

Loving God

Reading Mark 12v28-34

²⁸And one of the scribes came, and heard them questioning together, and knowing that he had answered them well, asked him, What commandment is the first of all? ²⁹Jesus answered, The first is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God, the Lord is one: ³⁰and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. ³¹The second is this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these. ³²And the scribe said unto him, Of a truth, Teacher, thou hast well said that he is one; and there is none other but he: ³³and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbor as himself, is much more than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices. ³⁴And when Jesus saw that he answered discreetly, he said unto him, Thou art not far from the kingdom of God. And no man after that durst ask him any question.

We are probably all very familiar with these words of Jesus. He was quoting from the fifth book of Moses chapter 6v4,5. But I wonder if we realise how special these words are? In the Old Testament God is revealed as the great creator and the great king. I can understand that he would expect us little creatures to have a sense of amazement at how great he is and how great his creation is. I would also expect him to want us to fear him and obey him as servants should do for their king. But here we are told he wants us to love him, with every part of our being.

This tells us something very special about the God revealed in the Bible and through Jesus. He is very different from the gods of other religions. Where else do you find a God who wants to be loved?

At different times in church history theologians have portrayed God as distant and unfeeling. But the prophets and apostles portray him as a God who feels and who wants our love. I think we should take what they say as the truth even if it is hard to understand.

How in practice can I love God? I cannot see him or touch him. Part of the answer we find in John's first letter, 1John 4v20,21. We prove that we love the invisible God by loving each other. This is consistent with Jesus' teaching that the second great commandment is to love our neighbour. But there is a danger here. We can get so involved in loving our neighbour that we forget God. This is especially true for those of us actively involved in church work. The sign of it is that our work begins to be dry and heavy. Loving our neighbour must always be the second commandment not the first.

I have to confess that for most of my life as a Christian, 36 years now, love for God was not something I thought about very much. One reason is that I am selfish and more interested in loving myself than God. Probably most of us have to struggle with this problem. But also my character is that I like to study and analyse, so when I became a Christian I enjoyed studying the Bible and

filling many notebooks with my ideas. I also enjoyed so much to work with Christian groups and churches perhaps partly as a compensation for the lonely childhood I had. In my doing for God I had little time for God himself.

In 1995 God touched my life in a new way. Many times I felt God's love. Once I was lying on the floor at the front of the church and I felt that Jesus was laying hands on me. Then I realised the hands had nail prints and I was overwhelmed by how much he loved me.

Then just after Easter 1996 something happened I did not expect. I felt as if God had gone away. For 46 years I had always been sure he was around. Now I felt he was gone. Then my mind became full of so many questions. Everything I had believed, I questioned.

This process lasted about seven years. During that time I desperately tried to find answers to my questions with the help of the Bible and other books. I got good answers to many of my question, especially about the reliability of the New Testament and the resurrection of Jesus. To other questions I found where the limits of knowledge were and where faith was needed. Gradually peace came to my mind but knowledge was no longer the big thing for me, I had a deeper longing for a more personal contact with God. At times I started to fear that God had left me completely and I felt really bad about this.

In spring 2002 I attended a silent retreat in Rymättylä. As a result of what I learned there I started praying a short prayer "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour". I did this many times daily. Then one day after a few months I felt God spoke to me about his grace and as a result I modified the prayer to "Jesus Christ, Son of God, my Saviour". I think this was a significant step towards being more personal with God.

In autumn 2003 I attended another silent retreat and I learned a longer prayer which I now use daily. It begins "Let my relationship with you be the centre of my whole existence, the beginning point of everything I do". This was a major step for me because it put my focus on relationship with God rather than just serving him.

Around that time we had a fellowship evening with the elders. In the few minutes of silent prayer we had, I was surprised to find that there was a feeling of love for God in my heart. This was a new thing for me especially after seven years feeling God had left me. It was like a first small spark of feeling love for God. Since then I have tried to give space to this little spark of love in my heart and help it grow bigger.

What I am trying to learn is to focus more on God himself and offer him my love in words or even just a silent feeling in from my heart. This does not mean I stop serving him, but that in addition to serving I want to learn to love him more directly. I find great help in coming to worship meetings in the church but my major problem comes in everyday life outside the church services.

I find that what hinders me from loving God in normal life are all the things that take my attention. These may be friends, work, TV, books, hobbies, even my own feelings. All of these things are good but they often have the effect of making me forget God. I find it important to have some regular time when I shut out all other things and just focus on God. I have found it helpful to create a small corner in one of our rooms at home and make it into a prayer corner. I have a cross on the wall and a small table in front with a candle on it. I try to go to this corner every day and shut the door and be in front of the God. Sometimes I don't manage at all. Sometimes I am physically there but many thoughts are going round my head and all I can do is confess my sins and my weakness. At other times I have found a deep feeling coming over me and drawing me to love God in words or even in silence.

I don't know what suits you. I think that for many of us summer gives us more chance to be alone with the God. We can walk or sit on a rock and look at the sea or go to sauna alone. I am sure if you just try to be alone with God and you will find he will teach you more of how to love him in a way that suits your character.

In addition to being alone, we need the support of other Christians. That is why it is good to come regularly to some church meeting or a small group even during summer otherwise we will easily find that the things around us begin to take our attention and we start to forget about God. This at least is my experience.

Here is the prayer that I have found so helpful. You can have a copy afterwards if you want one:

"Let my relationship with you be the centre of my whole existence, the beginning point of everything I do. Mould my thoughts and ideas according to your mind.

This part helps me especially when I am getting caught up in doing things for God.

Help me to rest quietly in your presence regardless of what is going on around me, then I shall stop thinking about the tasks that await me and I shall cease to worry about tomorrow and the future.

This helps me when I want to pray but my thoughts are buzzing round my head.

You are with me in loss and adversity.

This encourages me when things go wrong.

Thank you that you want to be with me always and that you will set me free from everything that prevents you from being close to me.

This is special because it emphasises that God wants to be close to me and he is taking the initiative to sort out things in me that get in his way. It takes the pressure off from me to sort myself out,

Thank you that you also right now want to do that."

This last part gives me a sense of excitement wondering what God wants to do right now in my life.

I wanted to share my experience with you to help you to see that God has his ways of drawing us to love him, even intellectual types like me. Sometimes he has to take us through a dying process so that things that hinder that love can be removed. I hope my experience will encourage you to trust in him even in the dark times of your life. He is looking for people to love him, will you respond to his call?

We have communion now and that can be a great time to tell God that you love him when you remember how much he has done for you.

Bible verses from "*The Holy Bible, American Standard Version*"

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