

Loving God In All of Life

For a short while, my son was trying to process the idea of love, and he couldn't, at that point, accept the idea of loving more than one thing at a time. He would tell me, I love red dragons, but I don't like blue dragons. The next day, it was reversed. The same applied to airplanes vs. helicopters, firetrucks vs. police cars. Depending on who had last disciplined him, he would tell us he did like Mommy but he didn't like Daddy, or the other way around. For my son, once he loved something, it was exclusive and pushed out all other loves. For him, one love left no space for another.

Once we have embraced the idea of ultimate love for God, in some ways, we are in the same position. The kind of god that God is demands a kind of love which leaves no room for other loves. Only God can be loved for Himself. Our dependence, devotion and delight must end up on God and God alone. I cannot love my wife for herself, as an end. I cannot love my children as ends in themselves. On the face of it, it looks like we must make the kind of choice my son makes with his toys, love God ultimately and nothing else, or love many other things alongside God and be idolaters.

We don't at first grasp how radical ultimate love for God is. There is no space for love for anyone or anything else to be loved the way we love Christ.

Luke 14:26 ²⁶ "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple

Matthew 10:37 ³⁷ "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.

Jesus is simply saying – no one, not even your closest family is allowed to claim ultimate love. That is reserved for Him alone.

So we're left with the question: if loving God means loving Him ultimately what about other loves? What about the rest of life? Am I supposed to live with a kind of torn feeling that I ought to be spending my whole life in the secret place, adoring God, and everything else is a waste of time, or a failure to love God?

We get the answer to that in Luke Gospel, chapter 10.

Luke 10:25-28 And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?" ²⁷ So he answered and said, " 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,' and 'your neighbor as yourself.' " ²⁸ And He said to him, "You have answered rightly; do this and you will live."

And here we can breathe a sigh of relief. Because Jesus, this time in reply to another man's quoting of the first and second commandment, agrees that the sum of biblical religion is to love God, and to love your neighbour. In the other situation recorded in Matthew and Mark, Jesus says the second greatest commandment is to love your neighbour as yourself. At very least loving God and loving your neighbour is not a contradiction.

And when you think about it, the Bible is full of commands to love all kinds of people: husbands loving wives, believers loving one another, people loving their neighbours, believers loving their enemies. Not only that, but it is a normal part of human life to love aspects of life itself. Ecclesiastes tells us it is good for a man to eat and drink and rejoice in his labour. Humans are going to love food and friendship and laughter and nature and a job well done and music and things of

beauty and so on.

So how do we bring these two thoughts together? On the one hand, no one but God deserves ultimate love. God is the only being in the universe you should love for Himself. But on the other hand you are told to love other people and other things. How can I reserve absolute love for God which allows for no competitors, while still loving other people?

What we're going to see from several Scriptures is that other loves form part of loving God. They do not compete.

Once we understand how we can love God in all of life, we'll be able to do two things.

Firstly, it will enable us to relate everything back to one principle in our lives: Loving God. All of the other things and activities and service and relationship we have or do will become part of one overriding passion of our lives – to love God.

Secondly, it will help us keep lawful loves from becoming idols. We will learn to love the gifts of God, and the things God wants us to love, not as ends in themselves, but as means to loving God.

We're going to look at several Scriptures that help us to understand how we love God through others things a people, and how we love other things and people for God's sake.

We'll see three ways we do this: when we love things in obedience to God, when we love them because they reflect God, and when we love things because God loves them.

I. When you love people or things in obedience to God, it is an act of loving God.

Let's examine this command to love your neighbour as yourself by going to its source: Leviticus 19:18.

Leviticus 19:18 'You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

Here you find the second greatest commandment in all Scripture, almost hidden amongst many, many other commandments. And so the first and most obvious thing we see is that loving others is a command from God. And what did Jesus say we are doing when we keep His commandments?

John 14:15 ¹⁵ " If you love Me, keep My commandments.

The outflow of love is obedience. So when we are told to love someone or something, and we do so in obedience to God, it is ultimately an act of love for God.

I do not firstly love my neighbour because of my neighbour. I love my neighbour firstly because I love my God, and my God told me to love Him. My love for my neighbour is not based in my neighbour. It is based in the will of my God.

I do not love my neighbour the way I love God. I love God for Himself. I love my neighbour as a means of loving God. I love my neighbour not because my neighbour is my source of ultimate dependence, ultimate devotion, ultimate delight, but because it pleases God that I do so.

That doesn't mean I am not truly loving the person. I am. In fact, my love is purer, and probably stronger than ever before. It is simply that my love does not terminate on my neighbour.

Now that is an incredibly freeing thought. If I must find something in my neighbour to love before I can love him, I might never get there. But if I love him because I want to please my God, I am able to love the person in spite of who he may be.

You know where this is especially helpful? Marriage.

Ephesians 5:25-29 *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, ²⁶ that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷ that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church.*

Why must husbands love their wives? Because they are adorable? Because they never fail? Because they never disappoint? Because they look the same as they did the day you married them? No. You love your wife because God tells you imitate Christ.

What that means is that God is basing a husband's love of his wife not in the properties and attributes of his wife, but of Christ's love for her. A husband is to love his wife for Christ's sake. Loving his wife is an act of obedience to Christ with Christ as His model. God gets our absolute love. But can you love your wife? Yes, you love her for God's sake. Your love for her is rooted in and flows out of and back towards your love for God. I am very glad my wife does not choose to love me for myself. Oh sure, she loves things about me. But what keeps her loving me is not something in me, it is something in her relationship with God.

The moment you love your spouse as your ultimate source of delight, he or she has become your god. But should husbands and wives love each other? Yes. They must love each other as part of their love for God. They must love each other as ways of ultimately loving God.

Our love for God drives us to obey Him even when who or what we are told to love is not immediately lovable to us. Sometimes, we might not yet understand why we should love it. But in faith, we love it, and so love God. For example, God tells us to love the church. He loves it and in many ways tells us to love it. He gives us many 'one another' commands. Sometimes we might not understand that. Sometimes, there is little in the Christian to motivate my love for him or her. But when we choose to love the church because God loves it, it is an act of devotion toward God.

In Philippians 4:8 Paul tells us the kind of thoughts we are to have, implying the kind of loves we should have. We should think the following kind of thoughts, we because are coming to love that kind of thing.

Philippians 4:8 ⁸ ¶ Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy -- meditate on these things.

Sometimes, we do not love these things at first. We have to come to love them. We must initially choose to love them in obedience to God. When we do that, we are loving God.

So, even though God alone gets my ultimate love, I can love people or things that God tells me to love as a way of loving and pleasing Him.

This is the first way we love other things or people for God sake. We love God supremely, and love others in obedience to Him. There is a second way we love god supremely by loving other things or

people.

II. When you love people or things that reflect God, it is a way of loving God.

Let's consider something else about Leviticus 19:18.

You shall love your neighbour as yourself. This command is not exhorting us to love ourselves. It assumes that we love ourselves. Paul says in Ephesians 5, no man ever yet hated his own flesh. We are built with a kind of natural affection for our own wellbeing, health, comforts, and joy. This command says – see to your neighbour's well being the way you do to your own. Regard your neighbour with the kind of love you give yourself.

This implies something, it implies he is as you are. For you to treat him as you treat yourself, it must mean you are of the same kind. You are made of the same stuff.

And what stuff is that exactly? If I must love my neighbour because he is as I am, what is he? He is made in the image of God. And this is why you love him: because He, like you, is made in God's image.

Genesis 9:6 "Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man.

Do you notice the 'for' word. That means a reason is being given. The reason for the punishment of the murderer with death is not as a deterrent, or as rehabilitation, or as a warning to others. The reason is that someone who murders a human being has done something to the image of God. When you murder someone, you are murdering someone made in God's image. It is precisely because of that act, of spiting the image of God that you are to forfeit your life. Likewise James says this in chapter 3:

James 3:8-9 But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God.

In other words, what you do to people, and what you say to them or about them, you are in some ways doing or saying to the image of God. Human beings are made in God's image, whether they are believer or not. That image is marred, to be sure, but it is there nonetheless.

Put it positively. You can love people not only because God tells you to and you want to please him, but because in some dim way, they reflect God.

Have you ever stopped and just watched a crowd walk by, and seen the immense diversity, and thought, each one of these somehow uniquely reflects something of God?

I can love that parking attendant, that rude customer on the phone, that tantrumming infant, that reckless taxi driver, that ruthless boss, because in spite of their sin, they in some way reflect God as a reasoning, choosing, thinking, creative Being.

For a fellow believer, that grows even stronger. Now the image of God is being restored in Christ, and we are coming to look more and more like Him.

It goes beyond people to nature and to the gifts of God.

James 1:17 ¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.

What happens when you love the gifts of God for themselves? They have become idols to you.

What happens when your absolute trust or devotion or delight is in those gifts? They have become gods. But let those gifts send you up to God in delight, in dependence, in devotion, and they become means of loving Him.

1 Timothy 4:4 For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving;

Maybe you have read C.S. Lewis' *Meditation in a Toolshed*. He writes:

I was standing today in the dark toolshed. The sun was shining outside and through the crack at the top of the door there came a sunbeam. From where I stood that beam of light, with the specks of dust floating in it, was the most striking thing in the place. Everything else was almost pitch-black. I was seeing the beam, not seeing things by it. Then I moved, so that the beam fell on my eyes. Instantly the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no toolshed, and (above all) no beam. Instead I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun. Looking along the beam, and looking at the beam are very different experiences.

In other words, if the beam of light is like people, or nature or the gifts of God, you can either just look at them and try to enjoy them or experience them as ends, or you can look up them, beyond them to the God they reveal.

I do not love my neighbour for himself. I love God for Himself. But I can love my neighbour because God tells me to, and because my neighbour reveals God in some way. And insofar as he does, I can love him.

But there is a third thing that the second greatest commandment implies; a third way of loving God supremely and loving all else for His sake.

III. When you love people or things that God loves, it is an act of loving God

If God commands me to love my neighbour, is He telling me to do something that He doesn't do? Is God saying, love your neighbour, because I don't. No, we assume that God tells us to love our neighbour because He loves our neighbour. That's the third way we can love people or things other than God for God's sake.

Matthew 25:34-40 *d, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: 35 'for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; 36 'I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' 37 "Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? 38 'When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? 39 'Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' 40 "And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'*

Notice what is very clear here: acts of love and kindness done to Christ's brethren were considered as acts of love and kindness to done to Him. Negatively, acts of neglect and indifference done to His people were done to Him. Or like He said to Saul on the road to Damascus, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

When you love people that God loves, you are loving Him.

We know this principle. If you want to bless someone who is a parent, do something kind for his or her children. Love done to the one you love is counted as love toward you.
Now whom does God love? According to Jesus in Matthew 5, He even loves His enemies.

Matthew 5:43-45 *You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ 'But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, ⁴⁵ 'that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.*

What reason does Jesus give for loving your enemies? Because God the Father does it. In other words, God loves them. Why should you love your enemies? Because God loves them, and you are to love them for His sake. You don't love your enemies for their sake, you love them for God's sake. Which means that loving your enemies is part of loving Him.

If they're part of the human race, you can love them as someone God loves. That's part of the rationale behind the command to love your neighbour as yourself. You cannot withdraw your love from anyone, and say, "Well, God probably doesn't love him or her." All acts of mercy, all acts of kindness, all forgiveness proceed on the basis of God loves this person. I should love what God loves.

Loving God supremely means I love whom and what I love because He loves it. This goes beyond people and extends to values and ideas and morals. God loves righteousness. God loves justice. God loves truth. God loves mercy. God loves beauty. God loves order. God loves cheerful giving. God loves meekness. Do you know it is always sinful to hate what God loves? You are to love what God loves.

If He doesn't love it, then I don't love it. In fact, I hate it. The flip side of the coin is that to love what God loves is to hate what God hates.

Psalms 97:10 *You who love the LORD, hate evil! He preserves the souls of His saints; He delivers them out of the hand of the wicked.*

Hate is the natural and opposite side of loving something. If you love dogs, you will hate cruelty to dogs. If you love peace and quiet, you will hate loud parties next door that go on for hours. If you love babies you will hate abortion. If you love your child, you will hate the cancer that shows up in the blood test. What we love determines what we hate.

Jesus loved the worship of His Father. Therefore He hated people using the Temple to make money and exploit the worshippers of His Father.

Jesus loved the truth of the Word. Therefore He hated the additions and perversions that the Pharisees had made of it.

If God loves righteousness, then what does He hate? Sin. A person who loves God is growing in their hatred for what God hates. God hates idolatry. God hates pride. God hates murder. God hates malice and bitterness. God hates fornication. God hates adultery. God hates homosexuality. God hates the profaning and blasphemy of His name. God hates the desecration of His worship, and His day. God hates the abuse of His Word by false teachers. God hates the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and pride of life – that is God hates this world system. God hates unbelief. God hates lying. God hates covetousness. God hates envy. God hates drunkenness. God hates sorcery. God hates contentions. God hates slander and people that sow discord. God hates the perversion of justice, bribery and corruption. God hates gossip and evil speakings. God hates theft. God hates a false

balance.

Do you know it is always sinful to love what God hates?

Now step back for a moment and see the choice God has given you. You can either turn life into one powerful mirror that reflects love and joy back to God, or you can turn it into a web of idolatry. Life can either be one ultimate love for God, fed by many streams of lesser loves. Or life can be a forest of idolatrous loves in which you are lost.

You can either simplify or multiply. You can multiply gods in your life, and experience the inevitable tearing and tussle between those gods. You can simplify by acknowledging that Christ alone deserves ultimate and supreme love. Therefore everyone and everything else is controlled and ordered by love for Him. If He loves it, you love it. If He tells you to love it, you love it. If it reflects or reveals Him you love it. It all becomes part of loving Him. You love everything lawful outside of God as a means of loving Him.

This helps us understand Scriptures like

1 Corinthians 16:14 ¹⁴ *Let all that you do be done with love.*

What this means is that all of life becomes a means of loving God. We need not switch worship on and switch it off. All of life can be directed back to God. Everything becomes instrumental towards your ultimate love of God. Simply ask yourself three questions:

- 1) Does God command me to love this? If so, then love it out of obedient love to Him.
- 2) Does this in some way reflect God? Love it insofar as it does
- 3) Does God Himself love this? If so, then love Him by loving what He loves.

Loving God is not like a thing which occupies space, like a big inflatable ball in your lounge. The bigger it gets, the less room there is for other people.

In fact, the opposite is true. Loving God is more like a river carving out a channel for itself. The faster it runs, the more it widens its channel; the more it widens its channel, the greater the volume of water flowing through it. So when we love God, we end up loving others more. The more we love them in the right way, the more we love God.

Augustine put it this way: "He loves thee too little, who loves anything with Thee, which He loves not for thy sake."