

The Priorities of the Christian Life – 1

Have you ever tried to put together a puzzle, without the picture on the box? The bigger the puzzle, the more difficult that becomes. Trying to relate one piece to another, trying to match shapes and colours, without knowing what the big picture looks like, can be a very confusing and frustrating experience.

For many Christians, the Christian life feels a lot like that. They come to faith in Jesus Christ, and then it is as if someone has poured hundreds of individual pieces of the Christian into their lap, without a big picture of how they relate. They hear about worship, discipleship, obedience, becoming like Christ, church, baptism, evangelism, discernment, prayer, and the list goes on. They have entered into a massive body of teaching, an entirely new worldview, and it can seem very daunting to try to put this massive puzzle together.

Is there any way for us to understand the Christian life as a cohesive whole, so that we can then put the individual pieces together? In other words, is there any way we can see the picture on the box, so that we can relate the parts to the whole?

Fortunately, there is. And fortunately for us, on one occasion, an inquisitive fellow asked Jesus something very close to these questions. He had the opportunity for a personal interview with Jesus Christ. What would you have asked Jesus, given the chance?

Some would waste their question asking about some minor aspect of religion. Some would try to appear knowledgeable in asking something they already knew. Some would try to match wits with the spiritual genius that Jesus was. Perhaps there would be some honest soul who would ask what we would all like to know: "What is our reason for living?"

When God the Son is among us as a man, what we really want to ask Him is: what is the priority of life? What is the main thing, which sums everything else up? If we are to summarise the Christian life in one sentence, what is it? What is "the chief end of man"?

That's what a scribe after my own heart once asked Jesus. He went for nothing less than the bulls' eye of meaning and purpose: what is the central idea of life?

Mark 12:28 ²⁸ *Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that He had answered them well, asked Him, "Which is the first commandment of all?"*

Thank you! There was a man who knew how not to waste an audience with the greatest Prophet Israel had ever seen. "Which is the first commandment of all?" means "what is the most important thing?" He was not asking which command comes first in *sequence*; he was asking which command comes first in *importance*. He aimed high with his question, and he was not disappointed with the answer.

Mark 12:29-30 *Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. ³⁰ 'And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment.*

From the lips of the Creator comes an unambiguous answer: the supreme obligation is to love God. A life well-lived is a life mostly concerned with loving God. A life full of meaning, satisfaction and fulfilment is a life that fulfils its Creator's intentions. "Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless, until they find their rest in Thee," said Augustine in the fourth century. Human life

lived apart from fulfilling its design – loving God – is a life that results in futility, restlessness, and despair. The book of Ecclesiastes is a journal of a man who tried education, sexual pleasure, music, feats of construction and design, political honour, worldwide renown, nearly limitless wealth, and philosophy to fill the void. His conclusion still haunts those who will not listen, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” Life is weightless, empty, like a wind without loving God as the sun around which we orbit. Blaise Pascal was right in describing the human heart as an infinite abyss that... “can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object” - in other words by God himself. [Pensees#425]

Unfortunately for us, the meaning of loving God has lately become confused. There are two tragic reasons for this. First, the modern view of God is often sub-Christian. A.W. Tozer put it this way: “For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of Christians that composes the Church. Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God, just as her most significant message is what she says about Him or leaves unsaid, for her silence is often more eloquent than her speech. She can never escape the self-disclosure of her witness concerning God.

Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, “What comes into your mind when you think about God?” we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man. Were we able to know exactly what our most influential religious leaders think of God today, we might be able with some precision to foretell where the Church will stand tomorrow? It is my opinion that the Christian conception of God current in these middle years of the twentieth century is so decadent as to be utterly beneath the dignity of the Most High God and actually to constitute for professed believers, something amounting to a moral calamity.”

A wrong view of God will inevitably lead to a wrong *kind* of love for God. That leads to the second reason for confusion about loving God.

There are several competing visions of *how* we ought to love God. Judging by the songs, books, and sermons produced by professing Christians, God is everything from a romantic love-interest, to a sweet grandfather, to a non-judgemental therapist, to a grungy party buddy. Of course, God cannot be all these things. But since these distinctive visions of who God is are being spread, we are faced with the problem of sorting through it all. What is God really like? What kind of love do you give to a God like ours? How do we love him in a way that pleases Him? Those are the questions we'll try to answer in this series on the Christian life. We will try to see the picture on the puzzle box.

We will begin by describing this priority of the Christian life – loving God. What exactly does that mean? What kind of love does God require and why? Having done that, we will consider how a Christian comes to love God in this way. We must know God in order to love Him. This is the process of the Christian life. Fortunately, this is a life of grace, so the third section will consider the provisions for and position of the Christian life, which make this process possible. Without our position in Christ, there can be no successful process of knowing and loving God. Of course, this process also entails some response from our side. We are to have a continual way of life which characterises our communion with God. This 'posture' of life will be considered fourth. Finally, we consider how various Christian disciplines form part of this posture – the practices of the Christian life.

Let's begin with the priority of the Christian life – loving God.

You do not love God the way you love a son, a spouse or a sunrise. God is not to be loved the way we love our pets, our PCs, or our professions. Every created thing has a corresponding love. The love of country is a different love in both degree and kind from the love of friendship. As C.S.

Lewis put it, “the form of the desire is in the object of desire...” In the same way, there is a love for God which corresponds to who He is. You could say it is a fitting, or appropriate love. To use the old term, there is an *ordinate* love for God. Were you to love God with the love that belongs to ice cream, soft toys, romantic love-interests or cute puppies, you would be guilty of a love which does not correspond to God – an *inordinate* love. It is not enough to like the *idea* of loving God. We must love God as He, is if we are to fulfil the first and greatest commandment.

What if the love I think I have for God does not correspond to whom or what God actually is? If my love for God misses God by a mile, but I feel warmed by the experience, what am I actually doing? I am actually busy with self-gratification. So deceitful is the human heart (Jer 17:9), that what I call *love for God* may actually be idolatry; a worshipping of myself. Given the massive disagreement in contemporary Christianity on how we should sing, pray, or preach about God, we may be the generation who has most excelled at pleasing ourselves and calling it *worship*.

To wade through the massive confusion that saturates the current religious atmosphere, we must return to Christ's words to that scribe and consider them carefully.

Mark 12:28-30 ²⁸ Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that He had answered them well, asked Him, "Which is the first commandment of all?" ²⁹ Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. ³⁰ 'And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with your entire mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment.

On that day, Jesus told the man what the greatest commandment is. He used His divine authority to summarise the most important idea of all Scripture by quoting Scripture. And surprisingly, He didn't say what would become, John 3:16, or quote Genesis 1:1, or give the Great Commission. Instead, he quoted a Scripture which is still prayed by Jews around the world – Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

The key to loving God appropriately is embedded in Jesus' answer. The scribe had asked for the most important commandment. The commandment would be “You shall love the Lord your God...” However, Jesus does something unexpected. He does not begin quoting at Deuteronomy 6:5. He begins by quoting from verse 4: “Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one.”

Verse 4 is not a command, it is a statement. It does not tell you to do anything (besides pay attention to its statement); it tells you something about God. Why would Jesus have done that?

Jesus began with verse 4 of Deuteronomy 6, because it is the foundation of and basis for verse 5. The statement *about* God is the reason for the response *to* God. To put it another way, only if you understand the significance of the statement “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one”, will you understand what it means to love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul and strength. Remove verse 4, and all you have is a command to love God intensely. But verse 4 explains who this God is, what it is He deserves, and what it means to love Him with all your heart, soul and strength.

Consider verse 4.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!

The oneness spoken of here is not meant to deny the Trinity. The oneness here underlines the uniqueness of God. He is *the* One, the only one. That is, the sense of the passage is, “Hear O Israel, Yahweh is our God, Yahweh *alone*.” In fact, we know that this is how Israel understood it because

of the scribe's response.

Mark 12:32 So the scribe said to Him, "Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He.

There are two profoundly important statements in there.

- 1) There is only one God.
- 2) Yahweh is that one God.

Here is the foundation for the love we are to have for God. Only one God exists, and He is Yahweh. In other words, *the love we are to have for Yahweh is the love we reserve for a god*. Love for God is the love of worship. Since Yahweh is the only God, Yahweh alone deserves worship.

Nothing in the universe deserves the status of a god, except Yahweh. Nothing and no one else exists that the human heart should treat as a god. While anything *can* be worshipped, not everything *deserves* to be worshipped. The first of the Ten Commandments is really the negative formulation of the greatest commandment: "You shall have no other gods before Me". Nothing and no one else should receive this worship-love from us.

What then is worship-love? What kind of love is the love humans give to their gods?

The problem is, the Bible never defines worship for us, it expects us to already know. Thankfully, we already have a clue in those words of Deuteronomy: *all* your heart, *all* your soul, *all* your strength. The way you relate to a God is not half-hearted, not double-minded, not ambivalent. The way you relate to a god an *ultimate* kind of love.

Gods represent ultimate things. Human beings regard their gods as the ultimate cause of events. Gods are looked to as ultimate explanations of good and bad experiences. God are petitioned and thanked. In other words, the love of worship sees its god at the very end of a chain of trust, or love, or devotion. When you praise, or thank, or rejoice in a god, you are not using it for something else. You are loving it for itself.

Let's say there is a man who loves a particular brand of car polish. Does he love car polish in an ultimate sense? No. He loves what it does. He loves it instrumentally. When it is used up, he throws away the can. He loves what it does. What does it do? It makes his car shiny. He loves a shiny car. Does he love his shiny car as an end in itself? No, he loves what a shiny car does. It attracts stares, glances, admiration from other people. Does he love stares as ends in themselves? No, he loves what those stares mean. You could say he loves that attention because of what it says about his status. What is the end point of his loves? His status. He loves his name as an end in itself. He does not go further than that. If you asked him, why do you love your status, he would not say, because it is a means to something else. He would probably just shrug and say, because I love it. His status is an ultimate love to him. It is his god.

Four-year-olds are excellent in the *why* game. They ask you one question, and you give an answer, and they ask why again; you give an answer, and they ask, "Why?" Eventually you reach an end-point where there is no longer a reason related to something's function or usage. The answer becomes something like, "It just is" You can do the same with loves. Why do you love this? Because it does this for me. Why do you love that? Because it does that. Why do you love that? Because it means that. Why do you love that? *Because I just do*. Once you reach that end-point, that "I just do" where the thing or person or activity is no longer valued as an instrument or as a means

to something else, but simply because it exists, you have reached the human being's god. At that point, such a thing has value in itself.

Many people make a god out of a relationship – a boyfriend, girlfriend, wife, or husband. Many people make gods out of their children. Some make gods of having more money. Some make a god out of a car or a piece of jewellery or a computer, or a sport. Some make gods out of succeeding; some make gods out of sexual pleasure; some make gods out of drunkenness or drugs; some make gods out of their appearance, or their intelligence. Some make gods out of computer games, their gardens, their holiday homes, their prize collection. These things or people or goals become things they live for. If such things are treated as ends, and not means, they have usurped the place that Yahweh claims for Himself. They have become idols.

The human heart is an idol factory. Our sinful natures make it possible for us to seize upon anything, and say, "This, this by itself, will fill the void! I will give myself for this, and live for this, it will bring me satisfaction. I will pursue this and live for this!" In fact, one of the ways to test if something has become a god to us is to watch our reaction when that thing is threatened. Typically, people lash out when their gods are threatened.

In contrast to all these created things, God is the self-existent, eternal, all-powerful Creator of the universe. This is God's defence of loving Him ultimately: no other God is a real god! No other god exists in reality. There is only one member of the class God – and it is Yahweh. In fact, God's name even suggests this idea. Yahweh, "I AM THAT I AM" suggests God is saying, I am the only one in the universe who is not simply an instrument or a means for someone or something else. I am not someone who is explained as an agent or means for something beyond Me. No, God is simply, I AM.

Sadly, it is possible to treat God Himself as merely another means to our own ends. This is the fundamental error that sends us over the cliff into inordinate love.

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. And if God takes any or all of those things away, then what?

And it's not hard to see that around us. Some want God to be their cosmic cash cow. Some want God to be their prescription-free anti-depressant pill. Some want God to be their good luck charm. Christian bookshelves are groaning under the weight of books that make man the centre, and God the supplier. The Christian life is sold as the means to fix up your marriage; help with your finances; help you budget your time; help you achieve financial freedom; give you personal peace and happiness, or make you a successful person. The songs and hymns are filled with declarations about ourselves; our sincerity; our intention to worship; our deep experiences, with God as the agent of our intense religious emotions. Lacking this God-provided experience, the average person comments after corporate worship, "I didn't get much out of that service." God is a means, and we are the end.

"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.", said Jonathan Edwards. The love of worship is loving God for Himself. To love God as the only God is to not seek to use God for some other end beyond Himself.

Christianity broken down to its first principle is this: There is only one God, and He is not you. He

is not a means to your own ends. You have been created to know and love Him for who He is. If you are to love God as He is, you must deny yourself. You must recognise that your life is not ultimately about you. You orbit the sun that is God, not the other way around. You must turn from trying to use God, or manipulate God, and come to Him to love Him as your only God. You must settle on the fact that there will be only one ultimate love in your life, and it will be God.

An ancient Latin hymn put it this way:

My God, I love Thee; not because
I hope for heaven thereby,
Nor yet for fear that loving not
I might forever die
But for that didst all mankind Upon the cross embrace;
For us didst bear the nails and spear,
And manifold disgrace.

Not with the hope of gaining aught,
Not seeking a reward,
But as Thyself hast lovèd me,
O everlasting Lord!
E'en so I love Thee, and will love,
And in Thy praise will sing,
Solely because Thou art my God,
And my eternal King.

This is the start of understanding the Christian life – it is a life of loving God. Loving God is not simply taking your love for other things, increasing it by degrees, and then aiming it at God. Loving God means loving Him appropriately. We must love Him in a way that corresponds with who he is. However, we still need to do some more work to understand what loving God means. Next week, we will consider what it means to love God ultimately.