

Chapter 22

LOVE GOD AND FEAR GOD

THE LOVE OF GOD

What is God after, what does He desire from you and me most of all? Does He desire worship, praise, thanksgiving, love, obedience, faith, service or all of the above? Which is the highest priority in your understanding?

We find the answer to this question in the words of Jesus in Matthew 22 starting at verse 36: A lawyer asked Him, *“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”* and Jesus said to him, *‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment.’* So Jesus answered this question by saying there is a great commandment, classified as the first commandment ahead of all the others, and it is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind. In other words, we are commanded to love God with all that we are.

We find this teaching confirmed and amplified in many, many places in the Bible. 1 Corinthians 13:13 says, *“And now abide (or endure) faith, hope and love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”* Galatians 5:22 lists the fruit of the Spirit and the first one named is love. Ephesians 3:17 says that our goal should be that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith, that we would be rooted and grounded in love, and that we would know the love of Christ which passes knowledge. In Galatians 5:6 Paul says that what is important to God is faith working through love. The NIV says, *“Faith expressing itself through love.”* In other words, he is saying that acts of love demonstrate our faith. 1 Corinthians 8:1 says that knowledge puffs up or makes people prideful but love builds up. Colossians 3 has a wonderful teaching on how we are to overcome our carnality, or sinful nature, and it sums it up in verse 14 by saying, *“But above all these things, put on love which is the bond of perfection.”* 1 Corinthians 9 has a quote from Isaiah that says, *“Eye has not seen nor ear heard nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.”* 1 Timothy 1:5 says, *“The purpose of the commandment (in other words the purpose of all God’s commandments) is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith.”*

So God tells us again and again that the purpose of everything in the Bible is to lead us to love for Him. 1 Corinthians 14:1 says that we are to “pursue” love. In other words we are to make it our first priority. What is the motivation for our loving God? 1 John 4:19 says, *“We love Him because He first loved us.”* John 3:16 says, *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.”* There is a very simple reason that God commands us, desires us to love Him and that is because He loves us. He loves us so much that we cannot comprehend it. His love for us is not impersonal or abstract, it is personal, emotional. He loved us even to the extent of the cross.

John 15:13 says, *“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”* That

is the only way that God could express His love to us. If He had just stated it, taught about it, verbalized it in some fashion, we could never have understood it; but He demonstrated it by sending His Son to the cross. And He loved us when we were His enemies. He knows everything about us but chooses to love us anyway, not because of our inherent worth but because of His nature, "God is love." But understand that God controls His love; His love does not control Him. That means that He chooses to love us. He does not choose to love the devil and his legions or those who ultimately reject Him.

As a young adult, even after I married and had children, my love tank was very low and I tried to fill up the emptiness inside with alcohol and some other things, none of which worked very well. When I was 30 years old, I started attending church for the benefit of my children, so I thought, and I was converted, born again, saved. My salvation came about through a deep revelation that I was loved, personally and intimately, by a God who showed Himself to be my heavenly Father. He continues to save me by that ongoing revelation. I vividly remember an occasion some years ago when I was so depressed that I truly wanted to die. I felt like a complete failure in every area of my life, and as I sat in my office filled with self-pity and despair, suddenly I became dimly aware of the presence of the Lord. It seemed that He gradually came into the room where I was sitting. I probably should say He gradually manifested Himself as being present to me in that room where I sat. First it was just a dim awareness, and then it grew and grew. It seemed that He approached and was right next to me. I sensed His presence. Most of all I felt His love which poured over me and through me in waves. My heart was pounding so that when I looked down I could see my heart beating by my shirt jumping. I felt sure that He was going to say something to me or show me something in a vision but He didn't. He just stayed there invisible to my eyes but present to my inner being for a full hour, and then He gradually withdrew. He never said a word to me about my situation, but when He left I was different, I was filled with peace and joy and hope.

Our God is an awesome God! He loves us personally and compassionately, even when we have made a big mess of things, and He deeply desires our love for Him. He is satisfied with nothing less than our love for Him. If we give Him all our time, all our money, all our service, yes, even if we give our body to be burned but don't give Him our love, our heart, it will not satisfy Him. We would not be pleasing Him at all. Even serving God can be an idol which comes out of pride and striving unless it comes out of a heart of love.

In Revelation 2, the Lord addresses the church at Ephesus and commends them for their hard work, their Christian service, their patience, their perseverance, but He says, "*Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.*" He is truly the "pearl of great price" and when we find Him, we should gladly sell everything, everything, in order to have Him. Since God has given us His love so passionately, He is not satisfied with anything less than our returning a passionate love for Him. He expects all from us. He demands all from us. And He is unapologetic when people's faithfulness costs them everything. When the widow gave her last penny in the offering, Jesus bragged on her. When the woman broke the vial of perfume that apparently cost thousands of dollars and poured it upon His body, "wasted" the money, He commended her, He was pleased. The more generous His

children are, the more He will be generous to them, if not in this life then certainly in that to come: “Give and it will be given to you, pressed down and running over will be poured into your lap.”

A list of the heroes of the faith is found in Hebrews 11. Many of them suffered torture, persecution, starvation and death. The Lord’s attitude is “*count it all joy*” when you get to suffer for the Lord. Paul says that it is a privilege. He says in Corinthians 4:17, “*for our light affliction which is but for a moment is working for us a far more exceeding eternal weight of glory.*”

And of course you noticed that I left out part of the great commandment. The first part is that we should “*love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, mind and strength, and the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” Sometimes we think it is easy to love God, but boy is it hard to love people! But God makes our love for Him contingent on our love for our neighbor. Husbands are to love their wives and wives their husbands. Parents are to love their children with a wise love, and children are to love their parents. We are to honor those in authority over us. We are to even love our enemies. We are to love those who have needs in a practical way. We simply cannot do all of that apart from the love of Christ within us. It is impossible. 1 John 4:20 says, “*If someone says, ‘I love God and hates his brother; he is a liar, for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen how can he love God whom he has not seen?’*” He said to His disciples, “*They will know you are my disciples if you love one another . . . You are to love one another as I have loved you.*”(John 13:34-35)

In the book, If God is in Charge, by evangelist Stephen Brown, he tells this story: After a meeting one night in a certain city he was in his motel and turned on the television to a local Christian station. A weeping woman caught his attention, and he watched as she gave her testimony.

She said that she was raised in a family that had nothing to do with God or with the church at all. She married a man who was an agnostic as she was. They raised their children without any recognition or acknowledgement that there is a God. She said that she got a call one night (this had happened only a few months before). Her 21 year old daughter had been involved in a terrible car wreck. She rushed to the hospital; the girl had been severely hurt and had suffered brain damage. The doctors said to her, “If your daughter lives, she will probably be a vegetable.” The woman said that she drove away from the hospital, went to a bar, and got drunk. When she left the bar and drove home she started cursing God. She was so filled with anger and bitterness that she called God every vile name that she had ever heard in her life. When she pulled up into her driveway and stopped, she was completely exhausted. In the quiet of that moment, she heard a voice speak very clearly to her: “My daughter, that is the first time you have ever spoken to Me, and I love you.” Her heart was broken to realize that in spite of her life of Godlessness, her rebellion, and her hatred and cursing of God that He was reaching out to her in love and kindness.

During the course of Jesus’ arrest and prior to His crucifixion Simon Peter, His disciple, His friend, denied Him and betrayed Him three times. After the resurrection, the risen Christ met the disciples on the beach of the Sea of Galilee. He had a simple question to ask Peter, and He asked it three times. “Peter, do you love Me?” “Do you love Me?” “Do you love Me?” I believe the Lord would put that

question to each of us today.

He is not asking, “Have you had a born again experience?”, “Are you a member of a church?”, “Do you tithe?”, “Are you serving me faithfully and sacrificially?”, but:

“Do you love Me?”

“Do you love Me with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength?”

“Do you love Me?”

When Peter answered in the affirmative, the Lord told him to “Feed my sheep, feed my lambs.” I believe the Lord would say to us, “Are you showing your love for Me by loving your wife or husband, by loving the little lambs in your home, by loving the members of your extended family, by loving the members of your church and other churches, by loving the stranger, the alien, the least and the lost? Little children, love one another.”

THE FEAR OF GOD

The Bible makes clear that what God wants from us most of all is our wholehearted love. There are so many times when we realize that we do not love God as we should. What can we do about that? We can “*stir one another up to love and good works.*” We can read and meditate on the Bible, and we can pray, we can cry out to God that He would give us more love, that He would give us a deeper revelation of Himself. For the more clearly we see Him the greater will be our love for Him.

While Jesus made clear that the greatest commandment of all is that we love God with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength, that exhortation is balanced by the imperative that we are to fear the Lord (Strong’s Concordance: “Fear, reverence, terror, awe”). Someone has said that we can’t truly love God without fearing Him, and we can’t truly fear God without loving Him, and I believe that if we truly understood what the Bible means by loving God and fearing God we would see the truth in that statement. Romans 11:22 says, “*Consider therefore the kindness and severity of God: severity on those who fell, but toward you kindness — if you continue in His kindness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.*” Surely one of the most drastic failures of the modern church is its failure to teach, preach and model this Scriptural balance of the love and fear of God.

What is the PURPOSE of the fear of the Lord? It is holiness, obedience, faithfulness. “*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom* (Proverbs 1:7), because it leads to obedience and holiness. And without holiness “*no one will see the Lord.*” (Hebrews 12:14). The fear of the Lord is defined as “hating evil” in Proverbs 8:13. No matter how intelligent a person is, he is not wise unless he fears

God. 2 Corinthians 7:1 says, *“Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God”* (Note that the fear of God leads to cleansing and holiness.) And Peter says in 1 Peter 1:15 ff... *“be holy in all your conduct....conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear.”*

A young man (a personal acquaintance) who was a lifetime member of a conservative denomination, had left his wife and was sleeping with his girlfriend. He said, “I know it’s wrong, but I’m saved and there is nothing I can do to be lost, so I’m going to do what I want to do.” He believed in the Bible, he knew it well, he loved God (so he said), but he didn’t even have a concept of the fear of God. Paul said in Philippians 2:12, *“Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.”* That is far from the attitude of that young man who was sure he had a contract with God and could therefore sin with impunity.

The sad fact is that there are times when our love for God will not keep us from sinning. That was true in my own life, as previously related. I was an enlightened liberal, not a fundamentalist and literalist, for goodness sake! So the dramatic experience of being delivered from demons was totally unexpected and terrifying and precipitated a reorientation of my theology and my life. For many weeks after that experience every time I thought of the devil I shook and trembled, and every time I thought of God I shook and trembled. God gradually taught me not to fear the devil, but only to fear Him. Over the years most of that fear of God has dissipated, so periodically I pray earnestly that He will give me a fresh infusion of the fear of God. In my weakness it is the only thing that can protect me and make me choose to be holy. I have learned by experience that even a terrifying experience such as I had is not enough to permanently instill fear of the Lord in our hearts, but that we must choose to fear the Lord, as Proverbs 1:29 states, and as is stated or implied again and again throughout God’s Word. In other words, fear of the Lord, like love of the Lord, is not a feeling but a choice, an act of our will.

In his book, The Fear of the Lord, John Bevere tells about a visit he had with Jim Bakker in prison. Jim had lost his family, his ministry, his reputation, everything he owned. He said, “John, prison isn’t God’s judgment on my life but his mercy. I believe if I had continued on the path I was on, I would have ended up in hell. . . . I always loved Jesus, yet He was not my Lord. . . . And there are millions of Americans like me.” Was Jim wrong in believing that he could have lost his salvation even though he was a Christian? I am not wise enough to answer that question, but I do know that there are many professing Christians who will not make it into heaven. To say that is not judgmental on my part because it is what Jesus said. He said that there are “many” who call Him, “Lord”, who are sure of their salvation, but on the day of judgment He will declare to them that He never knew them and to depart from Him! (Matthew 7:21-23) That passage scares me breathless! And in two parables in Matthew 13, “the wheat and the tares” and “the dragnet cast into the sea”, He says that at the end of the age the angels will come and separate out of the kingdom those who belong to the evil one. (Even as I write these words down, I feel a renewed fear of the Lord making me want to be holy and not play any games with God.)

Am I saying that God is legalistic, always looking for our slip-ups so that He can whack us? No, no, no! That is not His heart at all. He is full of mercy and grace. He is for us, not against us. That has been my experience with Him, hasn't it been yours? But if we insist on being double-minded, hypocritical, talking one way but living another, the consequences will be inevitable. That has also been my experience, hasn't it been yours? In order that we will not be deceived in this matter, God warns us in His word again and again: "*Be not deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.*" (Gal. 6:7) "*Without holiness, no one will see the Lord.*" (Heb. 12:14) "... *for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified.*" (Ro. 2:13)

Being afraid of God is not the same as fearing God! Those who are afraid of God draw back from Him; those who fear Him draw near to Him. In Exodus 19 and 20 when God appeared in fire on top of the mountain, Israel drew back but Moses drew near to God. (And also the story in 2 Samuel 6:8-9)

God is clearly portrayed as the Savior and Redeemer of all the earth, but just as clearly as the Judge of all the earth. The entire Old and New Testaments state with certainty the coming of a day of universal judgment when each one will stand before a righteous Judge. (Psalms 10:13—"*Why do the wicked renounce God? He has said in his heart 'You will not require an account.'*" - - Wrong! Psalms 14:1 - - "*The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God'*" - - Wrong! And the Bible says in several places that because God's judgment is delayed, because He does not bring immediate retribution on people's sins, then their hands become emboldened to continue in their sins.) And Ephesians 5:5-6 written to Christians says: "*For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.*"

It is so difficult for men to comprehend a God who is both merciful and yet wrathful. "Isn't the idea of wrath unworthy of God?" they ask. But God's wrath is not an outburst of temper, cruelty and loss of self-control. His wrath is never what man's wrath is, but always the right and necessary reaction to moral evil. God is only angry when anger is the right response. Would a God who ignored evil be a good God? What is your response when you hear about a grown man defiling a little child or shaking and beating a baby to death? God's wrath is something which men choose for themselves by rejecting the light (John 3:18).

This is a difficult teaching and one that I do not enjoy bringing, but based on the Word of God and on my personal experience and on my observations it is essential for the church, for you and me, to walk in a proper balance between the love of God and the fear of God.

"The secret of the Lord is with those who fear Him, and He will show them His covenant...Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good...Blessed is the man who trusts in Him....The Lord is near to those who

have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit...Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him...Delight yourself in the Lord and He shall give you the desires of your heart...God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble; therefore we will not fear (anything or anyone but the Lord!)...Be still and know that I am God...Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised...For God is the King of all the earth..." Glory to His name!