters which are more caught than taught. Knowledge is a matter of information, but discernment and judgement is a matter of formation.

Hebrews 13:7 Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.

Think about areas of life where matters of judgement, discernment and sensibility are needed.

Children may learn the multiplication table from a discursive lesson, but they learn matters of judgement, taste and manners by example. Children learn how to address their elders, sit at table, use courteous speech, host people graciously, eat politely, dress modestly, enjoy certain music, disdain certain foods, or desire certain modes of life by observing the behaviour of their parents. The affections are so fundamental to us, that before one can explain them, they must be learned in the milieu of life. One could say that the affections are caught, more than taught.

Appropriate emotions, or to use the old term, ordinate affections are informed by revelation, but formed by observation. We observe the example of others with ordinate affection and it shapes us.

Guess what? When you spend much time with people who love God appropriately, you learn what that means. This is one of the many reasons why God gives us the church. In a community of

believers, we are disciplined not only by getting information from each other, but by absorbing the example of one another.

Corporate worship is profoundly important, because everything we do in corporate worship is not only teaching something about who God is – it is teaching something about *what He deserves*. The way the prayers are prayed, as well as what is said. The way the Scriptures are read, and for how long. The way the music is played, the way it is sung, as well as what is sung – these all communicate – God deserves a particular kind of emotion.

The example of the church and its leaders goes a very long way towards shaping appropriate (or inappropriate) love for God.

And I will be quick to add, not just the church of 2010. The church of Spurgeon, of Jonathan Edwards, of Calvin, of Augustine, of Irenaeus. We need the example not only of Christians today, but of Christians of the past. How did they worship? How did they pray and sing? What kinds of things did they say? What kinds of things did they not say?

Only by living with the church gone by can we see where the contemporary church has adopted ways of loving God that may be inappropriate. We have to step away from our culture to see if our culture has adopted some ways or attitudes or methods which seem normal to us, but may be quite aberrant.

That leads to the second way our affections are shaped, which is exposure.

I could probably point to several loves in your life which you did not enjoy at first, but came to enjoy them through repeated exposure. Almost no one loves coffee the first time around. You have to keep trying it until what was formerly distasteful becomes enjoyable.

Not many enjoy a complicated symphony the first time around – it seems too long, too many notes. Not many new Christians enjoy hour-long sermons at first. Children do not always enjoy prayer or church attendance or learning to read. But once the person is repeatedly exposed to something, they can come to love it.

This is not to say that loves are purely matters of preference. There are things that ought not to be loved, that people learn how to love. There are things that people do not love that they ought to love, which needs to be learned.

If God is a unique being, then the kind of love we give Him is going to be unique. That means we are going to learn to love God over time, by being exposed to the right kind of love for Him. Loves are not all automatic. The best kind of love is not visceral. The best kind of loves take much longer to take root in you. They take reflection, meditation, understanding. And at first, they might not appeal to you. You might hear a prayer that at first sounds too high, or too poetic, and you don't like it. But over time, as you consider the meaning of that prayer, you come to see that it expresses something so beautifully, and so accurately, that you come to love it. That's especially true of hymns.

When we are first exposed to how people in the church have loved God, we might not always have a taste for it. But Paul's prayer is that our love would grow in knowledge and judgement. It is only if you do expose yourself to how Christians have sung to God and prayed to God and written about God that you will start to absorb those same loves.

What is the result of Paul's prayer? We end up approving the things that are excellent. In other words, previously, we did not always approve what is excellent. Something that is beautiful and lovely and worthy of our loves existed – outside of us. Not merely in terms of how I judge it – but in terms of what it is. If my loves grow in knowledge and discernment – I end up loving what is excellent. I love what ought to be loved. I am loving what I ought to love. But I have to do that through exposure to people of sound judgement, so that I imbibe the same thing.

We would all agree that we want to love God supremely and ultimately. It is not enough to love God ultimately or supremely if the kind of love we give Him is actually not the kind that corresponds with who He is. Therefore, we must love Him appropriately. We will love Him appropriately if our understanding of Him is firstly shaped by the knowledge of who He is as revealed in Scripture. Contained in Scripture are pictures of who God is, and contained within them are the kinds of love we should have towards Him. Scripture also gives us examples of love for God. Scripture exposes us to love for God. We'll judge these right kinds of love not in isolation, but within the church of God. Within the community of faith, past and present, we will find people whose love for God was and is ordinate.

So we close this time of studying what it is to love God. I pray you are convinced to make this the pursuit of your life. I trust you see what a wholehearted, radical thing it is to love God, since He is the only God. I pray you see how all of life can be related back to loving Him. And I pray you will keep thinking about what kind of love is appropriate for a Being like God.