

Love's Ultimate Desire: The First Commandment in First Place

1. Introduction

- a. The question we have posed is a simple one that must be answered at the outset of building a life of prayer to ensure that prayer is enjoyable and sustainable. The question is, “What is the point of prayer?” or put another way, “What does successful prayer look like?”.
- b. The first step we took to answer this question was looking at the One we are talking to when we pray. Unless we know and understand who we are talking to we cannot sustain a life of enjoyable prayer.
- c. Throughout Scripture God revealed many of the facets of His personhood but the very first revelation given directly to humanity in Genesis 2 is that our God is a bridegroom.
- d. It is not that our God has a heart like a bridegroom but our God, as seen in Christ, is a Bridegroom. He is a Bridegroom that will one day return to marry His bride, the Church.
- e. When we have this understanding of Christ so much of the Bible makes sense.
 - i. Why did God create man and woman in the very beginning? Because He is a bridegroom and we are made in His image (Eph 5).
 - ii. Why does continue to forgive Israel despite her constant rebellion? Because He is her Husband (Jer. 3).
 - iii. Why does Christ die on the cross? Because He is a bridegroom purchasing/winning over the love of His bride (Matt 22).
 - iv. Why is Jesus coming again? To marry the bride that He won over in love and to consummate the marriage with an eternity of fellowship and communion (Rev. 19).

2. A Successful Prayer Life

- a. With this understanding of God in our minds we can now better answer the question, “What is the point of prayer?”
 - i. Again, you could also phrase this question as, “What does a successful prayer life look like?”
- b. It is through the lens of the heart of a bridegroom that Christ gives us His answer to this question.

*“But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, ‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?’ Jesus said to him, “**You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.**” This is the **first and great** commandment.” - Matthew 22:34-38*

- c. Jesus defines success not only in prayer but in all of life as loving Him wholeheartedly.
 - i. Love's ultimate aim is always equal and reciprocated love. Love loves for love's sake. The goal of love is simple to give and receive love back.
 - ii. It is an innate human desire, given by God, to want to love and be loved.
- d. If this is what God is ultimately after not only in prayer but in all of life then we must reorient our entire life around this one commandment.
 - i. This may sound simple but in order to love God this way everything will be rearranged including our family, our money, our time, our job, our thinking, our friends, our entertainment, etc.
 - ii. Christ's command to love Him should become the north star to how we approach marriage, how we raise kids, how we spend our money, what we do with our time, how we treat our enemies and our neighbors, and the attitude we carry throughout a normal day.
- e. Equally yoked in love: God wants us to love Him with all of our heart and mind, because He loves us with all of His heart and mind. Jesus wants us to love Him in the way He loves us.
 - i. The cross was much more than a payment for sin, although it was that, the cross was and is God's eternal demonstration of His love for His bride. It is love incarnate pouring out everything so that He could receive love in return.
- f. He will supernaturally empower us to love Him this way. It takes God to love God. The anointing to receive God's love and to return it to Him is the greatest gift the Spirit imparts to us. The love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit according to Romans 5:5 and it is through our ongoing encounter with the loving bridegroom God that we are enabled to love Him in return.
- g. Your voluntary love is the one thing that God cannot have or gain with His own sovereign power. The dignity of being a human is that we are allowed to choose whom and what we love, including God.

2. The First Commandment

- a. Loving God wholeheartedly (that is with our entire being) is what God wants first from us. It is His first priority in all that He does. As Hosea discovered God will use any means possible, even pain, suffering, and discomfort to bring for love in His bride.
 - i. This is because He is a bridegroom and all any spouse wants from their partner is pure wholehearted love.
- b. If God could have you become successful at one thing in life it would not be work, parenting, ministry, helping the poor or preaching the gospel, it would be loving Him. This is how God defines success and prayer is the primary place that we receive, give, and cultivate our love with and for God.
 - i. What I find far too often is that when I ask people to describe their dream in life or what a successful life looks like very few people ever say having a heart fully in love with God.

- ii. Most give their answer in terms of family, comfort, or simply obeying God or becoming the “best” Christian possible.
- c. God will do what He must to create a heart of love within His bride. He cares more about our hearts being filled with love than He does about our comfort or our feeling blessed.
 - i. Blessing is not the accumulation of temporal things leading to wealth and comfort but the accumulation of Christ-likeness expressed in whole-hearted love.
 - ii. The wilderness that many people feel is nothing more than God starving people out of the comfort and lukewarmness that is slowly choking out the flames of love in their heart.
- d. Many people spend hours of prayer and days of fasting asking the Lord what His will is for their life. What they really mean is, “What is my ministry assignment?” But God is more interested in your heart burning in love for Him than He is in your ministry assignment.
 - i. I thought for a number of years that my primary calling in life was to be in ministry and do the house of prayer but I have since realized that although the house of prayer may be my assignment in life my primary calling is to cultivate wholehearted love because that alone will endure forever.
 - ii. A man or woman walking out their “calling” with a dull heart brings God no glory. But you can place a man or woman with a fiery heart of love in any context and God will be glorified in and through them.
- e. God’s will for you life is wholehearted love and devotion. God’s dream for you life is Matthew 22:37-38. If you make that your priority you will run right into your ministry assignment.
- f. The primary, not the only, way that we do this is in the place of prayer. Time is the only way to cultivate deep and enduring love with someone, there is no shortcut to that process and the same is true with God.
- g. Only those who spend time with Him will grow in true enduring love. As we spend time in prayer we first receive of His love which then expands our hearts to love Him in return.

*“In this is love, not that we loved God, **but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins....We love Him because He first loved us.”** - 1 John 4 :10 & 19*

3. The Great Commandment

- a. Not only is this God’s first priority and how He defines success but a heart full of love is also how God defines greatness in His kingdom. Simply put the greatest thing you could ever do with you life is give yourself to the pursuit of wholeheartedness.
- b. None of us could control our natural God given talents and giftings. Some people are natural athletes while others are naturally smart. Some see life with an artistic flare

- while others see life as one giant logical progression. You had no control over your talents, giftings, personality, or temperament. Those were all given to you by God.
- c. The reason God, unlike man, does not define greatness by any of those metrics is that different people were given different graces and it would be unfair to judge greatness based on a gift. If greatness was defined by athletic ability most artists would be considered failures. Likewise if success is defined by ministry impact and reach the vast majority of lay people and pastors would also be considered failures.
 - i. Reaching millions with the gospel, although powerful and something we should strive for, is not God's measure of greatness.
 - ii. Greatest in ministry (or anything else) is not determined by the number of people or amount of influence your ministry has. Greatest is determined by the maturing of love taking place within your life and in the lives of those around you.
 - d. Love is the level ground upon which we all stand therefore it is how God defines greatness. Our greatest calling in the grace of God is to respond in wholehearted love back to God through the power of the Holy Spirit as we receive His love in our hearts.
 - e. Loving God this way is the greatest thing we can do because it moves His heart more than anything else does. No amount of service, sacrifice or duty can replace or compare to the simple movement of love with the human heart towards God.
 - i. This commandment will be the standard by which we are judged at the judgement seat of Christ. Anything we do which is motivated by love will endure forever and anything we do, good or bad, which was not motivated by love will be consumed in a moment (1 Corinthians 3:14-15).

4. The Maturing of Love

- a. Wholehearted love does not come in a moment nor is it cultivated with ease. It comes through the process of time. One of the major pieces to this process is prayer because prayer is where we allow His love to touch our spirits and where we speak our love back to Him through words and song.
- b. But one of the greatest struggles in prayer is the feeling of inadequacy and failure. In prayer we are forced to come face to face with our weakness on a regular basis.
 - i. This is actually one of the greatest benefits of the house of prayer and why it is a greenhouse for discipleship because it forces us to trust God at a deeper level every day as we come up against our sin and brokenness.
 - ii. People quickly learn how to bury their sin and struggles in a Sunday morning church service once a week but in order to have a life of prayer you must face those weaknesses constantly.
- c. One of the primary reasons we struggle with these feelings of shame, guilt, condemnation and inadequacy is because we wrongly define what a successful Christian life is. We believe it is based on our performance and abilities thus we feel condemned when we fall short or fail.
- d. But once we realize that God is not after our abilities but wholehearted love it frees me from having to perform and live up to a performance standard.

- e. Rather God looks past our failures, weakness and sinfulness and looks at the movements of our heart to judge greatest, growth and maturity because a heart that is maturing in love will ultimately lead to obedience.
- f. The Song of Songs pictures this truth in the most remarkable way:

"I am dark but lovely....do not look upon me , because I am dark." - Song of Songs 1:5-6

- g. The Shulamite (the bride) is covered in shame because she is dark.
 - i. Culturally darkened and tanned skin was a sign of someone who was forced to work in the fields as a slave (male) or a widow (female). These were considered among the lowest caste in society.
- h. The bride here was fully aware of her brokenness. Similarly we regularly are confronted with our own sin and weakness. We are all fully aware of our areas of struggle and our human tendency is to hide them for fear of rejection (because our society is built on performance).
- i. However in that place of complete and utter weakness she has the understanding that to her bridegroom she is still lovely. Her darkness doesn't disqualify or nullify his love for her.
- j. Rather the bridegroom declares his love for her again and again throughout the book.

"Behold, you are fair, my love! Behold, you are fair! You have dove's eyes." - Song of Songs 1:15

"You have ravished my heart, my sister, my spouse; You have ravished my heart with one look from your eyes, with one link of your necklace." - Song of Songs 4:9

- k. Love is grown and cultivated over time and thus is not judged on its perfection but upon its sincerity. Weak love is still true love.
 - i. None of us demand perfect love from our spouses or children what we desire is sincere love because we know sincere love over time will mature and bear the fruits of obedience.
- l. Likewise God is not looking at us with the demands of perfection but with the desire of sincerity knowing that sincerity today will turn into maturity over time and that anyone who's love does not mature over time was never really sincere.

5. Mary of Bethany

- a. Possibly the best example of this in all of Scripture is Mary of Bethany. The first time we meet Mary is in Luke 10 when Jesus comes into her home and we are told that Mary sat at Jesus' feet and listened to Him speak.

"Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and

heard His word...But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her." - Luke 10:38-39, 42

- b. Mary's heart was so moved with love for Jesus that it caused Him to spend some time there the week before He died. Mary seemed to understand something that no one else did, that Jesus was about to die and the love in her heart spilled over for all to see.

"Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard anointed the feet of Jesus, and wipe His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil...But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial. For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always.'" - John 12:3 & 7-8

- c. As Christ was revealed to Mary love was awakened in her and it propelled her to do what most thought to be ridiculous, but it wasn't ridiculous it was just love.