

The Priorities of the Christian Life – 3 - Reflecting His Glory.

What is the grand priority of the Christian life? If you were asked to say it in a sentence, what would you say? As we have tried to put together a cohesive, systematic vision of the Christian life, I have suggested that we should see the Christian life firstly in terms of its priorities, then its process, thirdly by its position, and finally by its posture and its practices. We have spent two weeks considering the great priority of the Christian life – to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

But if we are to think about it, the average person will ask some hard questions about this command, or at least sense some discomfort. How is it that God gets to command people to love Him ultimately, without being guilty of conceitedness and arrogance?

Not long ago, a prominent atheist described the God of the Bible as “... arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction”. Among the adjectives he used to describe God were *petty, jealous and proud of it, control-freak, and megalomaniacal*. From the perspective of a hardened materialist, God's calls to love Him must seem like pathological narcissism. After all, what rational being will call on other rational beings to love him or her with all their might? Before his conversion to Christianity, C.S. Lewis wrote that:

When I first began to draw near to belief in God and even for some time after it had been given to me, I found a stumbling block in the demand so clamorously made by all religious people that we should ‘praise’ God; still more in the suggestion that God Himself demanded it. We all despise the man who demands continued assurance of his own virtue, intelligence or delightfulness; we despise still more the crowd of people round every dictator, every millionaire, every celebrity, who gratify that demand. Thus a picture, at once ludicrous and horrible, both of God and His worshippers, threatened to appear in my mind.

Why indeed, does God call on people to love Him ultimately? Is this sheer vanity from an insecure God? Is this, as Lewis said, the pitiful state of someone fishing for compliments?

Only one possibility exists to exonerate God from the charge of petty egotism. What if God is the most beautiful Being of all? If God happens to be the most beautiful Being of all, then ultimate love for Him is not only justified, it is necessary.

There's a good bit of Scriptural evidence that connects God's glory with beauty:

Job 40:9-10 ⁹ *Have you an arm like God? Or can you thunder with a voice like His?* ¹⁰ *Then adorn yourself with majesty and splendor, and array yourself with glory and beauty.*

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.*

1 Chronicles 16:29 ²⁹ *Give to the LORD the glory due His name; Bring an offering, and come before Him. Oh, worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness!*

Psalms 96:6 ⁶ *Honor and majesty are before Him; Strength and beauty are in His sanctuary.*

At least twelve different Hebrew words are translated into glory, but they all carry the connotations of beauty. Various they mean impressive, adorned, ornamentation, comeliness, splendour, honour. We would not be far from the truth if said that God's glory is His beauty and we know that we exist

to magnify His glory, or to show forth His beauty.

Romans 11:36 ³⁶ *For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen.*

Isaiah 43:6-7 ⁶ *I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' And to the south, 'Do not keep them back!' Bring My sons from afar, And My daughters from the ends of the earth --* ⁷ *Everyone who is called by My name, Whom I have created for My glory; I have formed him, yes, I have made him."*

Revelation 4:11 ¹¹ *"You are worthy, O Lord, To receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things, And by Your will they exist and were created."*

Bringing it together, if God's glory is His beauty, then we are commanded to love Him ultimately, because that's what you do with ultimate beauty.

The most beautiful being in the universe not only deserves to be loved ultimately, but a failure to do so is a form of lying. It is acting as if ultimate beauty is found elsewhere. And if God is infinitely beautiful, to act as if He isn't, is an insult of infinite proportions. That's what sin is. Sin is falling short of the glory of God by treating Him as if He is not infinitely worthy.

If He is infinitely beautiful, to deny that is an infinite insult, an infinite offence. What is a just and fitting punishment for an infinite offence? The answer is - an infinite punishment. The doctrine of hell and eternal punishment only makes sense when we understand that God is infinitely beautiful. In fact, the whole Christian gospel seems ridiculous unless you understand this. After all, here is a God who jealously demands that people worship Him, and if they don't, He apparently tortures them in hell forever. Seen in that light, the whole thing seems repugnant.

But what if God is exquisitely, unimaginably beautiful – in appearance, in motives, in wisdom, in actions, in works, in attitudes. We know how outraged we feel when someone desecrates beauty – slashing a beautiful painting, polluting or dirtying a place of nature, abusing a young child, torturing an animal, vandalising a sculpture. We feel a kind of moral pain when beauty is somehow harmed or trampled upon. Now take that emotion and multiply it as many times as you are able with your finite mind, and you have the crime of treating the most Beautiful One as less than infinitely beautiful. It is an outrage of infinite proportions, a revolting, despicable, heinous act of self-serving, brutal treason, that the creatures should treat the most beautiful one as if He is not, and treat themselves as if they are. That they should take His gifts, made with His hands, and substitute them for Him, suppressing their knowledge of Him, because they are contemptuous of His right to receive ultimate love. This is what we do. This is what sin is. And this is why the Son of God came to earth to die. He died as a substitute for sinners, experiencing the infinite wrath of God on the cross, so that we could be declared innocent of our infinite crimes of insulting the infinitely beautiful God. His mercy and grace are infinitely beautiful.

You see, if you are a moral being, with the capacity to perceive beauty, you have a moral duty to treat God as He is. The problem with man is, though he has a natural ability to see beauty, and understand that God is most beautiful, He lacks the moral ability to love God. His sin has twisted him, deformed him, ruined him, so that he loves the wrong things. It is not that he cannot naturally love or admire or see beauty. He could turn to God if he wanted to. The problem is, he doesn't want to, He will not. He is naturally able, but morally unable. His selfish desires will cause him to freely reject God 100% of the time.

So, the only way that people can come to love God ultimately is if God regenerates them. God must

do the miraculous work of opening blind eyes, drawing them to Jesus Christ, so that they repent of sin, turn to Christ and trust Him entirely and are regenerated and justified. God then begins the process of progressively changing the person, putting off the old loves, putting on the new ones, growing the newborn Christian's love for God and apprehension of His beauty. When the Christian dies, he or she is glorified and is rendered free from all sin because he or she sees Christ as He is.

This is why loving God ultimately is the great priority of the Christian life – because loving God ultimately is the way human beings acknowledge God's infinite beauty. Loving God ultimately is the value statement that moral beings make about God.

You see, many things bring God glory. The psalms tell us in different places that the created order glorifies God and upholds the idea that He is infinitely beautiful.

Psalm 19:1-2 *The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork. ² Day unto day utters speech, And night unto night reveals knowledge.*

Psalm 145:10 ¹⁰ *All Your works shall praise You, O LORD, And Your saints shall bless You.*

Romans 1:20 ²⁰ *For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse,*

However, when it comes to moral beings, the way we show that God is beautiful is through the ultimate love of worship. We see this very clearly in Psalm 29:1-2

Psalm 29:1-2 *A Psalm of David. Give unto the LORD, O you mighty ones, Give unto the LORD glory and strength. ² Give unto the LORD the glory due to His name; Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.*

David here calls for an action from the mighty ones. The mighty ones could refer to angels, but David's point probably isn't to describe angelic worship, as much as it is to call the more elevated beings of all to worship the Most Elevated Being of all. And what action does he call them to? He calls them to give the Lord something. Three times he says – give to the Lord, give to the Lord, give to the Lord. Then we find in verse two, that parallel to this action of giving something to the Lord, is the act of worshipping the Lord. Hebrew poetry so often puts thoughts that are equivalent, or synonymous, or overlapping, parallel to each other to develop and draw out what is being spoken about.

So here we have a kind of Rosetta stone to understand what worship is. We know David is talking about worship, he says so. We also know he considers worship to be the same thing, or nearly the same thing as this act of giving something to the Lord.

What is it that worshippers are to give to the Lord?

We are to give the Lord glory and strength. Specifically, we are to give the Lord the glory **due His name**. If something is due, what does that mean? If we say your yearly fees are due, what do we mean? We mean you owe something. There is a debt, and that debt must be met. If we say that we speak with all due respect, we mean that someone deserves a kind of respect, and we are granting that. We even use it to mean something is payable – your rent is due. Glory speaks of the sum total of God's worth. It is the outshining value of what makes God, God. It is all God is, displayed for admiration.

In other words, to say God has glory due His name is to say His character has a certain value and

calls for an appropriate response. God, because of who He is, deserves a certain kind of treasuring, or honouring, or valuing, and such a response is payable by all His creatures.

Worship is ascribing true value to God. The old English word tried to capture this idea, because it literally means 'worth-ship' - the worth of God, the value of God. Worship is evaluating God, and expressing what you believe God is worth.

In fact, when you think about it, human beings are always in the business of evaluating and expressing value. Whether it's natural scenery, or foods, or activities, or people, they are always, in conversation and through action and emotion, expressing their positive or negative evaluation of things and people. "That place was amazing!" "This food is incredible!" "This town is a bit dingy!" "He is such a back-stabber." "She is so gracious." "This ring is so beautiful!" Human beings have been made to value beauty, whether it is a natural or a moral kind of beauty. When we're confronted with beauty, we admire and praise and love it. We ascribe value to it.

So what Scripture calls us to do is not something we know nothing about. To worship God is to take the faculties God has given you for evaluating and ascribing value, and turn their focus onto God Himself. Evaluate who God is, and once you've found that out, once you have learned what he is worth, then express that: give Him due, or the appropriate glory.

If the Bible says, give Him what is due, it is clear that this is what He deserves. To deny Him this worship would make such praise overdue. Such worship would be outstanding, an unpaid debt, an unmet obligation. Worship is our ultimate obligation.

There is a weight of God's glory that presses upon us. The more we know God, the more we ought to feel the intensity of the need to respond in worship.

Psalm 113:3 From the rising of the sun to its going down The LORD's name is to be praised.

Psalm 145:3 Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; And His greatness is unsearchable

Every time Scripture says "He is worthy" it is saying, He is worth your worship. You owe Him your praise. Do what is fitting, give what is called for.

We know from experience that the more impressive; the more magnificent; the more beautiful the thing is that we observe or experience, the more our hearts urge us to announce the glory due to it. So it is with God. God is not sitting in heaven, hungry for compliments, and trying to stir up an army of insincere flatterers. God is more beautiful than the sum total of all His works. To know Him – to know the beauty of His holiness, is to sense in your heart the urgency, the reflex response of worship.

There is a word we have for people who do not recognise the value of something they ought to. We call them unjust. A just person is fair in his judgement. So when confronted with the weight of God's glory, he responds with the glory due His name.

Ultimate love gives God the glory as the only God. It upholds His supremacy, His sovereignty, His uniqueness.

But gladly, there is a second reason why loving God is the great priority of the Christian life, and it has to do with God's love for us. The experience of loving beauty is certainly an ascription of value on the object beheld. But it is also an experience of delight for the beholder, and, no one begrudges

the experience of seeing, or hearing, or experiencing beauty. In fact, we seek after such experiences. We regard them not as painful duties, but as pleasurable delights. We love beauty. We love the beauty of truth. We love moral beauty. We love physical beauty. We love intellectual beauty. We love natural beauty. We admire beauty, we seek it out, and we enjoy it for itself.

If God is the essence of all that is true, good, and beautiful, what sort of experience is it to know Him and love Him? He must be the ultimate source of delight, fulfilment and joy for a human being. In that case, calls to love Him ultimately, are calls from the lesser to the greater, calls to ascend from lesser joys to greater, from inferior to superior pleasure. The pleasure of what is beautiful in the world is only a shadow, an echo of the one who is Beautiful. A call to love God is a call to the sweetest experience a human can know: the rapturous awe of beholding beauty.

This is why Jesus prayed the following:

John 17:24 ²⁴ *"Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world."*

John 17:13 ¹³ *"But now I come to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves."*

Worship is our ultimate satisfaction. If God is the most valuable Being you can know, the most loving thing He can do is to allow you to know and enjoy Him. We were created to know and love God. Life is about God. It finds its fullest meaning in God Himself. Therefore, our lives find their satisfaction, meaning, purpose and peace in a fervent relationship with Him.

C.S. Lewis - I did not see that it is in the process of being worshipped that God communicates His presence to men. It is not of course the only way. But for many people at many times the 'fair beauty of the Lord' is revealed chiefly or only while they worship Him together.

Or as Lewis explained when he thought about this whole matter of praise:

But the most obvious fact about praise — whether of God or anything — strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honour. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise unless . . . shyness or the fear of boring others is deliberately brought in to check it. The world rings with praise — lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favourite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favourite game — praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars. . . . Except where intolerably adverse circumstances interfere, praise almost seems to be inner health made audible. . . . I had not noticed either that just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: 'Isn't she lovely? Wasn't it glorious? Don't you think that magnificent?' The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about. My whole, more general, difficulty about the praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely Valuable, what we delight to do, what indeed we can't help doing, about everything else we value. I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed.

The ultimate love we are to have towards God is two things – it is ultimate fulfilment for the one loving, and ultimate value statement for the one loved. It fulfils our deepest longings, and it

expresses the worth of God. It is the conjunction of human fulfilment and God's pleasure.

Which shows us that it is a loving action for God to call on us to love Him like this. He knows that the experience of His beauty will be the sweetest experience we can know, and it is love and goodness in Him that calls us to know Him.

This is why we are told to love God ultimately. Far from being the petty, megalomaniacal, pathological narcissist that some atheists make him out to be, God wants nothing but our deepest joys, or highest fulfilments.

What a God! That our greatest obligation should turn out to be our greatest pleasure; that our deepest joys would be the same as our designed purpose. This can only be from the hand of a loving God.

The priority of the Christian life is to love God ultimately. He is to be our ultimate dependence, ultimate devotion and ultimate delight. When we do this, we reflect His excellence, and find our deepest satisfaction.

But this all leads to the next stage of putting together a broad picture of the Christian life. If this is the priority of the Christian life, what is the process of the Christian life? After coming to saving faith in Jesus Christ, how is it that we come to love Him in this way?

This is what we will consider next, as we begin studying the process of the Christian life.