

Love God With All You've Got • Matthew 22:37–38

Olympic athletes are willing to do just about anything in order to win a gold medal. Seekers of national public political office often have to make huge sacrifices in order to reach their goal. But they're passionate about these things.

Then there are some people who focus their passion on more peculiar priorities. Like the wealthy man who, when he was a teenager, had a 1958 Chevrolet Impala convertible. He sold it before he went to college. But later in life he hired a private investigator to track down that car and finally found it in a junkyard in the other end of the country. He purchased it, had it shipped to his home, and spent tens of thousands of dollars in order to bring that Impala back to its original condition.

Most of us have less newsworthy passions, but that doesn't mean that we are any less passionate. There are some of us who would sell our souls in order to get career success. There are others who spend most of every day battling against some illness trying to stay alive a little bit longer. There are many of us for whom our families are so important that we would literally be willing to sacrifice our lives for one of our children. Then we all know about those who get super worked up over politics. And the list can go on.

People become passionate about music and art and gardening and sex and computers and houses and sports and science and history and hobbies and many other things. These are the things we love. And it's good to be passionate about something as long as it's not inappropriate. It's part of what defines who we are. It's part of what makes life what it is.

But there is one passion or love in life that we can and should have as outranking all of the others. The words come from the lips of Jesus. They've sometimes been called The Great Commandment. In Matthew 22 Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment." I want that to be me. I know God loves me, and I want to love God. I want to love him fully and passionately and completely.

So, let's talk about love, taking a look at it, at what loving God looks like. It certainly has to start in believing that God exists, that faith precedes love. If you don't believe there is a God, certainly you're not able to love that God. There's a line in the New Testa-

ment in Hebrews 11:6 that says, "Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."

There are some men and women who have given up on ever finding someone to love in life. It is because she has been deeply disappointed by men, so she doesn't love or like or seek a relationship with a man. Or it's because he tried to love and failed at love, tried it several times. Each of them has concluded there just isn't anybody out there who is lovable. There's no one out there who is worth loving, so don't look because the person doesn't exist.

So it is with God. Before loving him, we have to believe that God is real, that he exists. We must believe that he cares, that he can and does make a difference in the lives of those who believe in him.

But it's not just a matter of believing that God is. To love him, we also have to believe who God is. For there are some people who make up a god. He is made by their imagination. We're all familiar with other countries and cultures and religions where someone

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goes out into the forest, cuts down a tree, and then takes a chisel and hammer and shapes a god and sets up that god

in the center of the village or in the center of home and bows down and worships that god. They may even say 'I love that god.'

To us that seems strange and heathen and even bizarre, except in our culture we do something that is our own version of the same thing. We imagine a god. We design him to be who we want him to be. We take bits and pieces of the design that we borrow from various religions, but we also shape that god according to our own experiences. We decide who we want him to be and who we don't want him to be. So we end up with a designer god, much as we have designer jewelry or we have a designer stock portfolio. He is the god of our making. We may call him 'god', but the truth of it is that he is not the God of the Bible.

Likewise, we all know the sad stories of men and women who have courted and then married, imagining the other person to be what that person is not. Then, three weeks or three months or three years into the marriage, that person comes to discover that this individual to whom commitments have been made is quite unlike what that person was fantasized to be, and then

there is deep and harsh disappointment. We must come to the realization that people are who they are, not who we make them up or imagine them to be. And so it is with God. He is who he is. When we love him, we must love him as he is.

When Jesus spoke these words about love, he was actually quoting from the Old Testament, from Deuteronomy chapter 6, in what was called the Shema of Israel. The word 'Shema' means hear, and that is the first word – 'hear'. It was quoted in those days at least twice every twenty-four hours by every devout Jew. Every synagogue service always began with the recitation of the Shema. It goes like this: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one."

It is out of that belief that then comes the instruction to love this one God. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."

So to love God is to first believe that he exists, and then to believe that he is who he says that he is. That he is the God of the Bible, that he is the creator of the heavens and the earth, that he is the author of the Ten Commandments, and that he is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And to love him is to not only believe that he is and to believe who he is, but to be attracted to him. You've got to like God in order to love God. To be attracted to him is to be attracted to the way he loves, the way he thinks, the way he looks, the way he expresses himself, the way he is for holiness and against what is evil and sinful. It is to like his leadership and to like his Son because, if we don't like him, probably we're never going to love him.

But, to be attracted to God, at least initially, does not mean that we like everything about him. You've gone to a party or at work met some new person and you like that person, in fact there were a hundred things about that person that you really liked but about seven things that you disliked. You had to come to a decision. Were you going to let the hundred things you liked triumph over the seven, or were you going to let the seven so irritate you that you wouldn't have anything more to do with that person?

So it is that as we check out God we are largely attracted to him, but there are some things that he says and does with which we are not comfortable. There are some disappointments that we have in God because he has not done in our lives what we would like to have done. There are things for which we have prayed that we have not received. There are ways that God has treated us and we wish we had been treated differently. Are we going to let the things that we like about

God outweigh the things that we don't like about God? Are we going to give preference to our points of agreement or to our points of disagreement? Are we going to be drawn to him or not? Because to truly love God we need to be attracted to him, to like him, and to want to be like him. To love God requires commitment to God because there never can be true and lasting love without there first being serious and deep commitment.

Oh, I know there are some people who say love leads to commitment, and there's truth to that. But it could also be argued that commitment leads to love.

When Charleen and I were married, we loved each other. That's why we got married. In our wedding vows we each promised saying, "I will cling to thee and to thee alone so long as we both shall live." That was a commitment to an exclusive relationship that we would be bonded and bound to each other in a way that would keep every other man and woman out of that relationship. And it would be a lifelong commitment. It is in the exclusivity of that commitment that we have seen love grow far greater than what it first was. And so it is with God, that there is to be an exclusive commitment to him that he is Number One in our lives and that we will not allow anyone to breach that commitment.

If you are familiar with the introductory words to the Ten Commandments, you've heard God say, "I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God." God will not allow anything except exclusivity in our relationship with him. It's a commitment, and that commitment then leads to love.

So what does loving God look like? Well, it looks like believing that God is, believing who God is, being attracted to God, being committed to God, and being obedient to God. Ooh, not a good word in our culture. In fact I'm convinced that we can basically never use the word 'obedient' without always having a disclaimer that it is not complete obedience.

In the military the protocol is that you must obey the orders of a superior officer. However, since WW II, since the war crimes trials, since a number of things that have happened since WW II, we always put in the disclaimer that no one is expected to obey an illegal or an immoral order. So it's obedience...except.

And the same thing is true within a family. There's supposed to be obedience in a family and that's appropriate; however, no one is ever expected to obey someone who is abusive. That's true. That's right. That's a

very good and wise instruction.

In school we say that students should obey their teachers. But you should never obey a teacher who instructs you to do something that is wrong. So we always expect that there is an exception, and we are taught that we are to be independent of those who call upon us to obey.

But, what if there was a leader who was always right, who was always good, who was always kind, who was never abusive, who never did us any harm, who was experienced and wise? Well, that's the kind of leader that God is. And to love him is to commit to obey him before he gives us the instructions that we are to obey. While that sounds nice in theory, I find myself balking at the concept. I somehow want to retain my independence and my right to decision after I find out with full disclosure what is being asked of me. In fact, it seems to me that we would rather maintain our independence and be wrong than have complete obedience and be right.

Would you be willing to submit to the power and the authority of a good and loving God? Would you be willing to completely surrender that you will do whatever that God calls you to do before he even asks you to do it? Jesus said, "If you love me, you will obey what I command." So in the teachings of Jesus, love and obedience are joined at the hip. There is no love that does not include obedience.

So what do you think? Do you think that if that's what love looks like that you still want to do it, that you want to love with all of your heart and soul and mind? If yes, then what does love act like? What does love actually do?

Let's make a list. The first, the simplest, and the most powerful way to love God is to tell him. Say it directly and say it often. "God, I love you." Tell him first thing in the morning so it becomes the waking prayer of the day. "Good morning, God; I love you." Say it throughout the day so it punctuates our work and our travels and our relationships. "God, I love you." Make it the last conscious verbalization before sliding into sleep in bed at night. "Good night, God. I love you." And as we are willing to tell friends and neighbors about family love, so we ought to be willing and ready to tell them about our love of God.

In addition to saying, 'I love you,' we need to say 'I trust you' because there is no real love without trust.

Trust is a wonderful thing. Trust gives confidence to love. Trust allows barriers to come down and allows us to withdraw our defenses. Love is convinced that the other person is good and faithful and will do us no harm. It is that kind of trust where you know that the other person is always concerned for your best interests. Loving God means trusting God and telling him that. Tell him that you are convinced that he will do you no harm, that he is pulling for you, that he is on your side. Even when something happens that seems strange, like it's not quite what you would expect from

God, that you so trust him that you totally believe him. You're convinced in advance that he will do good and right for you. Say it. Tell God and tell him often. "God, I love you and God, I completely trust you."

And then ask him how to love him better, because

that's what lovers need to know. They need to know what the other person wants and needs. 'God, what do you like and what's important to you and what makes you happy and what makes you sad?' That's important because lovers always want to make the other person happy.

Watch someone that you know who is selfish and greedy and self-centered fall in love. Watch the center move to the other person. It's an astonishing transformation. That's what love does. Love is always unselfish. So ask God, 'God how can I love you better?' You don't need to give him suggestions. He can handle this. He can think of the answer himself. And don't expect an immediate response. God may tell you in that moment or he may tell you a long time later. But ask him the question. 'God, how can I love you best of all?'

And then do what God wants you to do. Most of the time I think we know what that is because the Bible is full of information about what God wants and what is God's will. In fact, I can quickly test you on that. What does God want you to do at school? You pretty much know. What does God want you to do in terms of the way you relate and behave at work? What does God want in your most intimate and closest relationship with someone else? What does God want you to do about debt? How does God want you to handle money? What is God's desire for your relationship with those who are poor and hurting and lost? Oh, sometimes we don't know the will of God. We all have those moments and those circumstances where

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it's hard to figure out, but most of the time we do know. So relatively seldom is the issue ignorance. If someone loves you, you want that person to do what will please you. So it is that God wants us to please him.

What would be the one thing that would just delight God's heart today? What this week would be the one thing that you could say or do that would show God without a doubt that you really do passionately love him? Then just do that one thing.

Last on the list of items to act out love toward God is to always give God the benefit of the doubt. I read a study once about couples who had had lifelong marriages and were wonderfully in love throughout their marriages. The social scientist tried to figure out what was the key ingredient. The study was sophisticated, although the conclusion was amazingly simple. The conclusion of that particular study was that those who have such a relationship tend to see each other through rose-colored glasses. That is, they are not particularly objective. They're amazingly subjective in the way they view one another.

You're familiar with that. You've been with this couple that's been married for years and years and he says to you, pointing to her, "Isn't she the most gorgeous woman you have ever seen?" (You're hoping this is a rhetorical question because you don't really know quite what to say here.) Fortunately, she interrupts before you have a chance to come up with an answer, and she says to you, "Isn't he the best looking man in the entire United States of America?" And you're thinking he isn't even close. He isn't even the best looking man here right now, much less in the whole United States of America. But, you see, they're not objective about the way each sees the other. They're in love. Love doesn't see objectively.

Or, he tells a joke. To say this is an old joke, George Washington tried it, but no one laughed. It's so old a joke that it's been told again and again, thousands of times, and he isn't even a very good joke teller. Even if it's funny, it's not funny when he tells it. But he tells it, and she's heard it seventeen thousand times. She knows every inflection, every syllable. She knows exactly when he's going to tell it. When he finishes this joke and no one else laughs, she just bursts out into laughter. She laughs and laughs at this joke. He's not funny. She's in love. Love sees the other person though rose-colored glasses. Love gives the other person the benefit of the doubt.

Those who love God give him the benefit of the doubt. They like what he says before he says it. They like what God does before he does it. They think that God is great even when other people don't. When other

people are saying, "God doesn't do a very good job running this world, does he?" those who love him are saying, "I think he does a great job running this world." The lover's first response is to give the benefit of the doubt, to trust the other, to give God the benefit of the doubt, to not be a skeptic but to trust him.

Last of all, and most of all, love is an intensely personal decision. "Love the Lord your God with all **your** heart and with all **your** soul and with all **your** strength." You. Uniquely you. So who is that? Who makes you you? What is it about you that distinguishes you from everyone else?

You say, "Well I'm a human being." "I'm a male," or "I'm a female." Or someone says, "I'm a runner." Or someone else says, "I'm a musician," and another says, "I'm a very sensitive person." Then we hear answers like, "I'm a thinker;" "I'm an executive;" "I'm a homemaker;" "I'm a dad;" "I'm a daughter;" "I'm an athlete;" "I'm a computer geek;" "I'm a hunter." Someone else says, "I'm a mom," or "I'm a son." Someone says, "I'm from Norwegian descent," and someone else says, "I'm an African-American." Another says, "Me? Who am I? I'm an old geezer, that's who I am." Or, "I'm a consultant," or "a pilot," or "a golfer," or "a cancer survivor." "I'm a writer," or "a widow," or "a friend," or "I'm pregnant." "I'm a reader;" or, "I'm a teacher;" or, "I'm a laborer;" or, "I'm a leader."

Whoever you are, **who you uniquely are**, " 'Love the Lord your God with all **your** heart and with all **your** soul and with all **your** mind.' This is the first and the greatest commandment."

And so, Lord God, we love you. We trust you. We want to know how we can love you better. We're committed to you. We will obey you. Oh, Lord God, help us. Help us to passionately, passionately love you with all we've got, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Good news: God loves you. Be loved, and may you "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." Amen.

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