

Loving God 3a – The Method

Matthew 16:24-26 Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. ²⁵ "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. ²⁶ "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Perhaps you have made the mistake of driving with your parking brake still on. You can feel that something is not quite right, and often you accelerate some more, until at last you realise the handbrake is on. Once you release it, you car can get on with moving forward. To change the illustration, perhaps you have tried to wash a new sink full of dishes but find that when you pull the plug out, the water just sits there. If you are going to drain the water to wash more dishes, you are going to have to unblock the drain.

When it comes to loving God, you may have noticed that it can feel like driving with the handbrake on. It can feel like a blocked drain. In our text today, the Lord Jesus told us what it is that we must do if we are to love God.

This is where we have come so far. Loving God is the ultimate obligation because there is no other god besides Him, and He is the supremely worthy God. The reason human beings do not naturally love God is that in their natural state they are alienated from the glory of God, and in their hearts they hate the glory of God. So God's remedy is the Gospel. God sends the Gospel and opens the eyes. If a person believes, there is regeneration which changes the heart, and justification, which changes the state. A person now sees the glory of God, loves it and is credited with Christ's righteousness, meaning they can worship God.

Once you are regenerated and justified, the process of loving God is one of seeing the glory of God in the face of Jesus by the Holy Spirit as you search out the truth of Him in the Word. God must sovereignly show you His glory, but once you see it, your new heart admires it, loves it, cherishes it, and as a result you are changed. You love Him more.

However, we saw something which is the hinge on which so much turns. When Moses asked to see the glory of God, he asked it for no other reason than to see the glory of God. God was his ultimate end. In other words, he was seeking to love God not as a means to anything else, but as an end in itself.

It was to this single-minded pursuit that God sovereignly revealed Himself. In other words, God's glory is not something you can get at for selfish reasons, or for any other reason besides God Himself. There is a kind of approach to seeing God's glory, to loving Him, which is rewarded with illumination, which results in more love. There is a kind of approach that is filled with double-mindedness, apathy and lukewarmness. God says about double-minded seekers,

“James 1:7 For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord;

The problem is that it is not quite as easy as saying, “Well, I will seek God single-mindedly”. Such an attitude is naïve regarding what is still in your heart. Such an attitude doesn't realise the parking brake which is still on, or the pipe which is blocked.

See, we need to be under no illusions. Gaining a new heart means you will love the glory of God when you see it. It does not mean that the battle is over. Being saved means you are a new man, with remaining tendencies towards the old. You have a new heart, but within your yet unglorified

state, you have tendencies to want the old way. Though positionally you are in Christ, and have a new heart, you are well trained in selfishness, well trained in sinful desires. Those don't just disappear, any more than you lose your memory when you get saved, or lose your ability to think logically.

How strong are those tendencies?

Romans 7:15-20 *For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. ¹⁶ If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. ¹⁷ But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. ¹⁸ For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. ¹⁹ For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. ²⁰ Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.*

This was Paul, the great model of Christian living describing a war that went on inside. Here is the point. If you think that you are going to be able to love God as an absolute end with no trouble at all from your sinful nature, you are mistaken. Not only are you mistaken, but you are going to be bitterly disappointed. You will agree with the idea of loving God, and then find that you make almost no progress in that direction. Why? Because you do not realise what you are dealing with inside your own heart, and therefore you do not take the drastic action needed to curb those forces which oppose loving God.

A military commander who does not understand or know what he is up against in the enemy will probably lose. He must understand the threat to understand the response. A doctor must know when the problem is a tumour and when it is a blister. If you mix up the diagnosis, you will mix up the treatment, and that can be fatal.

People who know the real nature of the sinful nature are in the right position to know how to respond to it. Parents who understand the extent and power of the sinful nature within their children are in the right position to know how to respond to it. Underestimate the power of sinful tendencies within the human heart, and you will fail to deal with them, and they will in turn, deal with you.

God told Israel to wipe out the Canaanites, and not to allow them to continue on. Israel disobeyed, and in one generation, you have the book of Judges – where those tolerated Canaanites are now holding Israel under slavery.

If you think that loving God is going to be like sampling chocolates, or like touring a new landscape, you don't understand the battle ahead. But once you do understand it, you can find a measure of encouragement. Because you find it difficult to love God, even though you want to, does not mean there is something abnormal about you. You are experiencing what Paul experienced. Because you find yourself discouraged with your own spiritual progress, and wondering if you are the only one who can't seem to get it together – then take courage. If you understand what is still inside your heart, you will probably start saying things like, “I'm surprised I haven't done worse! I'm surprised I haven't denied the faith altogether!”

The remnants of that old man, the principle of sin, or the flesh, are potent. Once you are a Christian, it is no longer who you are. You are a new creation. But make no mistake. It doesn't take much of that sin nature to do damage. Rat poison is 99% good food. This is not about proportions. It is about what you do with that old nature, so that the new nature can feed and grow upon seeing the glory of God in the face of Jesus in the Word of God.

Fortunately, our Lord Jesus made it very clear for us. Jesus described this posture of life for us and it is repeated in all four Gospels. In fact, the substance of what He said in these Scriptures is actually His most repeated set of statements recorded. That should tell us that the Holy Spirit wished to have us take note.

What Jesus is doing in this passage and its parallels is telling all who want to love God what they are in for. He is explaining that once we get this thing down to where the rubber hits the road, this is the kind of drastic action you are going to have to take, because your heart is not a pretty little garden where the love of God grows unhindered. Included in that heart are tonnes of selfishness, tonnes of worldliness, tonnes of pride.

So if you want to truly pursue the glory of God in the Word of God single-mindedly, to see it by the Spirit and have love spring up in your heart, what type of posture should you adopt? If you want to see Christ, to know Him and love Him and become like Him, how would you do this?

I. Self-Denial

The first thing Jesus says we have to do if we want to follow Him, is to deny self, you must deny yourself if you want to love God.

What exactly does that mean? The word for *deny* is the word used to mean *disown*. It is used sometimes to speak of one person disowning another person, cutting off all relationship, refusing to recognise the other person. It is used of Peter when he denied Jesus. What did Peter do that day? He said, "I tell you I do not know the man!" Jesus is saying, if you want to love Me, the absolute, basic starting point is to do this to yourself. Now Jesus does not mean pretend you don't exist. He does not mean try to ignore yourself. He does not even mean try to avoid the desire to be happy. He means that the beginning of following God is to know it's not about you! It is about God. You are not God.

Do you remember what we looked at when we examined Deuteronomy 6:4? We saw that only God deserves to be loved as an end. Everything else in the world, if it is a legitimate thing or activity or relationship must be loved for God's sake. There is only one person who deserves to be loved for Himself.

To love something for its own sake, is to make an idol of that thing. A god is anything we live for. A god is something we treat as an end. You are never to place yourself in that role. And what you have to realise is that your sinful nature is forever looking for ways to make it all about self. It looks for ways to make money, health, appearance, possessions, success, status, family, knowledge, pleasure all about self. And the many gifts God gives us as means to love Him become idols.

Jesus means that when self is competing for absolute love, it must be denied. When self seeks first place, it must be denied. If you want to take the Shema and bring it into everyday life, it looks like this: "There is only one God, and you are not Him". You shall make no god out of yourself - this god you shall cut off, deny, disown, amputate, utterly reject.

The truth is self wants to use God as a means to its own ends. Imagine a couple. Mike gives Sally a necklace and Sally loves Mike. Mike gives Sally flowers and Sally loves Mike. Mike gives Sally perfume and Sally loves Mike. Mike stops giving Sally gifts and Sally stops loving Mike. What was Sally loving? God gives me health, and I love God. God gives me a job and enough money, I love

God. God gives me healthy children, and I love God. God protects me and my loved ones, and I love God. God gives me a certain quality of life, and I love God but if God takes any or all of those things away, then what? Self is ready to intrude itself at every point. It is always looking for ways to turn the attention away from God and onto self. In fact, current Christian culture encourages this. Think about the book stores. Think about the titles. God is a means to my ends. Think about the approach of the average person to corporate worship. "I didn't get much out of that service." Why would you think that that is at all relevant?

"I didn't get much out of my quiet time today." Why would you think that that is the main point?

God does not exist to serve our needs. God is not a means to our own ends.

This is ground floor, first-base, beginning Christianity. It is not about you. God was not made for you. You were made for God. It is not about how to use God to make yourself happy. It is how you can spend your life to please God. Another word for this attitude is one you are very familiar with: humility.

"If we love not God because he is what he is, but only because he is profitable to us, in truth we love him not at all." - Jonathan Edwards

Now here is some of the difficulty. Denying self is bit like trying to see your own eyeballs. It is part of you. Some Christians get themselves into a tailspin where they think denying self is trying to avoid thinking about myself, or trying to avoid being pleased or happy, or trying to weigh up how many selfish motives they have in every thought they ever make. I suggest that that is a bit like trying to lose your own shadow. I don't believe that kind of attitude is what Jesus is calling for.

The simplest way of knowing what to deny is to fix your heart and mind to desire and love the glory of God. Whatever it is that fights against that, is what needs to be denied.

When did Paul see the evil within him?

For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice.

It was when he sought to do good that he found opposition within his own soul. If you are in a canoe and letting the current carry you downstream, you do not know how strong it is. But if you turn your canoe around and decide to row upstream, you immediately find how powerful that current is. But you only find it when you go the opposite way. So it is with your soul. Don't bother trying to tinker with the ins and outs of your soul like a watch repair man. You'll get hopelessly lost and confused. Set your heart to love God for Himself and for no other reason. Set your heart to love God as an end and not as a means. Whatever rises up to distract you, oppose you, divert you, dissuade you, postpone you, delay you – those are the attitudes, actions, desires, thoughts that need to be denied. That is self arguing, opposing, and resisting the idea of God being the absolute end.

When you go to pray, deny that which fights against a single-minded pursuit of God.

When you desire to go to church and hear the Word and gather with believers, deny that part of you which wants to do something else.

When you want to obey God to love Him out of a pure heart, whatever tempts you away is to be denied.

Newton's third law is that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Well, set your heart to pursue God and God alone for God's sake, and there will be a pushback in your soul. There will be protests. There will be excuses. There will be rationalisations. There will be all kinds of things dragging you back. But if you want to know the pure joy of loving God for God's sake, and seeing His glory in the truth of the Word, you must deny self.

We can take this principle a bit further. Not only must we deny attitudes, desires, feelings or priorities that stand in the way of loving God for Himself, we must deny any loves which self has which stand in the way of a single-minded pursuit of loving God. We must deny anything which stands in the way of this kind of supreme and absolute love for Christ.

Matthew 10:37 *"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."*

In other words, if father, mother, son or daughter come before God, if they stand in the way of loving God absolutely, you are unfit to love Him. Something in your life stands between you and the Lord as a god and it makes loving God absolutely impossible. You must deny self.

And in fact, to put it negatively, is to hear how Jesus put it in Luke 14

Luke 14:26 *"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."*

Was Jesus asking us to commit the sin of malice against our parents, spouses, children, siblings? No, He was saying the same thing as in Matthew 10. The love of God is such an absolute and supreme love, that all other loves face rejection, should they compete for that first place. Notice who else Jesus includes- 'your own life also'. When it is a toss-up between serving self and serving God, self is denied. That means anything and anyone in your life that seeks to become to you what only God can be must be denied – ambition, education, success, popularity, family, comfort, money, health, knowledge, pleasure, ease, safety...

Jesus was probably hardest on this than on anything else. He gave absolutely no breathing space for someone who wanted even a tiny bit of self along with loving God.

Luke 9:57-62 *"Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, 'Lord, I will follow You wherever You go.'"⁵⁸ And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."⁵⁹ Then He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father."⁶⁰ Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God."⁶¹ And another also said, "Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house."⁶² But Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."*

I'll follow you as long as we are provided for. Jesus says – if you're going to follow me, stop making a god out of your own comfort. I'm homeless, and so will my disciples be. I'll follow you as soon as I have seen to my dying father and collected the inheritance. Jesus says – stop making a god out of money. Deny yourself if you want to love Me. I'll follow you as soon as I have eased out of relationships at home. Jesus says – stop making a god out of your popularity, your comfort zone and your family. Deny yourself and press on.

This just sounds so extreme. It sounds unbalanced. It sounds loony-fringe type stuff. Why would Jesus tell us to deny and amputate any impulse within and any relationship without that obstructs single-minded devotion to God? Because it is the only way; a compromise with the flesh is the battle lost. Because concession to self is to be a polytheist, it is to allow other gods - and how quickly they gather.

Jesus knew that you do not strike a deal with Lucifer about sharing worship. And you do not strike

a deal with that old man, who followed Satan's rebellion, and also wants worship.

There are no deals, trade-offs or fraction games that we can play when it comes to who gets to be loved as the end of our being. No one close to us, not even our own selves must be allowed to compete for the place that belongs to God. Does this mean that we end up lonely and hated by all? Not necessarily, and not usually. Does it mean that we love nothing else? No, it doesn't mean that. It simply means this: you cannot love more than one thing absolutely.

Matthew 6:24 *No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other.*

You cannot love God in the way He deserves to be loved while you are double-minded. Once again, what did James say about being double-minded?

James 1:7 *For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord;*

Double-minded is the opposite of single-minded. Single-minded is when you seek God for God alone and there are no other gods. Double-minded makes room for other ends, other things we love for themselves, especially self.

1 Kings 18:21 And Elijah came to all the people, and said, "How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people answered him not a word.

Now, the fact that it is self-denial does not mean it is self-effort. You are denying self, but you cannot do that in your strength alone. All along, we must be seeking the grace of God to enable us to deny self. When you think of David's prayers, and the prayers of Psalm 119, they add up to someone who is saying – God, save me from myself. Unite my heart, because it is divided and double-minded. Purify my heart, for it is defiled. Enlarge my heart for it craves little things. Incline my heart, for it wants other things besides you.

Here's one way to think about it. Ever since that day when Satan said to Eve, "**Genesis 3:5** *"For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."*

Since that day, the sinful self has wanted nothing more than to fulfil that dream. Until the day you die and are glorified, it will be present, fighting for that place. The only way to love God absolutely will be to deny it absolutely, with the power of the Holy Spirit applying the power of the cross to you.