

Priorities of the Christian Life 2 – Loving God Ultimately

The Christian life does not typically come with detailed assembly instructions. The day you become a Christian, you are not often handed a booklet that details what the main idea is, how you reach that, and what roles and responsibilities are yours. Instead, you jump in, and start swimming, and find out as you go along.

Most of us appreciate any help we can get in putting this thing together. We would love to see the picture on the puzzle box, so that we can relate the pieces to each other, and know what we're building towards.

Last week, we began considering what this picture on the box would look like by asking the question, what is the great priority of the Christian life? Once we know what the priority of the Christian life is, we can begin considering the process of how we reach that priority. We also need to understand the position in the Christian life – from which we are enabled to reach the priority. When we understand the priority, the process and the position of the Christian life, we can learn of the posture of the Christian life - the continual way of thinking and acting that should characterise us as Christians. Finally then, we can consider the practices of the Christian life – those habits of devotion that enable us to live in that posture.

We began last week to see the great priority of the Christian life. We saw it in Mark 12

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 all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment.*

The grand priority of the Christian life is to love God. As we began studying this topic, we realised that loving God does not simply love God with more of the same love we give to created things. The love we are to have for God is to be a unique love.

Our love for God is unique because God is unique. We must reserve for God a particular kind of love: it is the love which commands all your heart, all your soul, your entire mind, and all your strength. Ultimate love, which is for God only, is this kind of wholehearted love. So what does this mean?

This is what we want to consider today.

We've already seen some of the answer. Ultimate love is the love we give our god or gods. That's the meaning of love with all your heart, soul and might. It is when your love is not using this thing for something else. You are terminating your love on this object or person. All your heart, soul and mind love this thing, or person, or activity.

As we go through the Bible we find three themes associated with the love you give to a god: dependence, devotion and delight. When you think about it, isn't that a fair definition of love? What makes up the love between husband and wife? First trust, or dependence. Two people must come to be fully prepared to entrust themselves to another person for life. Second, commitment or devotion. Marriage begins as two people covenant to be completely devoted to each other to the exclusion of all others. And hopefully, it will lead to delight. Marriage is two people rejoicing in each other. At

root, love is trust, commitment and joy; dependence, devotion and delight.

When we take these three ideas of love and bring them to our relationship with God, they go far beyond anything we know with our fellow creatures. Love for God is ultimate devotion, ultimate dependence and ultimate delight. All your heart, all your soul, all your might is given when you are trusting absolutely or devoted absolutely. This is the love of worship, and it is the priority of the Christian life.

What do these three aspects of ultimate love for God look like? Let's begin by considering the idea of ultimate dependence.

Ultimate Dependence

The Bible often uses several words to describe the idea. You have seen this idea whenever Scripture speaks of believers trusting, depending, waiting, hoping, and looking. And as you will have noticed, when the Bible uses these ideas, it wants us to know that this is to be ultimate.

Proverbs 3:5-6 ⁵ *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding;* ⁶ *In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths.*

Psalms 62:5-6 ⁵ *My soul, wait silently for God alone, For my expectation is from Him.* ⁶ *He only is my rock and my salvation; He is my defense; I shall not be moved.*

Psalms 123:2 ² *Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters, As the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, So our eyes look to the LORD our God, Until He has mercy on us.*

When Scripture uses these words of our relationship with God, it is emphasising the truth that God is to be our ultimate dependence. No one or nothing stands above Him as more reliable, trustworthy, faithful or dependable. God is not a means to something else that we trust in. To love God ultimately is to make Him your ultimate trust, ultimate hope, ultimate refuge, ultimate security, ultimate source.

When we make God simply a means to something else we are trusting in, or if we place ultimate trust in something else, what are we saying about God? What are we saying about His value? We are saying that God's creation is more trustworthy than the Creator Himself.

Israel did this with her idols, and it brought God's outraged rebuke:

Isaiah 42:17 *They shall be turned back, They shall be greatly ashamed, Who trust in carved images, Who say to the moulded images, 'You are our gods.'*

Judges 10:14 ¹⁴ *"Go and cry out to the gods which you have chosen; let them deliver you in your time of distress."*

Anything, other than God, to which we give ultimate dependence will disappoint and betray us. The man who trusts in money, finds it abandons him in the end. It is either taken from him, or it betrays him with its inability to bring lasting satisfaction. People who make a political party, or a business, or another human their rock, fortress, high tower, or shield (Ps 18:2) find that such things are like sand castles with the tide coming in.

Many things can be trusted, relied upon, looked to, or hoped in. In fact, God has set up the universe in such a way that we have to be dependent upon many things. However, they are only *means* of an

ultimate trust, which is reserved for God. The many things we depend upon are to be viewed as gifts from God, which we receive from Him, and which point back to Him. Ultimate dependence is to be reserved for God alone.

This leads us to the second category of love, which is

Ultimate Devotion

This idea includes all the Scriptural ideas of serving, giving, sacrificing, remaining loyal and being committed. The Bible uses these concepts to describe the idea that God is to receive our ultimate devotion.

1 Samuel 12:24 ²⁴ *"Only fear the LORD, and serve Him in truth with all your heart; for consider what great things He has done for you."*

In Malachi, we see a negative example of this. We see a deep apathy and sloppiness that had come to Israel and to her priests, so that the kind of devotion they gave God was less than what they would give to human authorities.

Malachi 1:6-8 ⁶ *"A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am the Father, Where is My honor? And if I am a Master, Where is My reverence? Says the LORD of hosts To you priests who despise My name. Yet you say, 'In what way have we despised Your name?' ⁷ "You offer defiled food on My altar. But say, 'In what way have we defiled You?' By saying, 'The table of the LORD is contemptible.' ⁸ And when you offer the blind as a sacrifice, Is it not evil? And when you offer the lame and sick, Is it not evil? Offer it then to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you favorably?" Says the LORD of hosts.*

Malachi 1:12 *"But you profane it, in that you say, 'The table of the LORD is defiled; And its fruit, its food, is contemptible.' ¹³ You also say, 'Oh, what a weariness!' And you sneer at it," Says the LORD of hosts. "And you bring the stolen, the lame, and the sick; Thus you bring an offering! Should I accept this from your hand?" Says the LORD. ¹⁴ "But cursed be the deceiver Who has in his flock a male, And takes a vow, But sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished -- For I am a great King," Says the LORD of hosts, "And My name is to be feared among the nations."*

By contrast David refused to offer anything to God which did not cost Him.

1 Chronicles 21:24 *Then King David said to Ornan, "No, but I will surely buy it for the full price, for I will not take what is yours for the LORD, nor offer burnt offerings with that which costs me nothing."*

When Jesus came and preached discipleship, He made it clear that the kind of commitment, devotion, sacrifice that belongs to Him is total, radical and ultimate.

Matthew 10:37-39 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. ³⁸ "And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. ³⁹ "He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it."*

Nothing in all creation deserves deeper devotion, greater loyalty, better service, or higher sacrifice. God is infinitely valuable. God is not a means to some higher object of devotion. Devotion, commitment, loyalty, service, sacrifice is to go no further or higher than God. To love God ultimately is to make Him your ultimate commitment, ultimate sacrifice, and ultimate allegiance.

Israel gave ultimate devotion to her idols, giving themselves entirely to them:

Deuteronomy 29:26 *for they went and served other gods and worshiped them, gods that they did not know and that He had not given to them.*

God often speaks with great revulsion at how Israel descended into human sacrifice, and gave up their children to Molech. Such was their commitment, their devotion, their willingness to serve Molech. What do we say about God, when we are more deeply devoted to education, or a career, or our looks, or to success, or to our reputation, or to a spouse or friend? We say that these people or things are more worthy, more valuable than the Creator, and deserve a deeper and more ultimate commitment.

Ultimate commitments to anything other than God will disappoint and betray us. Here is a woman who lived for her children. Everything was about her children's health, and children's development, and education. She loved her husband and loved God, but she lived for her children. That was her god. One day her children grow up and leave the house. She is devastated, confused and feels rather betrayed. She put everything into these gods, and now they are gone. Where is her return? Where is her satisfaction?

Here is a man who has devoted himself to collecting degrees, and reaching the pinnacle of the academic world. He finally gets there, and finds out, to his utter dismay, that he has reached the top, and it is lonely and empty. There is nowhere to go from there, and the applause has faded. He has spent his life on what does not profit.

Once again, a normal human life involves many commitments, places of service, or causes to which we are devoted. However, these are all to be tributaries of the one great river of devotion to God. All our loyalties, service, commitment is to lead back to and terminate on God alone.

By contrast, David represents one whose ultimate devotion was to God.

Psalms 27:4 ⁴ *One thing I have desired of the LORD, That will I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD All the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the LORD, And to inquire in His temple*

Loving God in a way that corresponds to who He is, means depending ultimately on Him. Loving God ordinally, means being devoted ultimately to Him. But loving God appropriately also means God must be our ultimate delight.

Ultimate Delight

The third category of love is delight. This category comprehends all the Scriptural ideas such as rejoicing, giving thanks, enjoying, praising, revering, being glad, taking pleasure, and being satisfied.

And once again, when you come across these ideas in Scripture, the Bible makes it clear that such expressions of delight must terminate on God.

Psalms 16:11 *You will show me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*

NKJ **Psalms 37:4** *Delight yourself also in the LORD, And He shall give you the desires of your heart.*

NKJ **Psalms 43:4** *Then I will go to the altar of God, To God my exceeding joy; And on the harp I will praise You, O God, my God.*

NKJ **Psalms 63:3** *Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, My lips shall praise You.*

Habakkuk 3:17 *Though the fig tree may not blossom, Nor fruit be on the vines; Though the labor of the olive may fail, And the fields yield no food; Though the flock may be cut off from the fold, And there be no herd in the stalls -- ¹⁸ Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.*

Scripture uses these ideas to teach that God is to be our ultimate cause for and object of, delight. Nothing created deserves ultimate delight, gladness, happiness or other expressions of human joy and approval. Every good gift comes from God (James 1:18), and is merely a means to lead us to rejoice ultimately in God Himself. God is infinitely beautiful. God cannot serve as a means to delight in something else beyond Himself. To love God ultimately, is to see Him as your ultimate joy, delight, pleasure, satisfaction, and praise.

If there are things or people or activities other than God that we delight in, what do we say about God? What do we say about His power to satisfy, if we give ourselves totally to the creation rather than the Creator when it comes to joy and delight?

Israel had turned to other gods for their ultimate delight. God saw them as a wife seeking pleasure in the arms of another man.

1 Chronicles 5:25 *And they were unfaithful to the God of their fathers, and played the harlot after the gods of the peoples of the land, whom God had destroyed before them.*

Israel had turned to idols to satisfy its soul, and God tells them that no idol can do that

Jeremiah 2:11-13 *Has a nation changed its gods, Which are not gods? But My people have changed their Glory For what does not profit. ¹² Be astonished, O heavens, at this, And be horribly afraid; Be very desolate," says the LORD. ¹³ "For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, And hewn themselves cisterns -- broken cisterns that can hold no water.*

God wants His people to know that He alone is worth this kind of ultimate love and whenever something other than God is put in His place, it disappoints. They are not trustworthy like He is. False gods are treacherous. False gods always abandon the worshipper at some point. You see, false gods betray you because they lead you to believe they can be to you what only the true God can be to you, then in the end, they always fail. That's why God said idols are like broken cisterns that can hold no water.

As the book of Ecclesiastes unambiguously shows us, looking to anything under the sun for ultimate delight will bring a deep sense of emptiness. The immoral relationship betrays you; the honing and dressing up of a perfect body or face betrays you; the marriage to the perfect man or woman betrays you; the attainment of a position ultimately betrays you; the titillation of every sense betrays you. False gods cheat us – they promise they will do what only God can do, but they turn out to be hollow. They do not satisfy like God does.

By contrast, Asaph had realised that God alone was to be his ultimate delight:

Psalms 73:25-26 ²⁵ *Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You. ²⁶ My flesh and my heart fail; But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*

He alone is God. He alone is ultimately reliable. He alone is ultimately valuable. He alone is ultimately desirable. That's why His name is Jealous.

Did you ever stop to consider this attribute of God's jealousy? God's jealousy is not a petty rivalry. God's jealousy is not a small-minded conceitedness that does not want others to be justly praised. Not at all - this is human jealousy, and it is detestable. God's jealousy is a just claim as the only rightful occupant in that place in the human heart designed to worship the only true God. God's jealousy is a call for truth – for ultimate dependence, ultimate delight, ultimate devotion to be placed only where it belongs – on Him.

Loving God is not primarily a feeling of attraction, though it involves desire. Loving God is not primarily doing things for God, though it does involve service and obedience. Loving God is not primarily believing things about God, though it does involve trust and faith. Loving God is trusting ultimately in God, being devoted ultimately to God, and rejoicing ultimately in God.

Since there is only one God, and He is the God of the Bible, treat Him and Him alone as your God – as the one to whom you are ultimately devoted; the one on whom you are ultimately dependent; the one in whom you ultimately delight.

This is the great priority of the Christian life. Of course, this raises a key question? Why should this be the priority of the Christian life? How do we make sense of God's call for us to grant Him ultimate love? We'll consider that next week.