

HOW DO YOU LOVE GOD?

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Jesus told us to love God. He told us with what to love God; namely, love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, but how do we love God? How do you love God? Buying flowers, candy, birthday and Christmas gifts? Feeling warm and "goose-bumpy?" Telling God everything you know, and sharing your feelings? Writing poems, composing music? Kissing goodbye in the morning? Holding hands? Embracing? A woman was suffering from depression; she was upset and unhappy. The concerned husband took her to a psychiatrist. The doctor listened to the couple talk about their relationship, and then said, "The treatment I prescribe is really quite simple." With that he went over to the woman, gathered her up in his arms and gave her a big kiss. He then stepped back and looked at the woman's broad smile. Turning to the husband, he said, "See! That's all she needs to put new life back into her." Expressionless, the husband said, "Okay, Doc. I can bring her in on Tuesdays and Thursdays."

Embracing and kissing are how you love your spouse, but how do you love God? Or have you been with God so long, love is no longer a component in your relationship? Are you taking God for granted? One couple celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary with a beautiful reception. The husband was moved by the occasion and wanted to tell his wife just how he felt about her. She was very hard of hearing, however, and often communication was difficult. In the midst of family and friends, he toasted her: "My dear wife, after 50 years I've found you tried and true!" Everyone smiled, but his wife said, "Eh?" He repeated louder, "AFTER 50 YEARS I'VE FOUND YOU TRIED AND TRUE!" His wife snorted and said, "Well, let me tell you something; after 50 years I'm tired of you, too!"

How do you love God? Before answering that question, another question needs to be answered, "Why did Jesus say loving God was the most important commandment?" Jesus was asked by a teacher of the Law, "Rabbi, which commandment is the most important?" Before visiting the Holy Land, I rarely wondered where the conversations took place. But having seen the land, I am now curious when I read the Bible to discover where the incident occurred. This particular conversation is recorded in both Matthew, which was read to us this morning, and in Mark; and both agree that Jesus was at the temple. This conversation occurred after Palm Sunday and before his arrest, trial and crucifixion.

Picture in your mind a hustling, bustling city. The buildings are white stone, the streets are narrow with open shops. On the eastern edge of the city sits the temple, on top of what is called the Temple Mount. I had not realized until our trip that when King David conquered Jerusalem, he put the ark of the covenant in a tabernacle on top of Mount Moriah, which was the mountain Abraham climbed, taking his son, Isaac, with him to be sacrificed. But God intervened, commended Abraham on his faith and loyalty, and told him child sacrifice was not necessary. Human sacrifice, therefore, was never a part of Hebrew religion. It was on that mountain that David placed the ark, and where Solomon later built the temple. That temple was destroyed by the Babylonians, and then later rebuilt by Nehemiah and company. Before Jesus was born, King Herod the Great had retaining walls built around the mountain, and poured in land fill to create a flat piece of ground around the temple, which is now called the Temple Mount.

Just to bring you up-to-date, the second temple, the one in which Jesus worshipped, was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. In the 8th century A.D., the Muslims built the magnificent Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount. It is a round building, adorned with blue and white mosaics and a gold dome. The western retaining wall has been the site of Jewish pilgrimages since the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D., and has been called "The Wailing Wall," for it is here that Jews mourn the loss of their temple and the dispersion of their people.

During the last week of his life, Jesus spent a great deal of time on the Temple Mount, much to the consternation of the authorities who were becoming increasingly disturbed by his teachings. Picture a crowded area, filled with tourists, just like today; except the tourists in Jesus' day were Jews from around the Roman Empire who returned to Jerusalem, especially on Feast days, to sacrifice at the temple. Now there are soldiers guarding the entrances to the Temple Mount. I imagine there were soldiers then as well, Roman soldiers guarding the same entrances, making sure no incidents occurred that might precipitate a rebellion.

I also imagine the scene was something like Hyde Park in London where speakers gather a few listeners around them. You see the same thing today except the crowds are tour groups and the speakers are the tour guides! In that setting Jesus was asked many questions by Pharisees, Herod's cronies, and representatives of the Sanhedrin, trying to trap him, trying to catch Jesus saying something that would allow them to arrest him. You remember Jesus was popular and they did not dare to arrest him openly there on the Temple Mount, but waited for a dark night.

And then came the question, "Which is the most important commandment?" Jesus answered, "Love God and love your neighbor. The entire Law of Moses and the prophets hinges on these commandments." The version of this conversation in the book of Mark is very interesting. The questioner responded to Jesus' answer by saying, "Well done, Teacher! It is more important to obey these two commandments than to offer on the altar animals and other sacrifices to God." Jesus replied, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." Remember where this conversation took place. It took place either in the temple itself, or outside on the Temple Mount. These words deprecating the sacrificial system were spoken in the midst of the sacrifices. The sacrificing of animals was a big business in those days. By the end of a good day, the priests inside the temple would be waist-deep in the blood of the slaughtered animals. Can you imagine the scene? With all those animals, it must have been like a barnyard outside, and like a slaughter house inside! Can you imagine the noise, the smell, the smoke from the fires? And this was a house of worship!

Probably what "did Jesus in" was his opposition to the sacrificial system. In this opposition he aligned himself firmly with the prophets who through the centuries before him preached, "God is more pleased with the sacrifice of your heart than the sacrifice of animals." Remember Micah, "What does the Lord require of you? Does the Lord want slaughtered animals? No, what the Lord wants of you is for you to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God." There was a sharp antagonism between the prophets and rabbis on one hand, and the priests and religious establishment who had become wealthy by selling the

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animals to tourists for exorbitant prices, and cheating them in the exchange rate as well. Jesus aligned himself with the prophets and the rabbinic reformers, and it cost him his life.

Jesus answered the question--what is the most important commandment?--by saying loving God is the most important commandment. Loving God is the most important act we can do, even more important than sacrificing animals, more important than liturgical or ceremonial acts. Now, what did Jesus mean by loving God? How do you love God? Jesus was quoting from the Old Testament; you heard a passage from Deuteronomy this morning. Jesus considered the two commandments to love God and neighbor to be the summation of the Law, and keeping the Law is our part of the covenant.

The heart of biblical religion is covenant--the pact, contract, agreement, entered into by two parties; in this case by God and God's people. This is the revolutionary, the distinctive nature of biblical religion. We believe that God--the creator of the galaxies, the ruler, the omnipotent, omniscient one--out of love for his creation, has entered into a covenant with his people. Some of the older editions of the Bible use the word "covenant" which is more descriptive than "testament." Our Bible is composed of two sections: the old covenant which God made with the Jews, and the new covenant which God made with all people through Jesus. The New Covenant is the fulfillment, not the eradication, of the former covenant.

The new covenant is made with us by God who, through his son, Jesus, revealed himself in a unique way; through the life, teachings, death and resurrection of a human being. Through that human, Jesus, we see the purpose of God for his creation, and the love of God for his people. God loves us with the love revealed in the wise, caring, gentle but tough Jesus who stood up for people, befriended the poor, fought the impersonal, oppressive systems, and died forgiving his enemies. What is your response to the generous gift of God's grace? How do you love God? Enter into covenant.

Can you see yourself in a covenant relationship with God? a contract? an agreement? Love is the basis of the covenant. For an analogy, look at a marriage that has lasted through the years, where you observe, "They really love one another." The couple has moved beyond pure emotion. They no longer have butterflies in their stomachs. They are no longer prevented from eating because they are filled with romance. But they love one another. They enjoy being together. They are considerate of each other's feelings. They wait on one another. They do errands for each other. And they are loyal. Their love for one another has deepened into commitment. They are committed to each other. They are committed to each other's happiness. They are committed to each other's dreams and hopes. They live in such a way that brings happiness to the other and glory to their relationship. They are proud of their marriage, proud of their family, and they live ethical, moral, committed lives out of respect and pride.

In a similar way, that is how you love God. Loving God has its moments of beauty, its moments of tenderness and joy; perhaps it is the sight of a sunset, or a newborn baby, or a magnificent concert, or a moving worship service. At such times, tears come to your eyes, your heart swells and fills with joy. But those moments come and go. Loving God has its moments of emotion, but true love of God has moved the relationship to commitment.

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DOUGLAS NORRIS
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

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Covenant means to be committed to God's purposes, committed to God's ways, committed to living a life of ethics and morality that brings glory to God's name, honor to the name of "Christian."

Our spirited ancestors, at least in the Methodist tradition, were wise and practical. They gave us four practical expressions of covenant. When you join the church you are asked to uphold the church with your prayers, your offerings, your attendance, and your service. You express your covenant by serving God--serving in the community through causes that improve the quality of human life. You express your covenant by serving in the church--teaching, singing, committee work, clerical work, ushering, so that the ministry of God might prosper. You express your covenant by praying, attending, and giving.

How do you love God? How do you respond in gratitude for your life and all you have received from God? By upholding your part of the covenant.