

Southport Presbyterian Church
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A Relationship of Love with God
Matthew 22:34-40

³⁴Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” ³⁷Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” ³⁸This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

As we continue our journey as a church family through the book, *Experiencing God*, we arrive at a chapter that I believe is key not just for the book but for the Christian life as well. It involves having a love relationship with God. The authors write, “Everything in your Christian life, everything about knowing Him and experiencing Him, everything about knowing His will depends on the quality of your love relationship with God. If that is not settled, nothing in your life will be right... A relationship with God is real and personal. This has always been His desire.” (Claude King and Richard Blackaby, *Experiencing God*, p. 53, 65).

One of the most powerful lessons Jesus taught concerning our relationship with God came near the end of His ministry. In response to a question about what is the greatest commandment, He cited Deuteronomy 6:5: “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” (Matthew 22:37-38 NIV). This command to love God is foundational for the Christian life. We are to have a relationship of love with the God of the universe.

From this passage we see the following about this relationship:

First, God wants a relationship of love with us. He wants an intimate relationship with His people where we really get to know Him. John Bevere in his book, *Drawing Near: A Life of Intimacy with God* expresses well this desire that God has: ... “Within the book of James, we find the greatest invitation ever issued, ‘Draw near to God and He will draw near to you’ (4:8). Stop a moment and ponder this: the Creator of the universe, the earth, and all its inhabitants, requests your presence. Not only your presence, but He desires to be intimately close, for we are told ‘He is a God who is passionate about his relationship with you’ (Exodus 34:14 NLT). This is God’s unwavering desire. He is the One who has issued the invitation, for He longs to be known by His children” (John Bevere, *Drawing Near: A Life of Intimacy with God*, p. 1, 2).

God wants a relationship. He wants a relationship of the heart. Our heart is the first part of us that is commanded to love God. We are also to love God with our soul and mind. But many times we go directly to the mind and love God there but we skip the heart. We may even feel that because we believe in one God with our minds that is all that is needed for a relationship with Him. But listen to this challenge from the Book of James: “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder” (James 2:19). The demons and the evil one believe there is one God, but they certainly have no personal or intimate relationship with God. They hate Him.

The Apostle Paul talks about intimacy with Jesus in *Philippians 3:10-11* and his words here also express what our relationship with God the Father should be as well. He writes: “I want

to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.” William Barclay writes about Paul’s words here in Philippians: “. . . the verb which he [Paul] uses for to know . . . almost always indicates personal knowledge. It is not simply intellectual knowledge, the knowledge of certain facts or even principles. It is the personal experience of another person. It is not Paul’s aim to know about Christ, but personally to know Him” (William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, Revised Edition, pg. 63). Paul’s desire here is to know Jesus not with a superficial knowledge or a factual head type of knowledge. Rather, he wanted to know Jesus deeply, intimately and well. He wanted to know Him personally in a very deep way. He wanted knowledge of the heart. He wanted intimacy with Jesus. That is the kind of intimacy God the Father wants with us.

A good way to understand this concept is by this example. If I asked all of you here if you know President George W. Bush, almost every hand would go up. We know George W. Bush—he’s President of the United States. We know him as a figure, as a living person.

But if I asked if any of you had ever met George W. Bush, probably few, if any hands, would go up. If I asked further if any of you really knew George W. Bush’s dreams and desires not just for our nation but for his family, his life, probably no hands would go up. However, if I asked this same question to some of his best friends, they could probably tell me that they know what his dreams and desires are. That’s because they know George W. Bush personally. They talk with him on a deep, personal level – friend to friend. They know George W. Bush the person.

Many people know facts about God and Jesus, Who He is, the Messiah, the Son of God, Who died for the sins of the world and rose bodily again. They know the facts about Jesus and God the Father but they don’t know them personally. Not only have these folks not entrusted their lives, their futures to the Hands of God or Jesus, but they also have not sought to hear what their dreams and plans are for the lives of these people. They don’t know the heart of God for them.

The Apostle John wrote in 1 John 5:16, “God is love.” That’s what God is. It is His very nature. It is why He wants an intimate relationship of love with His children. Indeed, theologian Karl Barth, in his *Church Dogmatics*, defines God as “the One who loves” (Philip Yancey, *What’s so Amazing about Grace*, p. 55). So God wants and pursues an intimate relationship of love with us.

Second, we see that the very fact that we are commanded to love God indicates that this is something people don’t do or don’t want to do or avoid. John Bevere writes, “We’ve emphasized the liberation from sin and death [that Jesus brings], but neglected to declare the intimate fellowship [with God] awaiting all who’ve been made free [by Jesus]. This neglect [of this teaching in the Church] is costly and even disastrous, as so many miss the beauty of knowing God intimately” (John Bevere, *Drawing Near: A Life of Intimacy with God*, p. 2).

I often believe the neglect to teach this intimate relationship of love with God in the church is due to the fear Christians have of any intimacy with God. They fear Him getting to know them intimately and well because maybe He might not like what He finds in their life or that He may call on them to change or give up some things.

Those who are fearful of what God may find or see in their life miss the fact that first God knows everything about us in the first place. We can’t hide from Him. In addition, God loves us for who we are and in spite of our sins, failures, and weaknesses. Paul writes about the unconditional love of God in Romans 5:8, “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While

we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Yet, despite knowing this, many Christians are still fearful of intimacy with God because He may call on them to change, and they don't want to do so. Even though God calls on us to change because He loves us too much to let us stay where we are, they still don't want to change. As a result, this avoidance of intimacy with God shows up in several ways in Christians. First, they focus on having proper doctrine and belief as a way to appear like they have a relationship with God, but they are really more enamored with theological concepts about God than knowing God personally. They equate proper doctrine and beliefs – which are important – with knowing God intimately in their hearts. They can rattle off all sorts of facts and theological doctrines about God and Jesus. But they really don't know either one personally.

We need to remember that the Pharisees were as doctrinally pure as you could get in their day. Much of what they believed, but by no means all, was very orthodox and sound. Yet their doctrines and their love for doctrinal and ritual purity kept them from doing what God wanted done and kept them from knowing Jesus. Concerning the Pharisees' journey of the head and not of the heart, Jesus cited Isaiah concerning them, when He said in Matthew 15: 8 “These people worship me their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”

Henri Nouwen once said the following about our relationship with Jesus and which applies to our relationship with God as well, “Very often we distance ourselves from Jesus. We say, ‘What Jesus knew we cannot know, and what Jesus did we cannot do.’ But Jesus never puts any distance between himself and us. He says, ‘I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father’ (John 15:15) and ‘In all truth I tell you, whoever believes in me will perform the same works as I do myself, and will perform even greater works.’ (John 14:12). Indeed, we are called to know what Jesus knew and do what Jesus did. Do we really want that, or do we prefer to keep Jesus at arm's length?” (Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*, June 2).

One time a friend gave me a print-out from a blog or website where the writer claimed that the term “personal relationship with God” was not biblical. The writer claimed that faith does not involve a relationship with God but rather a set of beliefs about Him. What I saw in this writer was a person who tried to keep God at a distance by viewing God and any contact with Him as being relegated only to a set of beliefs about God and not a relationship of love with Him. When I read the article, the first question I had was, “What does this guy fear about an intimate, loving relationship with God? Because he is certainly trying to keep God at a distance by restricting any contact with God as being restricted to only a set of beliefs about Him!”

As William Barclay notes about Jesus and which applies also to God the Father: “To know Christ is not to be skilled in any theoretical or theological knowledge; it is to know him with such intimacy that in the end we are as united with him as we are with those whom we love on earth and that, as we share their experiences, so we also share his” (Barclay, pg. 65-66).

Finally, we see that the love of God will inevitably lead to love for our neighbor as verse 39 states. If we want to be able to hear God's voice and what He calls us to do in the world to help others and build His Kingdom, it starts first and foremost with this relationship of love and intimacy with Him. It can start nowhere else. All Christian action flows out of this love for God and the resulting desire to please Him.

You see, if we are in love with God, we will want to do His will out of love for Him. 1 John 5:3 says, “This is love for God: to obey his commands.”

Larry Tomczak writes, “When you know the Jesus of the Bible, you daily fall more and more in love with Him. Jesus doesn't want you following Him out of cold, rigid, legalistic

obedience as if He were an impersonal taskmaster or an exacting judge. He wants you to obey Him because you love Him and delight in pleasing Him!” (Larry Tomczak, *Seeking the Savoir*, p. 4). So is it also for God the Father. He wants us to obey because we love Him.

This love for God is what will empower us to do whatever God calls us to do.

Mike Bickle writes, “This will be the characteristic of the martyrs at the end of the age: Lost in love, they won’t care what they are called to do; they’ll just want to do it with Him! They will want to love and obey Him whether in this age or in the age to come, whether in heaven or on earth. Their hearts will be reaching for that primary reward: to live overflowing in the experience of the love of God – to experience love from Him, to love back and to love others with the overflow. . . Ultimately, the Great Commission will be fulfilled by people lovesick for God and thus overflowing with compassion for other people” (Mike Bickle, *Seeking the Savior*, p. 12).

Indeed, it is this love, this passion for Jesus that will set the church of the 21st Century on fire. It will be what sets the hearts of believers on fire to tell others about Jesus, to transform society and its social ills and injustices just like it did for John Wesley and William Wilberforce and others who evangelized, changed their decaying societies, and battled evils such as slavery. Brothers and sisters, if we want to see our nation and the world evangelized today; if we want to see the greatest challenge in the history of the church overcome – that is, reaching the Islamic world for Christ; if we want to see the economic and political injustices of our nation overcome; if we want to see the end to abortion, pornography, the slave trade of women and children worldwide; if we want to see people set free from adultery, homosexuality, and other sexual problems and sin; if we want to see a nation that truly cares for the poor and needy and speaks out against lavish human consumption that deprives others; if we truly believe what God says in Isaiah 61:8, “For I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity;” if we truly believe what God says in Ezekiel 18:23, that He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but that the wicked turn from his ways and live; brothers and sisters, if we want to see any of these things happen, if we want to see all that God wants changed become a reality, if we want to know all that is in His heart, it will take followers of Jesus who have first and foremost, a deep, passionate love of God and Jesus above everything else. It will be what will drive the changes in our world that God wants His people to undertake.

Recently, a missionary to Southeast Asia shared with me about a visit he had to Nagaland in northern India. At one time Nagaland was an extremely dangerous region that was made up of tribes of head hunters. Today, it is overwhelmingly Christian, so much so that the nation of India tries to restrict visitors to that area. They don’t want the world to know that Jesus is the One who transformed that region from being so dangerous to a region of transformed lives.

How did Nagaland become transformed? It was a missionary from England who loved God and answered the call of God to go to Nagaland. My friend asked several Christians who this missionary was, but no one remembers his name. All they remembered is that he came from England, that he lived in the same kind of huts that they lived in, ate the same kind of food that they ate, wore the same kind of clothes they wore, told them about Jesus and God’s love for them, and that Jesus transformed their hearts, their lives, their region.

My friend continued his travels in Nagaland. Everywhere he went, he asked Christians the name of the missionary who came to Nagaland from England, and the answer was the same from everyone he asked. No one remembered his name.

One day he came across a stone monument. It was built by Christians in Nagaland to express their gratitude to God for His love in Jesus and to remember the missionary and his love

for God and the people of Nagaland. It was a humble gift from people who had been transformed because one person loved God so much that that he answered God's call to go to Nagaland.

There were only four words on this monument of stone but these four words expressed profound gratitude. The monument simply said, "To the Unknown Missionary."

Brothers and sisters, may we be like the missionary from Nagaland and do whatever God asks of us, and may we do it not because of fame and recognition and praise, and not because we will even be remembered. But rather we do it simply because we love God.

Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

Amen.