



Daily Devotionals: Love God | January 8, 2023

Matthew 22:34-38

We desire to foster a lifestyle of prayer and intimacy with God.

Day 1

The first part of our mission comes from the first priority of all Christ-followers: love God. It comes directly from Jesus' command, which he took from God's command thousands of years earlier found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

Matthew 22:34-38

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment."

Everything we do as followers of Jesus flows from that one command; it is the nucleus of our faith, and everything revolves around it.

What does that mean for us as a church? It means we want to foster a lifestyle of prayer and intimacy with God throughout the entire congregation, both individually in our own lives and collectively in community.

What does it mean to have a lifestyle of prayer and intimacy with God? It means that we are abiding in Christ, growing in our relationship with him by spending time in Scripture and in prayer. We are learning more about how he is and how he desires his people to love. We are listening to his voice, doing what he desires. It means our heart aligns with his heart.

This week, we'll investigate what it means to love God with our heart, soul, and mind as well as explore how to build a lifestyle of prayer and intimacy with God.



Questions for reflection:

- Read Deuteronomy 6:4-9. What would it look like to love God in the way this Scripture describes?
- Read Matthew 22:34-38. Why do you think Jesus answered the expert in the law's question with this command?
- What does the phrase "a lifestyle of prayer and intimacy with God" mean to you? What does it mean in your own life? What does it mean for our church community?
- What kind of church will The Creek be when we all commit ourselves to loving God with our hearts, souls, and minds? How have you seen this happening already?



Day 2

In their book, *Having The Mind of Christ*, authors Ben Sternke and Matt Tebbe, introduce eight principles that are truths Jesus Himself lived by. The first (and foundational) one is “God is love, so it’s all about love.”

“If we are going to be known by our love as disciples of Jesus, we must recover a robust, tangible, Jesus-shaped vision of love, and take love seriously as the goal and grounding of our faith. We must learn to believe that if we don't have love, we don't have anything. If we're not growing in love—even if we are growing in our knowledge of God and moral behavior—we're not gaining anything. The invitation here is to learn that love never fails, that love is the competency that counts, that our life of discipleship to Jesus is rooted in love, and that all of this flows from the God who *is* love.” (*Having the Mind of Christ*, page 21)

So, what exactly does this mean? The first question we have to ask is, “what is love?” It’s a difficult concept to define in English. We use the word “love” in so many different ways. You may love your spouse, you may love the mountains, and you may also love pizza. We use the same word to describe how we feel about people, places, and things even though most of us would say that we don’t love those things in the same way or for the same reasons.

When we talk about loving God, we have to redefine the word “love.” In *The Four Loves*, author and Christian philosopher, C.S. Lewis defines the highest form of love as *agape* and describes it as a selfless love that is passionately committed to the well-being of others. This is how God loves us, and, as we read in Scripture, “We love because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

God is love. It’s His fundamental quality. He is the author and originator of the love we share with Him and others. It’s not some ethereal idea of love, but a real, intimate relationship. God has loved mankind throughout history, and He continues to love us personally through a selfless and passionate commitment to our well-being, a commitment that goes all the way to the cross.

The Apostle Paul said in **Romans 5:8**, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” As author Max Lucado says, “Nails didn’t hold God to a cross. Love did.”

Our love for Him doesn’t begin with us, it begins with Him. Our love for God flows in response to the way He loves us. The cross is the greatest example of love that has ever been and that will



ever be. Jesus demonstrated perfect love because He sought our well-being at the expense of His own. Thank you, Jesus, for your tangible gift of love through the cross.

Questions for reflection:

- How is your love for God similar or dissimilar to your love for other things in life (family, food, etc.)? How does your love for God compare and contrast to the relationships in your life?
- Take a few moments to write out how some of the ways God has loved you. How do you want to respond to His love?
- Think about the different ways you have “loved God” throughout your life. How has that shifted and changed through the years? Think of how God has pursued you with His love even before you knew Him, and how you responded. Describe how your love for God has grown and changed throughout your life.



Day 3

As we desire to grow in intimacy with God, it's important to make the distinction in how we can “know” God. We need to discover the difference between “head knowledge” of God’s love and “heart knowledge” of God’s love. It’s one thing to know cerebrally that God loves you—to gather the facts. It’s another thing to *experience* the love of God poured into your heart by the Holy Spirit and have it *transform* you (see **Romans 5:5**). This is another kind of knowledge that leads to intimacy with God.

The overwhelming majority of people who interacted with Jesus during His time on earth would describe Him as loving, kind, and gentle. An exception would be the Pharisees, the church leaders of the day. Jesus was notably harsh with them, calling them hypocrites, fools, and full of greed. Why, when Jesus was so gracious and merciful with prostitutes, thieves, and social outcasts, was He so harsh with them?

What the Pharisees missed was that knowledge about God and His Word does not equal love for God. They had lots of head knowledge but it never made it to their hearts, so the result was pride, not love.

What do we learn from the Pharisees? It's possible to know about God and still not love Him. Their missing piece was intimacy with God. All that good stuff—studying, obeying, and correct thinking—actually got in the way of knowing God enough to see Him in Jesus. It's possible that their fear kept them from knowing Jesus: what if they met God and realized He wasn't who they thought He was? Perhaps we can all identify with having some fear. And what's the antidote to that fear?

1 John 4:17-19

This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us.

At The Creek, we never want our pursuit of right thinking and right living to outpace our pursuit of loving God or, more accurately, our response to His loving pursuit of us. This is why we desire for everyone to have an intimate relationship with God, where we can truly *see* Him, *know* Him, and *be transformed* by Him.



Questions for reflection:

- What do you think the difference is between head knowledge and heart knowledge of God? Why are both necessary and good? Which one do you tend to emphasize?
- Are there painful experiences in your past or fears that have hindered your ability to love God? What would need to happen for you to give them to God?
- Are your church attendance, Bible reading, and other spiritual practices growing your love for God, your knowledge about Him, or both? Explain why and how.



Day 4

On Day 2, we briefly looked at Jesus' response when He was questioned by the Pharisees about which commandment out of ALL the commandments in the Old Testament was the greatest (which was meant as a trick question).

Jesus responded to this question by saying that all of the commandments are summed up in one: Loving God with your heart, mind, and soul, which he was referring to a prayer called the Shema (shu-MAH) in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."

Jesus exchanges "might" for "mind"—not a contradiction of Scripture, but an addition. He *draws out* and *expands* on Deuteronomy.

- When Jesus says "heart" he means our passions, emotions, affections.
- When Jesus says "soul" he means our whole being, the totality of what makes us a person including our bodies (according to the Bible, humans don't *have* souls...Humans *are* souls, but we don't have time to dig in that right here).
- When Jesus says "mind" he means our intellectual devotion, thoughts, and decision-making.

In short, we are to love God with *everything* - our affections, bodies, and thoughts. What does that mean? We listen to Him and share with Him in prayer, we obey His commands and yield to His wisdom, and we learn and grow in our maturity. The specifics are different for each person, but the motivation is the same: love God with all we have.

God is not demanding our performance, or even our righteousness, but rather our passions, affections, thoughts, and ultimately our entire being. In giving those things to the Lord, the Scriptures teach us that we'll find ultimate love, true joy, and never-ending peace. Why? Because God is love (**1 John 4:8**), in God's presence there is fullness of joy (**Psalm 16:11**), and because He is the Lord of peace (**2 Thessalonians 3:16**).

The Center for the Study of Global Christianity (CSGC) has estimated that 900,000 Christians have been killed for their faith in the last decade. These men and women did not lay down their



lives because of a sense of duty, obligation, or even obedience. *They laid down their lives because of their boundless love for God.* May it be true of us, too, that our boundless love for God will lead our whole lives.

Questions for reflection:

- What are the barriers keeping you from loving God more? Write them below and be specific. Maybe it's busyness, bitterness, or fear. What would it take to remove those barriers?
- When you think about your love for God, does it tend to be done out of things like duty or social pressure or for status? Or do you love the Lord out of delight? Explain.
- Go back and read through Jesus' use of the words *heart, soul, and mind*. Take a moment to think through each word. Pray and ask God to reveal how you could show your love for Him in each of these areas. Write out your thoughts below:

HEART (passions, emotions, affections)

SOUL (whole being, the totality of what makes us a person including our bodies)

MIND (intellectual devotion, thoughts, and decision-making)

Write a prayer in response to what you've experienced with Jesus today.



Day 5

Growth in relationships—dating, marriage, family— never happens without intentionality, purpose, and trust. You can probably think about a relationship where those are present, and as a result, the relationship flourishes. You can probably also think of a relationship where they’re missing, and as a result, the relationship suffers.

The same principle is true of our relationship with God. Intention, purpose, and trust are all required for flourishing. Today is about intentionally taking action in loving God. You’ll remember that our mission to love God is to foster a lifestyle of prayer and intimacy with God throughout our entire congregation. **A flourishing relationship with God *is possible*, but it takes intention, purpose, and trust.**

Here are some important practices to help grow your relationship with God:

Solitude

It’s difficult to grow in a relationship with someone you don’t spend time with. Solitude is a practice where we set aside everything and everyone and point our attention to God. Adele Calhoun explains, “Solitude is a formative place because it gives God’s Spirit time and space to do deep work. When no one is there to watch, judge and interpret what we say, the Spirit often brings us face to face with hidden motives and compulsions. The world of recognition, achievement, and applause disappears, and we stand squarely before God without props.” Solitude is a place for us to encounter God’s love and be transformed. Set aside some time *to be alone with God*. If this is new for you, begin with 10 minutes or so. Silence your phone or put it in another room and set a timer so you won’t be disturbed. Read Scripture, pray, journal. Just spend time at Jesus’ feet.

Silence

Sometimes our prayer time consists of a one-sided conversation where we’re the only one talking. Silence is an act of prayer where you make space to listen to God. It may not be easy at first, but start where you are. Try practicing five or ten minutes a day. Set a timer, take a few deep breaths, and ask God to meet you. Don’t worry, it might feel awkward at first, and that’s ok. It’s like building muscle; the more you do it, the easier it is to hear from Him.



Gratitude

Gratitude changes your perspective. If you spend time thanking God each day for the gifts he's given, you'll start to see how much he loves you and be more responsive to that love. Get a notebook and make a list each day of at least a few things you're grateful for.

Assess your love

How are you loving God with your heart, soul, and mind? Write out one to two sentences for each. As you become more aware of your current relationship, you will see the growth starting, just because of that awareness. Spend time inviting God to show you the next steps in growing in your love for Him. Write down His invitations.

God is passionate about a relationship with you; He assumes all the risks. He has already extended Himself to us. When we do these practices and make ourselves more available, God, the originator of our love, will grow our love for Him.

Questions for Reflection:

- Choose at least one of these practices to do for a few days. Record what you notice. How did God meet you in the practice? What did you learn?
- Look back over this week. How has your understanding of loving God changed? What do you desire to explore more from what you've learned this week?