

A Love Above All Others

Readings

Isa 2:10-17

Ps 89:1-18

Rom 6:1-11

Matt 10:34-42

Opening

C.S. Lewis wrote on the subject of love throughout his writings, but never more directly than in his book entitled...*The Four Loves*. Nearing the end of that book, Lewis recalled William Morris and his poem titled "Love Is Enough." One of Morris' critics offered a simple review: "It isn't." One can easily surmise what Lewis would have thought of the Beatles' *Love Is All You Need*. Should love be elevated to the status of a god, Lewis wrote, love becomes a demon.¹

But how could a Christian ever be down in the mouth about love? Shouldn't talk of love be pleasant? Shouldn't love draw, stir, illuminate, endear, kindle, and awaken our hearts? Isn't loving and being loved the key to happiness, joy, and fulfillment?

I imagine you've been in conversations where you're speaking with someone for several minutes, you feel like you're connecting, but then you have this sudden sense of alarm, maybe even a cold sweat. You suddenly realize you and your friend have entirely misread one another. Your terminology sounds the same; your meanings are entirely different.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 56.

The word 'love' is much like the name 'God' in our time. I hear the name 'God' and I wonder what someone means. The church father, Gregory Nazianzus, had the same difficulty in the 4th century. Gregory declared, "When I say God, I mean Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

When I hear love, I need to pause and ask "whose love—the triune God's or someone else's?" I will say this, I'm **not** the standard bearer. I don't want love defined in my own image or likeness. The heart is still too deceitful. I love 'me' too much. What I need is the love of Jesus.

The Love of Jesus

It even rolls off the tongue nicely, 'the love of Jesus.' It has a nice cadence, 'the love of Jesus.' If you grew up in the South, you might even shorten it to 'love o' Jesus.' We make his love sound so easy, so effortless.

Then we hear words *from* Jesus about love that are not easy: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." ²

Loving God is *everything* for Jesus. Jesus demands love worthy of himself, something only God would say. Jesus cannot simply be our favorite moral teacher with statements like this. Which reminds me of another famous Lewis quotation, one of my favorites, this one from *Mere Christianity*.

² Matthew 10:37–38, ESV

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

If you wish to follow Jesus; if you desire to love Jesus, he requires everything. He cannot be a second love, an accessory love, or even a first among equals. Nothing less than all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Loving God, Ourselves and Our Descendants

St Benedict ordered his monastic communities by this principle: prefer nothing to the love of Christ. Therein lies the only way to spiritual health and fullness of life.

There are so many signs of goodness in the church the past few decades: recovery of beauty, longing for liturgy, hunger for the ancient roots of our faith, desire for biblical justice, the pursuit of relationships with neighbors. In all this spiritual and practical goodness, I feel we’re losing the main thing: do you love *God above all other loves*?

Do you love God for God Himself, or only for what he does for you? Do you love the Lord above all other loves?

I have found myself praying this prayer with and for my children. More than their father; more than their mother; more than a possible spouse one day; I want my children to love the Lord God above all other loves.

I’ve realized that prayer isn’t for my natural children alone. I’m praying this for generations to come in this household of faith. Will our descendants love God above all other loves?

In his poem “France Must Go On,” Charles Peguy writes of a father longing and ready for his children to take his place.

He thinks tenderly of the time when he won't even be a remark;
That is what he is working at, that is what he is working for;
Indeed, isn't it for his children that a man works?
He won't be any more than a body in six feet of earth,
under six feet of earth, under a cross.
But his children will be living.
He greets with tenderness the new times when he will be no more.
When he will not be,
When his children will be,
His children's reign.
He thinks tenderly of that time which will no longer be his time,
But his children's time,
The reign (in time) of his children on earth. ³

I pray that our descendants in this household of faith will love God even more than we do. If that future becomes real, it will be because we tended, we guarded our hearts and their loves.

Habits of the Heart

Here's how you know who or what your heart loves most: thoughts and habits. Simply pay attention to two signs: an internal and an external sign. Notice the patterns of your **thoughts** and you'll discover what or who you love most. That's the internal sign. But the external sign is your **habits**. As Jamie Smith has written, “you are what you love. You love what you *repeatedly do*.” Watch your routines, your habits and you will discover what or who you love most.

³ Charles Peguy, “France Must Go On,” *Saints and Sinners*, 98-99.

A few years ago when I was training for a half-marathon, I began tracking my daily calorie intake. I kept this daily log on a website where you would type in foods you consumed at breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks. I'd enter the food item, it would magically appear from the website database, then this dialog box appeared which asked "Did you eat this?" Underneath the question was this green button I was to press that said "I ate this."

The first several days were ok, but then I'd fall behind recording the log and I'd have to input a few days together. With guilt I clicked, "I ate this" for everything I ate and saw I exceeded my calorie goal by 30%. (Apparently that 9pm bowl of Breyer's Vanilla Bean ice cream makes a big difference.) I honestly didn't feel like I was overeating. When I began paying attention, my habits told a different story.

A Well-Ordered Heart

Until we keep watch over our heart, we won't recognize where and how our loves have fallen into dis-order. God created us with a well-ordered heart, a heart made for eternity, a heart that finds fulfillment and rest worshipping him alone. But our sin nature and sin habits take lesser loves and throw our hearts into dis-order. Work becomes something more than a job—it becomes an idol we serve to find fulfillment instead of seeking intimacy with Christ alone. We expect our closest relationships to give the affection, attention, and love our hearts crave. Christos Yannaras said "Sin is precisely the failure of love to reach the goal it has in mind."⁴ Sin is a failure of *love*. Isn't that interesting? Our loves get us tied up in knots. We aim for total fulfillment in our human relationships and it can never reach the goal we seek. Is it a wonder that we suffer from disorders such as obsessions, co-dependencies, addictions? The heart was not made for disordered loves.

Imagine attending a symphony performance of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. The first chair violinist, the concertmaster, has the sole duty of tuning the orchestra as the concert begins. But imagine a careless concertmaster who hasn't bothered to tune his own violin. His own violin is a bit sharp on the top end, a bit flat on the low end, he's generally somewhere between D-Eb. But the *The Four Seasons* begins in E major. If the concertmaster tunes the

⁴ Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith: An Introduction to Orthodox Theology*. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2006).

orchestra with a violin that's off-pitch, the whole orchestra will be in disarray. The orchestra won't reach E major on their own. And disaster awaits at the first key change.

When the heart is tuned to loving God, all our other loves find a common melody and they find their right place in the music. But only when the heart is 'in key.' When the heart pursues the love of God first, our other loves are set free. Gone are the demands for lesser loves to be more than they were made to be. It is the great paradox of the Gospel. Whoever loses their loves to love God above all will find freedom and love in relationship with others. St Francis de Sales said, "God has enough love for the entire universe without being drained. When everything has been filled to the brim with God's love there remains an infinity of love in reserve."⁵

The Redeemed Heart, Re-Ordered by the Cross

To order our hearts and our loves rightly, there is only one way: the way of the cross. Only those who take up their cross are worthy of Christ Jesus. The cross put the world on a new axis, the axis of redemption and new creation. The cross puts the heart on a new axis. The cross purifies and orders our loves like no other. Jesus said to his disciples, "I do as the Father commanded me, *so that the world may know that I love the Father.*"⁶ Do you love God above all other loves? As it was with the Lord's cross, so it must be with the crosses we carry. Our suffering is not without purpose—we devote every hardship, every pain so that we may love God with a pure heart. "For when we are united with Christ in a death like this, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." We have only begun to experience true joy and freedom. Love God above all and receive the resurrection of your heart that makes you fully alive. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁵ St Francis de Sales, *Living Love*, 98.

⁶ John 14.31