

Why Loving God Is The Priority

The topic of loving God involves far too much ground to cover exhaustively. Loving God in some ways comprehends the whole of the Christian life, so the problem you have if you're going to do a series on loving God is that you have to narrow your focus. If you don't, the messages will seem like too little butter spread over too much bread.

So the approach I'm going to take is to mainly discuss the *why* and the *what* of loving God. I am going to focus on why we should love God, and then what it means to love a Being like God. I wish I could take the time to get into the practicalities of how you're going to work this out, but you'll get to cover that question together as a church in the years to come.

Our first message today is going to cover the topic of why loving God ought to be the central focus of your life and of your church's life. The three messages after that will examine what it means to love God: we must love Him ultimately, we must love him supremely, and we must love Him appropriately.

I recently read a book called *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell, a fascinating study of extreme achievers and the reason for success, whether it be in sports, commerce, careers – really in all of life. Gladwell's thesis is that success is never really explained in terms of raw talent, or pure genetics, there is always a story behind the success. In one of the chapters, the author spoke of the 10 000 hour principle. He pointed out that whether it was elite sportsmen, concert pianists, grand master chess players, genius programmers, brilliant fiction writers – the most successful people in the world had had an average of 10 000 hours of practice or activity in their discipline. They were talented, but no talent rose to the top without 10 000 hours of practice.

That got me thinking. As I calculated how many days or weeks or months or years 10000 hours works out to, I began thinking, what would I want to give 10 000 hours of my life to? What would I want to be really 'good at'? And the way my mind works is that I immediately think about what would be the most profitable and useful use of 10 000 hours. And I came out at what the Bible calls the great commandment – to love God.

If you'll allow me to use the term loosely, I'd like to be successful in loving God, since it is the most important thing in this life and the most important thing in the next. Ten thousand hours. You can't quantify your relationship with God, but for the sake of illustration, what if you gave ten thousand hours to knowing God in His Word, in prayer, in corporate worship, in service of the church, in obedience?

I want to begin this series by making a biblical case for loving God being the ultimate priority of your life.

What I want to do is give you five reasons from five passages of Scripture why you should make the central theme of your Christian life loving God. I want you to see from the Bible that there is no higher motive, no better goal, no more worthy action.

Why should loving God be at the centre of our lives as Christians? Why should we relate all things we do to a relationship with God? Why should our motive for our actions always be to love God?

I. Because Loving God is Our Ultimate Obligation

Matthew 22:35-40 Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, ³⁶ "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" ³⁷ Jesus said to him, " 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ³⁸ "This is the first and great commandment. ³⁹ "And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ "On these two commandments hang all the

Law and the Prophets."

What was the question Jesus was asked? "What is the great commandment in the Law?" How could we put that in every day language? "What is the greatest priority in all God's Word?" "What is of greatest importance when it comes to God's will for me?" "What does God want me to make my first priority?"

Notice how Jesus does not answer. Jesus does not say, "All of God's Word is equally binding and important on a believer." He doesn't say, "Don't try to rank God's Word, just get busy doing some of it." No, He does not try to sound wise. He is wise. So He, as God in the flesh, tells the man what every pious Israelite knew: the greatest priority of all is to love Yahweh your God with all your heart, soul and mind. This, Jesus says is the first and great commandment. First, not in order of sequence, but in order of importance. And the together with the second command, it summarises the whole Word of God – the Law and the Prophets. What is the Bible about? It is about God revealing Himself to men, so that they might enter into a reconciled relationship with Him and love Him with all their heart, soul and mind. That they might get back to what it was like for Adam and Eve before the Fall.

Why is loving God the ultimate obligation?

Let me try to answer that question by asking another question. Is God beautiful? If He is beautiful, how beautiful is He? When you have come across beauty in your life, what has been your reaction to it? When you saw a beautiful sunset, or a beautiful landscape, the view from a mountain, a sky full of stars, when you heard a beautiful piece of music, or saw beautiful architecture, what was your response? Usually, inwardly, there was a delight. You took pleasure in it, you experienced varying degrees of admiration, awe, wonder. And then outwardly, you often began pointing others to the beauty with all kinds of adjectives – isn't that amazing, lovely, incredible, breathtaking, remarkable...

Now, when you responded like that to things of beauty, were you trying to make the beautiful things feel better about themselves? Did you feel a heavy and unwilling sense of duty to come up with some nice things to say? No. The beauty of the object spontaneously brought those reactions about. It was the worth of the object, the beauty of the object that led you to love it.

We might say, the more beautiful something is, the more we are led to proclaim its worth. The more beautiful it is, the greater the magnetism we feel to love it. You could say we feel that the beauty of the object calls us to love it. We feel that we owe it our love because of its intrinsic worth.

Once again, how beautiful is God?

God is the sum of all beauty. God is beautiful not just in His appearance, but in His works, in His wisdom, in His nature.

If He is the most beautiful of all Beings, what kind of response does that call for in His created Beings? It calls for our highest love. Loving God is our ultimate obligation, because God is the loveliest of all things or beings. All rational creatures owe God their love, whether they want to or not, because He is that beautiful.

Do you know every time you come across that statement in the Bible that God is 'worthy' you are seeing this very idea? He is great, and therefore greatly to be praised. God has a worth, a value, that is infinite. Only dishonest people refuse to acknowledge the worth of something. Honest, sane people honour things according to their value or beauty.

When someone doesn't love what is beautiful, that's not a reflection on the beautiful thing, it's a reflection on the person.

The nature of God Himself calls for love, not as a needy person calls for needs to be met, but as a beauty calls for love.

II. Because Loving God Is Our Ultimate Satisfaction

Psalm 63:1-5 A Psalm of David when he was in the wilderness of Judah.

O God, You are my God; Early will I seek You; My soul thirsts for You; My flesh longs for You In a dry and thirsty land Where there is no water. ² So I have looked for You in the sanctuary, To see Your power and Your glory. ³ Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, My lips shall praise You. ⁴ Thus I will bless You while I live; I will lift up my hands in Your name. ⁵ My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness, And my mouth shall praise You with joyful lips.

You might have heard that last point about loving God being your ultimate obligation, and you might be thinking in terms of duty and self-denial. But the good news, perhaps the best news of all, is that your greatest obligation, is also your greatest satisfaction. Loving God is not only the highest priority, it will be your highest fulfilment.

Listen to this Psalmist. He paints us several pictures. One is of a man rasping with thirst in a desert. He is stumbling towards an oasis. When he gets there, what is he going to do? He is going to almost fall into it, and drink big gulps of water. David says, God, that's what you are like to me. My desire for you is a rasping thirst. I long for you so much, that I go to the house of worship where I long to see your beauty. I long to know you.

And here is what's amazing: Your lovingkindness is better than life. What do you mean David?

David says, I mean, put everything this life can give me apart from God on one side of the scale, put a love relationship with God on the other, and God's lovingkindness wins hands down. Look at the words: "praise You...bless You...satisfied...praise You...joyful lips."

Does David sound like a happy man?

David writes this because he wants to evoke the same kind of desire in us. He wants these images of thirst quenching, of soul-satisfying, or luxurious food, of exuberant praise to create within us the feeling that God is satisfying. God is delightful. God is beautiful.

For Adam and Eve, life was about knowing and enjoying God and reflecting Him back to Himself. As they lived in that Garden of Delights, as they subdued the Earth, they were loving God with all their heart, soul and mind, there was no tension between pleasing self and pleasing God. It was one thing. There was no competition between loving God and loving self or loving other things more than God. Adam loved all things for God's sake. And on the day he ate (I should say, on the day *we* ate, because Romans 5:12 says we all sinned on that day) the result was a deep wedge driven between loving God and loving other things. The human soul is truly a lost soul – a thing made in God's image, looking for love and pleasure independent of its Creator.

Over 1500 years ago, a Christian named Augustine said this: "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee" Try to digest that for a moment. God – You made us for Yourself. We exist because God wanted us to, for His own glory. Because of that design, Augustine says – our hearts are restless, until they find their rest in You. We spend our lives restlessly pursuing one thing after another, never satisfied, because our ultimate meaning and fulfilment is found in God Himself.

Augustine's words are powerful, and come down to us after 1500 years simply because they are true words. We were made for God, and nothing outside of God will ultimately fulfil us. Our created purpose is to know and love God.

What would you think of someone who kept refusing the things that were best for him? Well, that's exactly what we do when we make money, or sports, or food, or sex, or entertainment, or success,

or family, or reputation, or things the pursuit of our lives. Humanity has a kind of spiritual madness that causes us to refuse the good and choose the destructive. That's depravity.

It is not that you need to be convinced to seek what is most satisfying. You do that without thinking about it. It is how you are wired. You need to be continually reminded that God is actually your ultimate satisfaction. The life of faith believes the promises of God, that He is good and has made this world for our delight, and wants to bless us. Loving God is not an act of meeting a need in God. God loved Himself perfectly before he created the world. He made us to enjoy Him, and in our enjoyment to reflect His beauty and excellence.

III Because Loving God Will Be Our Eternal Occupation

Revelation 5:8-14 Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹ And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll, And to open its seals; For You were slain, And have redeemed us to God by Your blood Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, ¹⁰ And have made us kings and priests to our God; And we shall reign on the earth." ¹¹ Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, ¹² saying with a loud voice: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain To receive power and riches and wisdom, And strength and honor and glory and blessing!" ¹³ And every creature which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, I heard saying: "Blessing and honor and glory and power Be to Him who sits on the throne, And to the Lamb, forever and ever!" ¹⁴ Then the four living creatures said, "Amen!" And the twenty-four elders fell down and worshiped Him who lives forever and ever.

You can cross reference this passage with several others in Revelation: chapters 4, 7, 11, 12, 15, and 19 you see the same thing. There are these explosions of praise that break out in heaven from those that are glorified. And you get the sense they are not forced to do it. They want to do it! They're watching the events on Earth, and they sometimes just launch into adoration.

What does that tell you about what we will be doing in eternity? Now in eternity we will be dwelling on the New Earth, with the New Heavens located on it. But what is the joy and light of the New Heavens and the New Earth? Christ. I'm sure we'll do various things on the New Earth, but do you know what will be the absolute climax, the height of joy for us? Worship. Adoring Him. Loving Him. In fact, at least one order of angels, the Seraphim seem to do nothing but that – flying around the throne, crying out their awed and adoring praise.

A.W. Tozer once said this: "I can safely say, on the authority of all that is revealed in the Word of God, that any man or woman on this earth who is bored and turned off by worship is not ready for heaven." If you're bored with worship you're not ready for heaven. Why? Because that's the heart of what heaven is. Or to put it another way: since loving God is what we will do for all eternity, if you have no desire to do that now, you should question whether that is your eternal destiny.

Can you imagine an eternity of doing something you can't stand? If loving God was not enjoyable, what kind of God would He be to make us do that for all eternity. He would be a torturer wouldn't he? Isn't it strange that people say God is a torturer for sending people to hell, when in fact, He would be a torturer if He brought those people to heaven. They would spend an eternity doing something they cannot stand.

Occasionally you hear a preacher say something like this: We'll worship perfectly in heaven, let's focus on evangelism down here. And the correct response to that would be: the point of evangelism is to create worshippers out of rebels. We don't start worshipping in heaven, we start here and it is

consummated there. Furthermore, the best reason for doing evangelism is worship – our love for God.

When one reads the parables of Jesus, there is a theme which repeats itself several times. Faithfulness in one's stewardship here, will bring greater reward and responsibility in eternity.

What is the ultimate reward? As Thomas Watson pointed out, the reward is not heaven itself, but God Himself, for Psalm 73:25 says, "whom have in in heaven but Thee?"

More of God Himself. That's why I suggest the more you love God here, the more of Him you will experience and know there. Your faithfulness in loving God here will determine how much of God you know and love. Oh, every saint will be in fullness of joy over there. It's just that some saints will be 350mls, some will be 500ml, some will be 2 litres. We'll all be full. But the more of God we have pursued and loved here, the more of Him we'll know and love there.

John Wesley and George Whitefield had ministered together for many years, before their differences over Calvinism and Arminianism drove them apart. One day, after Whitefield's decease, John Wesley was timidly approached by a lady who had been influenced by Wesley and who loved both Whitefield and himself:

"Dear Mr. Wesley, may I ask you a question?"

"Yes, of course, madam, by all means."

At last, after not a little hesitation, the inquirer tremblingly asked, 'Dear Mr. Wesley, do you expect to see dear Mr. Whitefield in heaven?'

A lengthy pause followed, after which John Wesley replied with great seriousness, 'No, madam.'

"His inquirer at once exclaimed, 'Ah, I was afraid you would say so.'

"To which John Wesley added, with intense earnestness, 'Do not misunderstand me, madam;

George Whitefield was so bright a star in the firmament of God's glory, and will stand so near the throne, that one like me, who am less than the least, will never catch a glimpse of him.'"

IV. Because Loving God Is The Truest Confirmation

1 Peter 1:3-9 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, ⁵ who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, ⁸ whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, ⁹ receiving the end of your faith -- the salvation of your souls.

How do you know that you're saved? How do you get assurance of salvation. There is an objective side and a subjective side.

On the objective side, Peter here gives us what God has done to give hope to believers.

It is an imperishable inheritance that is reserved for us, that is guaranteed by the power of God.

That's the objective side of assurance of salvation. That is what God does.

Then in verse 6, he switches gears to the subjective side. How do believers who actually possess this salvation respond to trials? They rejoice! Whom do they rejoice in? Verse 7c-9: Jesus Christ. When a soul loves Jesus Christ by faith in the midst of suffering, it proves the genuineness of the faith. In other words, loving God is the best sign of true conversion.

Now let me qualify that. I didn't say it is always the most visible sign. Because it isn't. We go through valleys. We can grow cold.

I didn't say it is the first sign. It may or may not accompany the first signs of conversion.

But it is the ultimate and best sign of salvation, because love for God is what God saves you for.

See, there are various signs that I am married to Erin. One is that the pastor said we were after we made a covenant. How do I know I'm married to Erin? I can watch that DVD and hear him say it. I have a ring on my finger that she gave me. It's another sign I'm married to her. There is a marriage certificate in our files at home. That's another sign. But the best sign, the crowning sign that I'm married to her is that I love her. You're not married to someone just because you love him or her, but once you make that covenant, the best sign that such a covenant was made is love between the parties.

The best sign of true salvation is what the Puritans called full assurance: when you know you are loved by God and you love Him.

Romans 8:15 For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father."

1 Corinthians 8:3 But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him.

The frightening thing about Jesus' words of condemnation in Matthew 7 to those who protest that they prophesied and did miracles and exorcised in His name is that those people were very active for Jesus. They were busy. And their busyness assured them of their salvation. The results they saw assured them. But Jesus tells them He didn't know them. He had never known them. They had never been in a covenant relationship together. There had been no love. And that's what they should have been asking. Do I love Jesus Christ.

The Bible has no category for someone who is born again, but does not love Christ.

Ephesians 6:24 Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. Amen.

1 Corinthians 16:22 If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed. O Lord, come!

V Because For Loving God There Is No Substitute.

Revelation 2:1-5 To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, ' These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: ² ¶ "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; ³ "and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. ⁴ "Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. ⁵ "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place -- unless you repent.

Here is a church that would put most churches today to shame. They work hard for God. They have no tolerance for evildoers in their midst. They practise church discipline. They practise discernment with people claiming to be spiritual authorities. They know their doctrine and can sift the false out from the true. They are faithful; they don't quit; they don't give up on ministry and throw in the towel. These are spiritual Spartans – hard-working, self-denying, hardship-embracing Christians. Where do you go today to even find a church like this?

So you would expect Jesus to commend them and congratulate them. Instead, He tells them they have fallen, they ought to remember where they were, repent, and go back to doing those things they did, or else He will remove them entirely.

What could have gone wrong that Jesus would overlook all that other great spiritual achievement and threaten them with removal?

"You have left your first love". You have left the love you had for Me, and consequently for others.

You have left the place where loving Me was the centre, where I was the first love. And with that gone, nothing else really matters.

Do you realise what Jesus is implicitly teaching here? There is no substitute for loving Him. There is no activity in the Christian life, no matter how good, or useful, or beneficial that makes up for a cold heart.

All the theological knowledge in the world won't impress Him, if you don't love Him. If a young man is interested in a young lady, and he begins learning about her by accessing her school records, hiring a private detective to follow her, interviewing her friends, and secretly following her in his car, is that love? No. He is not treating her like a person, so it is not love. We can treat God like that. Learning about Him like an object, a specimen, a maths theorem, but all the while, not seeking Him.

All the service in the world won't impress Him if you don't love Him. How many marriages end because the husband decided that doing things for his wife – like providing financially was the same thing as loving her. But if he is not involved in her life, it is not love, it's just maintenance. Knowing about God, doing things for God can still be done without love for Him.

Martha was doing things for Jesus, but apparently without much love, at the time, for Him. Mary according to Jesus chose that better part – to love the Saviour and commune with Him.

Even when we hear the gospel, and believe and enter into a reconciled relationship with God, with His Spirit dwelling inside us, we so often forget that loving God is the point of it all. We're busy doing this, and doing that, and learning this, and serving here, but it is so easy, so sadly easy for us to get our priorities all mixed up.

Loving God is not icing on the cake. Loving God is not spray paint on the car. Loving God is not arranging the hair. Loving God is vital ingredient. Loving God is the engine itself. Loving God is beating heart.

Loving God is an obligation because He is beautiful. Loving God is the satisfaction you are looking for. Loving God is how you will spend eternity if you are saved. Loving God is the best sign you should look for to confirm your salvation. Loving God is the core of our Christianity and cannot be substituted with anything else.

Just recently, I was told of a man who had served as a missionary in Uruguay. He was 98 years old, and was vigorous to about his last days. He had been instrumental in starting numerous churches. When he was in the hospital, and the end was near, a huge community of missionaries and pastors and Christian workers came to see him in the hospital. When a 98-year-old servant of the Lord is about to die, I want to be there and hear what wisdom and experience say. Someone asked him, "What are your regrets?" He thought a bit and then answered, "I wish I had done less and prayed more."

Do you hear what that man is saying at the end of nearly 100 years of life? He is saying, the big priority is relationship with God, not efficiency, productivity, success, achievement. Relationship – communing with God in prayer – love for Him.