

## Grace on Mission: *Loving God*

Let's turn together to Matt. 22. For the next four weeks we will be looking at our mission as a church together in a series called *Grace on Mission*. Twelve years ago when we started GCC I wrote out a mission statement (actually I lifted it from one of our sister churches!) and it started out with the words, *we exist to...* and then it went on for an entire paragraph, and no one, including me, could remember what it said or really even knew what it meant. So a couple years ago we changed our mission statement to four easy to remember points:

*Loving God. Growing Together. Serving Others. Going to the World.*

That's it. Not fancy, not complicated. But those four points encapsulate what our mission as a church is. If we can do those four things I believe we'll be doing what Jesus calls us to do. So it's good to periodically remind ourselves what our mission as a church is. But here's the thing about a mission: it's not something you ever fully accomplish. We'll be working at it until Jesus returns. Vision, on the other hand gives us measurable goals so we can see how we're doing in the work of our mission.

It's my hope and objective for this short message series that we be envisioned for the mission and for our part to play in that mission with measurable goals. The first point of our mission statement is *Loving God*. Let's read **Matt 22:34-40** together and then ask God to speak to us.

The lawyer thought his question was going to stump Jesus. There are a lot of important commandments in the OT and he figured if Jesus promoted one as the greatest, they'd be able to accuse him of undermining the other commandments. But Jesus quoted Deut. 6 and said the most important commandment is to love the Lord our God with our heart and soul and mind and strength, every fiber of our being. This commandment, Jesus said, is the greatest commandment, not because it competes with the other commandments, but because it *completes* the other commandments! All the other commandments hang on this commandment and its cousin, to love each other as we love ourselves.

What this tells me is that we can do everything else Jesus tells us to do, we can be busy with church programs and meetings and stuff, but if love for God isn't at the heart of it all, then it's meaningless to God. When the church obeys the greatest commandment, everything else falls into its rightful place. All the other commandments hang on this one.

But how do we love God? How do we as a church encourage love for God? Let's consider some practical ways we can do that and give some measurable indicators of our growth in our love for God. The first thing we need to know is that, ironically, loving God doesn't begin with loving God, it begins with knowing that we're loved by God. Keep your finger in Matt. 22 and turn to 1 John 4:9-10, 19.

### **Loving God begins with knowing He first loved us (1 John 4:9-10, 19)**

*In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. **10** In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins... **19** We love because he first loved us.*

God sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. The word "propitiation" means that God's wrath over our sins was turned away or appeased by Jesus' sacrifice. God hates sin with a hatred beyond anything we can imagine - that's not a shortcoming in God, it's an important quality of His holiness. Sin in every form is abhorrent to Him. But God loves the sinner with an amazing love, and so Jesus, out of love, bore the wrath of God for our sins as if he was the guilty sinner, paying for our sins so that the wrath of God

could be righteously satisfied. When we place our faith in Jesus Christ, we are saved from God's wrath. God did that because He loves us. He loves you. He loves me. We don't have to wonder what God's disposition towards us is: He loves us.

One of the most famous paintings in the world is the Mona Lisa and one of the reasons it has captivated the artistic world so long is the mystery of her expression. When you first look at her you see her smiling. But look again and the smile is gone. Then it reappears. Then it's gone. It's a mystery that has puzzled artists for centuries and drove at least one painter to his death. In 1852 the French artist Luc Maspero jumped to his death from a Paris hotel. His suicide note explained that he preferred death to continuing his struggle to understand the Mona Lisa's smile.

We don't have to wonder about the expression on God's face. For those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ, His expression isn't angry or scowling or distant or repulsion, it's love. Let that sink in. Do you know, really know, deep in your heart that God loves you? If God loves you, then your life is precious and valuable. Receive God's love for you this morning. Believe God's love for you this morning. And as we receive His love for us, our hearts are able to respond by loving God back.

The most important thing we can do as a church to accomplish our mission of loving God is to proclaim the love of God in Christ Jesus in everything we do! Whether it be in our Sunday service, or children's ministry, or youth ministry or our community groups or just when we're interacting with each other, or telling people about Jesus, to emphasize the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

Now there are practical things that we can do to grow in our love for God and we can sum them up in three words: *connection, commitment, and commission.*

### **1. Connection**

*Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:4-5)*

Jesus is describing a close, intimate, life-giving connection between himself and his disciples. When we love someone we feel connected to them and we want to keep that connection strong and unbroken. When we love someone we're not just going through the motions, our hearts are engaged in the relationship.

There are some practical things we need to do to abide in Jesus. We need to read the Bible, which is God's revelation of Himself, regularly so that we're getting to know God better. When you love someone you want to get to know them.

I've been reading in 2 Kings in my morning devotions and 2 Kings isn't chock full of big, doctrinal statements about God. But almost every time I put the Bible down, I'm struck by how God is faithful to fulfill His promises, and no one can stop God's will or thwart His plans. When God says He will strike down a wicked king and his descendents, it happens. When He promises to preserve a godly king's line, even when someone tries to wipe that line out, God protects that lineage. So I learn something about God that I can take with me into my life and situations: God is faithful to keep His promises. Our hearts connect with God by reading His word.

We also connect with God through prayer. Prayer is really communication with God. It's not just talking to God - have you ever found yourself in a conversation with someone who does all the talking? It's not

really a conversation, is it? It's a monologue. And as you walk away, you realize that your relationship with that person really hasn't grown. It takes a two way communication. Yes we lift our needs and share our hearts with God in prayer, but we should also listen for God to speak to our hearts as well.

We connect with God through the Holy Spirit, by asking God to fill us with the Spirit and seeking His constant guidance. We connect with God through fellowship with other believers where we can be encouraged and provoked in our love for God. These are just some basic ways we connect with God.

Now reading God's word, praying, fellowshiping, etc, doesn't guarantee that we are connecting with God. We can do all those things and just be going through the motions. The solution though isn't to think those things aren't good or important. The solution is to engage our hearts. When we read, pray, listen for the Spirit's voice, and fellowship, we need to engage our hearts if our goal is to love God more. As you begin to read or pray or be with believers, recognize the importance of engaging your heart and opening your heart to God. That helps us to connect with God.

## **2. Commitment**

Jesus said, *if you love me, you'll keep my commandments* (John 14:15). Love always expresses itself in commitment. When a man and woman want to express the deepest love two people can have for each other, they *commit* themselves to each other for the rest of their lives – for better, for worse, till death do them part. Parents express their love for their children through commitment. Friends show their love by being loyal - which means committed to each other. Love expresses itself in commitment.

At Grace we want to encourage and even provoke each other to grow in our commitment to Christ but we want to do it without becoming a "you've got to do this or you don't love God" kind of church. In my brother in law's church one of the pastors was preaching on the passage in 1 John that says that those who love the world are enemies of God, and somehow he managed to slip in a rebuke to those who weren't coming out to the Sunday morning prayer meetings. It left the impression that only apostate enemies of God miss a morning prayer meeting.

We never want to guilt people into commitment. When God wants to grow our commitment, He doesn't start with our commitment, He starts with our love. God isn't interested in propping up our commitment, He wants to stir up our love. Because if we love Jesus, we'll obey him. Love leads to commitment.

As a follower of Jesus, you need to identify the things that Jesus calls you to do, and be committed to that. None of us can do everything, but everyone of us needs to do something and be committed to that something. We shouldn't guilt each other, but we should press each other to be committed to loving and following Jesus - to love and good works.

Maybe you're afraid of commitment and are distrustful of churches that even graciously call for commitment. If that fear comes from being hurt in the past, God wants to help you heal from that. But don't let that fear make you think that you want a church that asks nothing of you. Jesus asks everything of us. He said that we need to love him more than mother and father, brother and sister, son or daughter, more than life itself. That's commitment.

Here at Grace, we want to encourage commitment to Jesus as an expression of love for Jesus. A part of me doesn't want to be challenged in my walk by anyone, but I know I need to be, therefore I want to be challenged in my walk by other believers. Love leads to commitment.

## **3. Commission**

By that I mean the Great Commission - the taking of our message to the world. On the last Sunday of September we'll be looking at the fourth step of our mission: *Going to the world*. Tre Reaume from the Discipleship House will be coming to share that message with us. But our love can't just stay bottled up inside us. I think one of the biggest reasons some Christians struggle with a lack of deeper connection to their faith is because they never share their faith. Our love for Jesus grows as we give it away. Keeping everything inside of us will eventually shrink our excitement and sense of love for Jesus. The antidote is to witness for the Lord, to be known as a Christian, to take a stand for Christ.

The Dead Sea is called dead because it's high salinity (9x saltier than the ocean) makes for a harsh environment where animals can't flourish. The reason the Dead Sea is dead is because it has no outlet. What goes in never goes out. The Jordan River/Sea of Galilee water system comes to an end at the Dead Sea. As Christians, if spiritual things are constantly flowing into us but have no outlet, it will eventually choke out the spiritual life contained in the spiritual things. We'll have more knowledge than life. We need the commission, the outward flow, the taking of the gospel message to an unbelieving world to keep our love bright and strong!

Three simple ingredients for loving God: *connect, commitment, and commission*. And yet we can do all these things and not be loving God. We can get pretty good at going through the motions - I know from firsthand experience! Jesus addresses this with the church of Ephesus in Rev. 2:1-5:

*To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, 'These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lamp stands: <sup>2</sup> "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; <sup>3</sup> and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary...*

This is a church that is doing the right stuff and believing the right stuff. But Jesus has a big problem with this church:

*<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. <sup>5</sup> Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.*

A lot of times when people quote this passage, they talk about "losing" their first love. But Jesus doesn't say they lost their first love, he says they *left* their first love. When we lose something, we don't do it purposely. The other day I had to pick up something from Walmart, and when I came out I couldn't find my car! How do you lose a car? For five or six minutes I was walking around the parking lot with no idea where I parked the car. I thought maybe I parked in front of the other doors so I started walking over to that side of the parking lot and then remembered that, no, I had definitely parked on this side of the parking lot. I was hoping no one saw me walking aimlessly back and forth in the parking lot.

We might lose our car, but we don't lose our first love. We leave it. Jesus doesn't say, search for what you lost, he says "remember, repent, and do the first works..." Go back where you were and retrieve what you left. But what does that mean... *do the first works*? The Ephesian church is already doing the right works – so what does Jesus mean, do the *first* works? I think Pastor Crawford Loritts is right when he says that some texts are meant to be taken emotionally. Jesus is saying go back and remember those tender moments when you loved me more than life itself – and everything you did, you did out of that love. Don't stop doing the right things, but reconnect, start abiding again, put your heart into it.

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If you find yourself going through the motions, doing all the right things but heart not engaged, Jesus says remember. Remember when he meant everything and your heart was so full you would do anything for him. Repent, ask him to forgive you for leaving your first love and reconnect, recommit, and be recommissioned for the Lord's good service. The most important point of our mission as a church is loving God and helping others grow in their love for God. May the Lord help us to do that so that we leave a legacy of people loving God. Let's pray.