

Loving God – Loving People

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I'm moved by the Holy Spirit to tell you the simplest thing you'll ever hear. You might think that as we go through life we need a deeper, more complex theology to understand it all. But the opposite is true. The most important thing I could ever tell you is this: Your Father loves you.

No truth, no fact, no reality is greater, deeper or better than this one. Maybe you think, "I know that already. It's step 1 in the Christian life. Why is this supposedly revelatory news?"

I'm compelled to write it because it's the one truth Christians have trouble grasping more than any other. And, as you say, it's the one thing we need to know at our core. If we ever want to have an impact for Jesus, this rock-solid truth has to be at the very center.

Jesus knew we would have trouble grasping it. That's why he told his disciples, "It is best for you that I go away, because if I don't, the Advocate won't come. If I do go away, then I will send him to you" (John 16:7). Of course, the Advocate is the Holy Spirit, the Helper, Comforter. Why would Jesus be compelled to send us a comforter? It's because he knew we were going to be uncomfortable.

Living in this broken, fallen world brings a lot of tribulation our way. Some of it can be excruciating, involving our health, our children, our very survival. To get through it all, we need to know one thing above all else: that we have a Father who loves us. That's the reality God's Spirit brings to our memory when we're anguishing through trials.

David seemed to know the Comforter's presence when he wrote, "How precious are your thoughts about me, O God. They cannot be numbered" (Psalm 139:17). Another translation reads, "How precious are the thoughts toward me you concern yourself about."

This blows me away. God thinks about me? It's one thing to know the Lord loves me; that's just a theological fact.

But it's another to know he actually *thinks* about me—that, in fact, he never stops thinking about me. It's impossible to fathom. Yet God is telling us through David's psalm, "You don't need to strive to get me to pay attention to you. I'm already focused on you."

Growing up, I heard a different kind of theological statement: "When God looks at you, he doesn't see you. He sees Jesus." The idea was that we're sinful in the Father's eyes—yet he doesn't see our sin because we're covered by Jesus, who has no sin.

But as a kid, I didn't want to be shoved out of sight. I *wanted* God to see me! I wouldn't have minded a hug or a face-to-face with the heavenly Father I envisioned. And I think I was onto something. Some of God's thoughts may involve correction or rebuke, but they're all good thoughts, based in pure love.

Sadly, most of us don't picture God that way. We imagine his thoughts as being, "One more move like that and I'll remove my presence from you." No, David says. God's thoughts about us are precious. They're loving in a way we can never fully grasp. We're dear to our Father, and he loves our company. And the plans he has for us are for our good.

When it comes to knowing the Father's love, the 18-inch journey from our head to our heart is the hardest to make.

I'm the kind of Christian who loves to fill my head with theology. And as a budding young minister, I loved raiding my father's library. I read volumes on all the covenants God made with man, from the Noahic to the Abrahamic to the Davidic and onward to the New Covenant. One day I was in my study when I sensed a nudge from the Lord: "Do you want me to reveal more of my New Covenant to you?" Of course I did!

In the next instant, a child's Sunday school song entered my thoughts: "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so."

Jesus loves me—it sounds so simple. And yet I was overcome as if I understood God's love for the very first time. The one word that leapt out at me was, curiously, "Yes." Yes, he really does love me. Yes, the Son of God poured out his life on the cross for me in love. Yes, yes, yes, it's all true—my heavenly Father loves me.

Those three words—"I love you"—are the crux of the New Covenant. If we really knew the Father's love, not just in our heads but in our hearts, it would change everything. And John tells us we can know for sure whether we know God's love. All we have to do is look in our hearts with this simple measuring stick: "Perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love" (1 John 4:18).

Do we fill our minds with thoughts of our Father's love? Or are we preoccupied with self-judgment based on our performance? "Did I present the Lord well to that non-Christian? Was I nice enough to the checkout person?" No, no, no—God's perfect love casts out all fear of performing well. And he replaces it with love.

In fact, it's impossible for God's grace and our fleshly fear to occupy the same space in our hearts. One will push out the other. If we know God's perfect love, it will replace all fear, setting itself up at the center. And knowing his love leads to freedom. "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32).

Knowing the Father's love changes the entire way we live out our calling.

When we're freed from fear, we're free to love others fully. Now, I love ministry and I love preaching; it's people I'm not so sure about. More and more, loving people is what I want out of life—but it can be a real battle for an introvert like me. Reaching out to others can be intimidating. I might misrepresent God, say something inaccurate, maybe even turn someone *off* to Christ.

Paul addresses these fears when he writes, "'Who can know the Lord's thoughts? Who knows enough to teach him?' But we understand these things, for we have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16). The mind of Christ? That sounds even more intimidating! Yet I'm reminded by the Holy Spirit: "It's not about you, Gary. It's about what I do through you." That frees me to love.

Having the mind of Christ sounds like a deep theological mystery. But in reality, it's very simple: We carry a light into the world because we have Jesus in us. And he commands us not to hide that light under a bushel of fear. We think of his light as shining forth to open the eyes of the lost. Yet it also enlightens our own minds so we know how to minister.

A few months ago, Kelly and I were running errands at the local mall. I stopped at a kiosk where a young man was demonstrating a machine that sends electric signals through the body. I can't think of any item I'll ever need less, but I told him, "Hook me up." Just when he was about to flip the switch—and I was having second thoughts—his boss walked up. And I was moved to talk to her about Jesus.

She quickly stopped me, saying, "I'm Jewish." That's enough to put a halt to any talk of the gospel today. In our cultural climate, it's a no-no for Christians to witness to people from other religions. First of all, it's seen not as loving but as proselytizing. Second, it implies that others are wrong—another cultural no-no. I didn't care, because I sensed I had the mind of Christ.

"That's okay, Jesus loves Jewish people," I said. "In fact, he was one! Besides, he also loves Muslims, Buddhists, atheists and everyone else."

She relaxed at that. And so I asked if she needed prayer for anything. Immediately she opened her pocketbook and showed me a picture of her two-year-old daughter. "I get so nervous about her," she said, clearly worried about the world her little girl would grow up in. "Yes, I'd love prayer."

Kelly and I took her hands and prayed with her—right in the center of the mall, as an electric-signal machine beeped away nearby.

If we trust him, the Holy Spirit will take us into the unlikeliest places to share the Father's love—places we would never see as harvest fields. Yet that's where he does his work—so it's where we need to be.

I just bought a new, unmarked Bible and I plan to underline a lot of things differently from before.

All of us are idealistic when it comes to Bible study. We end up underlining a lot of ideals we set for ourselves. But most of the time it's a futile exercise. We mark promises from God we never seek him to fulfill. We underline calls to action we never end up doing. I don't mean to be negative about this—I just want us to be realistic about a lot of unnecessary guilt we place on ourselves—guilt that doesn't do God or his kingdom any good whatsoever.

It's not complicated to obey Jesus' command to "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15). When he speaks of "all the world," that includes the everyday world we inhabit—the grocery store, the gas station, the mall, our office, our school. That's where he makes his glory known. The "target audience" of his love isn't some faceless concept on a whiteboard—it's our flesh-and-blood neighbors.

Yet where do we do most of our talking about the gospel? At church. At a Bible study. At a home group meeting. That's not "all the world" Jesus is talking about. The commission he gives us is delivered in terms so simple it's astounding: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19).

Yes, it's that simple. And Jesus taught that it was simple. Listen to his response to the religious leaders of his day, the brightest theological minds of the time: "One of them, an expert in religious law, tried to trap him with this question: 'Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?' Jesus replied, 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments" (*Matthew 22:35-40*).

I want to note two things about Jesus' answer here. (You can underline it in your new Bible!) First, there's only one word common to both commandments: the verb *love*. Second, Jesus says that loving our neighbor is "equally important" as loving God. Wow. This takes serving God out of the realm of mystery and onto solid ground. It's as simple as it gets.

Now look at the life Jesus demonstrated for us: "Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him" (Acts 10:38). I want that kind of life—one that loves God and loves people. Not one that keeps a list of to-do's from the Bible, or chases theological mysteries, or talks about the Father's love only to other Christians.

Friend, do you want to be freed from all fear? To get beyond all self-judgment? To have the mind of Christ? The answer is very simple: "The Father loves you." Now, go and do likewise.

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