

KNOWING & LOVING GOD

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“Hear, O Israel: ... thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.” (Deuteronomy 6:4, 5)

“Jesus said ... This is the first and great commandment.” (Matthew 22:37, 38)

“If a man love Me, he will keep My words: “And My Father will love him, And We will come unto him, and make Our abode with him.” (John 14:23)

Both the Ten Commandments given to Israel and the moral law God has written in every conscience (Romans 2:14-15) require each of us to love God with our entire being. Such a demand is laid upon us not because God needs our love, for He is infinite and lacks nothing. Nor is it because God is self-centered or proud and thus demands that we love Him above all else. He commands us to love Him with our whole heart because nothing else could save us from our incorrigible enemy, Self.

This first and greatest commandment is given for our own good. God loves each of us so much that He wants to give us the greatest possible blessing: Himself. He does not, however, force Himself upon anyone, for that would not be love. We must genuinely and earnestly desire Him. **“And ye shall seek Me, and find Me, when ye shall search for Me with all your heart”** (Jeremiah 29:13) is the promise of God, who otherwise hides Himself (Isaiah 45:15). And again, **“He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him”** (Hebrews 11:6).

This fervent seeking after God with the whole heart, without which no one can know Him, has always been the mark of His true followers. One of the psalmists likened his passion for God to the thirst of a deer panting for water (Psalm 42:1, 2). David expressed it the same way: **“O GOD ... I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee ...”** (Psalm 63:1). What greater desire could one have than **knowing** GOD? Yet this most worthy pursuit is neglected even by Christians.

How astonishing that the infinite Creator of the universe offers Himself to such degraded creatures as ourselves! Nor is His love an impersonal cosmic force; it is intimately personal. Think of that! Such love should awaken a fervent response within us. Yet how many of us express our love to God even once a day let alone love

Him with our entire being? Sadly, even Christians are caught up instead in the forbidden love of the world (John 2:15) and the pursuit of its deceitful rewards.

Loving God is the first commandment because our obedience to all His other commandments must be motivated by love for Him. Moreover, since God commands us to love Him with our whole being, then our entire life--yes, everything we think and say and do--must flow from that love. Paul reminds us that even giving everything one possesses to the poor and being martyred in the flames is in vain unless motivated by love for Him. {[LOVE] ... Seeketh Not Her Own [SELF] ... -- 1 Corinthians 13:4-5.}

If loving God with one's whole being is the greatest commandment, then not to do so must be the greatest sin--indeed, the root of all sin. How is it, then, that loving God, without which all else is but "sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal" (1 Corinthians 13:1), is not even found in the course lists of our theological seminaries? How can it be that this "first and great[est] commandment" is so neglected in the church? The sad truth is that among today's evangelicals it is not loving and esteeming God but self-love and self-esteem that are presented as the pressing need!

I speak to my own heart. At times I weep that, like Martha (Luke 10:38-42), in the busyness of serving Christ, I give so little thought or time to loving Him. Oh, to be more like {Martha's sister} Mary! How does one learn to love God without ever having seen Him (John 1:18; 1 Timothy 6:16; 1 John 4:12, 20)? Obviously, there must be a reason for loving God--or anyone. Yes, reason and love do go together. Love must result from more than a physical attraction, which, in itself, can only arouse a fleshly response. In addition to the outward appeal there are the inner beauties of personality, character, integrity, and, of course, the other's love response. God loves without such reasons. Our love, even for Him, requires them. "We love Him, because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Our heavenly Father loves even those who make themselves His enemies, those who defy Him, reject His laws, deny His existence, and would tear Him from His throne. Christ proved that love in going to the Cross to pay the penalty for all, even asking the Father to forgive those who nailed Him there (Luke 23:34). Such is the love that the Christian, having experienced it for himself, is to manifest through Christ living in him: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).

To love God with our whole heart and our neighbors as ourselves is not something we can produce by self-effort. Love for our fellows must be the expression of God's love in our hearts; nor can we love God except by coming to know Him as He is. A false god

won't do. Yet at the 1993 National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C., Vice President Al Gore said, "Faith in God, reliance upon a Higher Power, by Whatever Name, is in my view essential." No one can love the "12-STEP GOD As You Conceive Him to Be." That would be like loving some imaginary person. To **know** the true God is to **love** Him; and to **know** Him better is to **love** Him all the more.

Most of us have an all-too-shallow knowledge of God. Nor can our love for God grow except from a deepening appreciation of His love for us--an appreciation that must include two extremes:

- 1) God's infinite greatness; and**
- 2) Our sinful, wretched unworthiness.**

That He, who is so high and holy, would stoop so low to redeem unworthy sinners supremely reveals and demonstrates His love. Such an understanding is the basis of our **love** and gratitude in return and will be the unchanging theme of our praise throughout all eternity in His glorious presence (Revelation 5:8-14).

There can be no doubt that the clearer one's vision of God becomes, the more unworthy one feels, and thus the more grateful for His grace and love.

Such has always been the testimony of men and women of God. Job cried out to God, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor [hate] myself, and repent in dust and ashes (Job 42:5-6). Isaiah likewise lamented, "Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts" (Isaiah 6:5).

Such recognition of their sin and unworthiness did not decrease but enhanced the saints' love for God and appreciation of His grace. The more clearly we see the infinite chasm between God's glory and our sinful falling short thereof (Romans 3:23), the greater will be our appreciation of His grace and love in bridging that gulf to redeem us. And the greater our appreciation of His love for us, the greater will be our love for Him.

There is no joy that can compare to that of love exchanged. Nor is there any sorrow so deep as that of love spurned or ignored. How it must grieve our Lord that His redeemed ones love Him so little in return! That grief comes through in scripture passages such as these: "I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me" (Isaiah 1:2). "Can a maid forget her ornaments or a bride her attire?"

Yet My people have forgotten Me days without number” (Jeremiah 2:32).

Even more reprehensible than forgetfulness and neglect is the teaching of Christian psychology that God loves us because we are lovable and worth it. Richard Dobbins, best known Assemblies of God psychologist, suggest that one repeat, “I am a lovable, forgivable person.” Bruce Narramore boasts, “The Son of God considers us of such value that He gave His life for us.” If that were true, it would not increase but decrease our love for Him and our appreciation of His grace. **The Bible teaches that our love for God and our appreciation of His love and forgiveness will be in proportion to the recognition of our sin and unworthiness.**

Such was the lesson Christ taught Simon the Pharisee when He was a guest in his house. Jesus told of a creditor who forgave two debtors, one who owed a vast sum and another who owed almost nothing. Then He asked Simon, “Which of them will love him [the creditor] most?” Said Simon, “I suppose ... he, to whom he forgave most.” “Thou hast rightly judged,” replied Jesus. Then, rebuking Simon for failing even to give Him water and a towel, and commending the woman who had been washing His feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair, Christ declared pointedly, “Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little” (Luke 7:36-47).

It is both logical and biblical that the more sinful and worthless we realize we are in God’s eyes, the greater our gratitude and love that Christ would die for us. By whatever extent we imagine that we are lovable or worth His sacrifice we lessen our appreciation of His love. **The Bible teaches that God loves us not because of who we are but because of who He is. “God is love” (1 John 4:16).** If God loved us because something attractive or worthwhile within us elicited that love, then, changeable creatures that we are, we could lose that appeal and with it God’s love. **But if He loves us because God is love, then that love can never be lost, for God never changes. Therein lies our security for eternity (Jeremiah 33:3) --- and all the glory is His!**

We often find it difficult, especially in trying circumstances, to rest in God’s great love for us--no doubt because deep within our hearts we know how unworthy we are. Christian psychology tries mistakenly to cure this sense of unworthiness by persuading us that we are worth it after all. Robert Schuller declares, “The death of Christ on the cross is God’s price tag on a human soul ... [It means] we really are Some-bodies!” **Not so. Christ didn’t die for Some-bodies but for sinners.** Dobbins says, “If we hadn’t been worth it He wouldn’t have paid the price.” On the contrary, the greater the price the costlier our sin, not our worth. That the sinless Son of God

must die upon the Cross to redeem us shouldn't make us feel good about ourselves but ashamed, for it was our sins that nailed Him there. Yet Bruce Narramore calls the Cross "a foundation for self-esteem!"

This humanistic, self-inflating false gospel is being increasingly embraced by evangelicals. {But Whoso Keepeth His Word, In him Verily is the Love of God Perfected: (1 John 2:5)}. Establishing the counselee's self-worth is a key concept utilized at Rapha counseling centers founded by Robert S. McGee. Anthony A. Hoekema writes, "Surely God would not give His Son for creatures He considered to be of little worth!" Thus the love and gratitude toward God that the Cross ought to arouse in us is stifled by the perverted new belief that He did it because we are worth it. **Jay Adams points out the horrible error** of teaching that what God does for us is "a response on His part to our significance rather than an act of His love, free mercy, goodness and grace!"

Our song for eternity will be, "Worthy is the Lamb" (Revelation 5:12). Heaven has no place for the erroneous belief that Christ died because we are worth it. Christ's death in our place had nothing to do with our worth but with the depths of our sin, the demands made by God's justice, and His eternal glory.

Of course those who brought humanistic psychology's selfism into the church attempt to support it from Scripture. Bruce Narramore quotes Psalm 139 and suggests that the "wonderful pattern for growth, fulfillment and development" that "God built into our genes ... is the ultimate basis for self-esteem." Surely the genius of the genetic code should cause me to bow in wonder and worship at the wisdom and power of God--but self-esteem? Seeing the marvels of God's creative power in my genes is no more cause for self-exaltation than seeing God's creative power in another's genes or in any other part of the cosmos --- *I didn't create it!*

Paul declared, "By the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Corinthians 15:10). No basis for self-esteem there! Dare we think that we will ever be able to erase from our memories the fact that we are unworthy sinners saved by grace? Yes, God in His grace will give us crowns and rewards and we will even hear from our Lord's lips, "Well done, thou good and faithful _____ servant ... enter thou into the joy of thy [L]ord" (Matthew 25:21; 1 Corinthians 4:5). But will that give us a positive self-image, a sense of self-worth and self-esteem? **C.S. Lewis answers:** "The child who is patted on the back for doing a lesson well ... the saved soul to whom Christ says, 'Well done,' are pleased and ought to be. For here pleasure lies not in what you are but in the fact that you have pleased someone you rightly wanted to please. The trouble begins when you pass from thinking, 'I have pleased him,' to thinking, 'What a fine person I must be to have done it.'"

Our love for God even influences whether we yield to temptation. Lust is called both “deceitful” (Ephesians 4:22) and “hurtful” (1 Timothy 6:9) because it entices us with pleasure that is brief and involves disobedience to God and thus leads to pain and ruin in the end. Those whose focus is upon themselves think of God’s commandments in terms of pleasures denied. But those who are enraptured by God’s love have been delivered from self and find true and lasting pleasure and joy in obeying and thus pleasing Him. There is a joy that comes from pleasing God that is so far beyond any pleasure of this world that temptation loses its power in comparison.

The new theology denies us this path of victory. Its joy is selfish. To obey the first and great commandment is necessarily to deny self as Christ commanded (Matthew 16:24). Nor can one deny self and at the same time love, esteem, and value self. Seeing God’s love as a response to my significance and worth salvages just enough value for self to deny God’s truth. _____ **Let us forget ourselves, our needs and hurts, and seek to know and love God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) because of who He is and His love and grace to us. His love will then flow through us to others, whom we will then esteem better than ourselves (Philippians 2:3). Such is the path to true joy (Hebrews 12:2).**

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