

How do we go about “loving God”?

BY DAVID POSEY

“Do you love God?”

“Of course, I do! I even tell God I love Him when I pray!”

So, you feel great love for God?

“Yes! I love Him with all my heart!”

“OK. But how do you show your love for God?”

“I’m here every time the doors are opened; I give generously; I sing with all my heart; I take the Lord’s Supper seriously...”

“What else?”

“I don’t drink, smoke, curse, or watch ungodly shows on TV...”

“That’s good; but why?”

“Because I love God.”

“Do you think God *needs* your worship, your money, your prayers, your pure lifestyle? Is that the only way — or even the most important way — you can show your love for God?”

“Well, if it’s not that, how else would I show my love for God?”

When Jesus was asked by a lawyer — who was trying to trap him — “what is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus’ didn’t answer his specific question. The lawyer asked about *the* (singular) greatest command. But Jesus told him that all of the law and the prophets depend on *two* commandments:

And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” *Matthew 22:37-40*

Many of us read this text incorrectly — or at least, incompletely. We read these as two separate commandments: #1, Love God. #2, Love your neighbor. But Jesus didn’t say that. He said “the second is *like* the first.” There are two possible meanings of “like.” It can mean that the second is identical or at least *similar* to the first; or it can mean that the second *confirms the reality* of the first. The second is not identical or even similar to the first because Jesus says the first is “the great and foremost commandment.” There can only be one “great and foremost commandment.”

When Jesus says the second is “like it” it must mean that when we obey the second we are demonstrating our commitment to the first. I John 4:20-21 confirms this view:

If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

I’ve met lots of people who almost literally wring their hands over whether they love God or not, and most of them are miserable. They struggle with whether their *feelings* for God are strong enough.

We get caught up in this because our default reaction to the English word “love” is “affection,” a *feeling*.

Yet, I can’t think of a text where God ever tells us that our love for him is simply a feeling. The Greek verb, *agapao*, describes a decision we make to do acts of love, not primarily a feeling.

This is crucial in our understanding of “the first and great commandment.” God is telling us that we demonstrate our love for God — with all our heart, soul and mind — by the means of loving our neighbor.

“Neighbor” means anyone in “our world” who is in need of help. “Our world” begins at home. So, at the most basic level, we take care of the needs of our family. Then, we observe and meet the needs of our brothers and sisters in the local church (Gal. 6:10). The parable of the good Samaritan teaches us that we are also responsible for helping others who are outside of our physical and spiritual families. But we have to be careful: some Christians are so busy “feeding the world” that they ignore the needs of their brethren.

The point is that a failure to observe and care for those needs is a failure not only to love your neighbor, but a failure to love God “with all your heart, soul and mind” — no matter how much you attend, sing, give or “feel.”

Our God is a practical being. By that I mean he expects us to put our love into practice not just talk about it, pray about or “feel” it.

If our love for God is measured by how strongly we *feel* our love, then those among who are more emotional and demonstrative by nature are the ones who please God — no matter what they actually do. But the Bible never says or implies that love for God is primarily an emotional thing. It’s a doing thing and the primary object of our doing is our neighbor.

Once you begin to look at it that way, then you can quit wringing your hands and start putting them to work on behalf of others. Some of the issues that trouble Christians are caused by being wrapped up in their own little world, instead of “looking out for the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4).

The members of the Folsom church take care of their families and quickly respond to the needs of the brethren and are probably doing what they can to relieve the needs of

people in other parts of the world. That's how we show our love for God with all our heart, soul and mind.

Moreover, people who love God view their "acts of worship" not only as an expression of their love for God but also as acts of love for the church. They attend to encourage and stir up others to good works (Hebrews 10:24). They sing to praise God but also to "teach and admonish one another" (Col. 3:16). They realize that their giving may help save a soul or relieve a need, so they give cheerfully (II Cor. 9:7). They are concerned about both the physical and spiritual needs of others when they pray.

In other words, those men or women who love God with all their "heart, soul and mind" best exemplify that by loving their neighbors as themselves. There is an inseparable connection between the two. John said,

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

1 John 3:16-18