



Daily Devotionals: Love God | January 15, 2023

Matthew 22:39

We desire to see people who are far from God respond to the Gospel and place their faith in Jesus.

Day 1

This week, we're launching into the second part of our mission. Last week, we reflected on how the first part of our mission is to **Love God**. The second part of our mission is equally important. We are to **Love People**.

Loving people is an opportunity for us to participate in *dynamic evangelism*, where we desire to see people who are far from God respond to the Gospel and place their faith in Jesus.

For us to love people well and bring the Gospel to bear in their lives, it requires we begin by talking about our posture towards them. There are two features to this:

- (1) A posture of cruciform love
- (2) Seeing others as made in the image of God.

Let's take a look at both of those characteristics of loving people well.

(1) A posture of cruciform love

In *The Deeper Journey*, Robert Mulholland works with this arresting phrase, **cruciform love**. He says, "The deeper journey is a *cruciform* path from a pervasively *self-referenced* life into a thoroughly Christ-referenced life, a life of cruciform love in the world, a Christlike life for others....".

"Cruciform" means "conformed to the cross." So, when we are pursuing a "cruciform life" or "cruciformity," we are pursuing a life that resembles Jesus' sacrificial posture. Just as He laid down His life for us, we lay down our lives for others. We take up the way of the cross.



(2) Seeing others as made in the image of God

When we talk about loving people, one of the first things we need to understand is that all people are created in the image of God.

In **Genesis 1:1-27** we come to understand how and why God created humanity and its role in creation. In **Genesis 1**, God speaks the universe into existence. He creates the wonders of far-off galaxies and the beauty and intricacies of various flowers and trees.

Then, in **Genesis 1:26** we read, “Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness... so God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.’”

“In the image of God he created them...”

Imago Dei is the phrase we use to describe that verse’s reality. In Latin, it means “image of God” and is used to describe humanity’s inherent worth and dignity.

To love people well, we must embrace a posture of **cruciformity**. So, we ask, “How can I go to the cross on this person’s behalf? How can I lay down my life for this person? How can I give this person my all?”

To love people well, we must view them as God does – people who are made ***Imago Dei***. To deny individuals as possessing the *Imago Dei*, in thought or in action, is to miss the mark of our divinely ordained purpose.

Questions for reflection:

- After reflecting on what you read today, how would you describe cruciform love?
- What are your thoughts, feelings, and questions about being made in the image of God? Write what comes to mind.
- When was a time in this past year when you may have missed the mark in practicing “cruciform love” or seeing someone as made in the image of God?



Day 2

Yesterday, we looked at how God made people in His image – full of dignity, value, and worth. One of the hard parts about seeing people in a full-blown *Imago Dei* kind of way is that we struggle to love them as God loves us—unconditionally.

So often, in our relationships, we find ourselves...

- Keeping score
- Being critical
- Complaining about needs not being met (think phrases like “it’s not fair”)
- Resentment
- Bitterness
- Trying to fix each other

Essentially...it leads to *conditional* love. And as you can see, that leads to some problems. If someone experiences conditional love, they’ll always feel like they’ve got to earn their friend’s approval, never quite making it. That, or they’ll have to constantly worry about the relationship shattering before their very eyes at one wrong misstep – leading to incessant worry, fear, anxiety, and stress.

But what would it look like for us to love others like God loves us?

Take a moment to read **Galatians 5:22-23**. What are the different fruits of the Spirit listed here? Write them out in the provided space.

Now read **Romans 12:9-21**. What are all the different ways love is exemplified in this passage?

Now, imagine visitors walking into our church and seeing thousands of people from all different backgrounds, ethnicities, genders, and classes loving God, loving each other, and living life that looks a lot like Galatians 5 and Romans 12?

That kind of love makes God look glorious and that makes His Church look beautiful.



And all of this stems from the fact that we are unconditionally loved by God.

Wait, let's rephrase that: **You are unconditionally loved by the Creator, Ruler, and Redeemer of the entire cosmos!**

Seriously, one of the shortest and yet most profound verses in all the Bible is this simple sentence:

"We love, because God first loved us (1 John 4:19)."

Any love we give flows directly from our understanding of how we are loved by God. Our love starts with His.

- In love, God designed us to bear His image.
- In love, God gave us the freedom to make choices.
- In love, God rescued us from our choices through Jesus' death and resurrection.
- In love, God invites us to love others with the love He gave us.

"God's unfailing love for us is an objective fact affirmed over and over in the Scriptures. It is true whether we believe it or not. Our doubts do not destroy God's love, nor does our faith create it. It originates in the very nature of God, who is love, and it flows to us through our union with His beloved Son." -Jerry Bridges

"Though we are incomplete, God loves us completely. Though we are imperfect, He loves us perfectly. Though we may feel lost and without compass, God's love encompasses us completely. He loves every one of us, even those who are flawed, rejected, awkward, sorrowful, or broken." -Dieter F. Uchtdorf

It boils down to this: You can't love people with the love of God, unconditionally, if you don't believe God loves you. Your love for others bubbles up out of the love you experience from God.

Questions for reflection:

- Do you ever feel like people put "conditions" on their love for you? How does that make you feel?



- Think of someone in each of the three categories of relationships in your life: (1) a work relationship; (2) a spiritual relationship (say a person in your life group); and (3) an intimate relationship (a child, a spouse, etc.). Do you have any conditions for any of the people in each of these categories? What are they? Are they appropriate to have?
- Do you need to confess any “conditions” you’ve placed on loving others? Take time to write a prayer to God confessing those.
- Meditate on **Galatians 5:22-23**. Which of the fruits of the Spirit do you need to grow in most? Ask God to help cultivate that fruit in your life.



Day 3

On Day 1, we learned that each and every person is created in the image of God, the *Imago Dei*. And yesterday, on Day 2, we looked at how God's love towards us is the foundation of us loving others unconditionally.

While I'm sure no one would outrightly say that they disagree with those two, if we're being honest, we also probably know someone that is hard to love unconditionally. You know, *that person*. You know who I'm talking about – we see them coming from down the hall, we see their caller ID pop up on our phone, we see them across the church lobby...and inwardly...we groan.

Our minds begin to race: *Did they see me? Did they see me, see them? Is there someone nearby I can start a conversation with before they get to me?* But alas, there they are in front of us. So, we force a smile, say "hi," engage in a little chit-chat, and look for the quickest way out of the encounter.

We all know *that person*.

When Jesus kicks off his ministry, He begins it with healings, exorcisms, and the best sermon ever preached – all taking place in Matthew 5-7. It's surprising that Jesus was so popular because, if you look closely, some of his words are very challenging.

Take a look at **Matthew 5:46-48** from the Contemporary English Version:

"If you love only those people who love you, will God reward you for that? Even tax collectors love their friends. If you greet only your friends, what's so great about that? Don't even unbelievers do that? But you must always act like your Father in heaven."

Ouch. Notice that this was not a suggestion, but rather a command from God. God commands us to love difficult people. When we love difficult people, it's a sign that we understand how much God loves us. But, admittedly, it's not easy.

Let's pause right here and ask...

Who in your life (family, a co-worker, neighbor, brother or sister in Christ) is difficult to love? Write down any names that come to mind.



What makes you want to avoid that individual? Is it their attitude that's the problem or is it actually yours? Is it that they stand too close, make awkward comments, have bad breath, have hurt us in the past? Or is it about our preference to be around people we know and like? Is it their quirks? Or is it maybe our own lack of humility, forgetting we have quirks too? Write your thoughts in the space below.

Most likely, the reason *that* person is *that* person is because they're people with shortcomings just like you and me. God's commands are rarely easy, but they are important. Here are five ways we can grow in our ability to love *that* person.

Take some time and practice the following steps below:

1. **Pray for your own heart.**

Ask God to soften your heart towards this person, to put off anger and irritability, to put on meekness and kindness, to understand this person's struggles, and to meet them with compassion (**Colossians 3:12-14**).

2. **Pray for *that* person.**

Ask God to be at work in their hearts, drawing them to Himself and helping them see how much He loves them (**John 3:16-17**).

3. **Move toward them, not away from them.**

Although our tendency is to steer clear of that person, try intentionally moving toward them. Find ways to actively love that person. Habitual love has a tendency of changing the hearts of others as well as our own. Write down two to three ways you can serve that person in the next week or so.

4. **Give them grace, just as God gives grace to you.**

Remember God's grace poured out for your own daily sins. Pray to God right now to help you bear with them and love them well (**Colossians 3:13**).

5. **Realize that you too, could be the difficult person in someone else's life!**



Have you ever considered if you're the thorn in someone else's flesh? Don't be oblivious to your own shortcomings and sins. Spend some time thinking through your week. Was there a time when you could have been *that person* to someone else? Make a plan to apologize if the Lord stirs something in your heart and brings someone to mind.

God will be honored and our hearts will find deeper contentment as we seek to love people just as Christ loved us when we were His enemies.

Questions for Reflection:

- Read Matthew 5:46-48 again. Take a few moments to pray, asking God to show you how to love "like your Father in heaven." What do you think that would look like in your own life?
- Look back at the names you listed in the question above. Write out a prayer for each of those individuals. Name one tangible way you can love them well.



Day 4

Yesterday we worked through what it looks like to engage *that person* in our lives, but what if *that person* is actually *those people*?

Hear me out: Have you ever considered the idea that there might be prejudice lurking beneath the surface in your own heart?

Truth is, there just might be. The word “prejudice” has Latin origins and means to “pre-judge based on opinion.” Still doubting if it’s true of you? Consider these questions:

- How do you determine the quickest line to get into at the grocery store?
- How do you choose what to wear?
- How do you decide where to sit at church?
- How do you choose a doctor, what car to buy, what career path to take?

Based on previous experience, research, or sometimes just a hunch, we “pre-judge” decisions all the time. According to Psychology Today, Dr. Eva Krockow suggests the average person makes 35,000 choices a day. If you sleep an average of seven hours daily, that’s over 2,000 choices every waking hour! And many of those choices are based on what you have “pre-judged” about a situation or a person.

Few people walk around proudly exclaiming, “I’m prejudiced!” That’s a stigma we want nothing to do with. The truth though? We all make pre-judgments about people before we really get to know them based on any number of factors:

- Appearance (think: clothes, hair, skin color, physical attributes, tattoos, piercings)
- Behavior (think: introvert/extrovert, speech accent, arrogant/insecure, habits)
- Status (think: car, home, income, job, influence, success, followers on social media)

And the list could go on... We do this based on our experiences and our opinions which makes it incredibly difficult to love them the way Jesus loves them.

Read Luke 7:36-50.



Imagine the scene: Jesus is eating dinner one night when a prostitute comes into the home, kneels down at Jesus' feet, and starts weeping, drying her tears with her hair. Then she anoints Jesus with expensive perfume (very likely bought with the money she earned working).

Don't miss these two important facts:

1. While the religious people began passing judgment, Jesus forgave her sins.
2. Those who claimed to know God saw her with judgment, but Jesus saw her for who she truly was – a child of God in need of hope and forgiveness.

Yesterday our tendency to avoid difficult individuals was challenged. Jesus was noted for the way He met with people who didn't think, act, or look like Him. But Jesus also went out of His way to interact with entirely different people groups: prostitutes, tax collectors, hypocrites, lepers, criminals, outcasts, the poor, the hurting, the needy, and the rejected.

Questions for reflection:

- What “pre-judgments” do you think you tend to make of other people? Are there certain ones that you feel like are made more often than others?
- Have you ever experienced someone writing you off, not because of your character, but because of a certain people group they associated you with? What did that feel like?
- In what ways have you seen a “pre-judgment” about someone lead to distance in your relationship with that person or people group?
- Who are *those people* to you? How do you think God loves *those people*?
- When was a time when you “pre-judged” someone and were proven wrong about your judgment?

Like going to the eye doctor to fix a vision problem, spend time asking God for new eyes – the eyes of Jesus. Pray that you would see all people, particularly the people you have pre-judged, like He sees them. Spend time confessing prejudices you have. Confess them knowing that God will forgive (**1 John 1:9**).



Day 5

Many people struggle today with a healthy sense of self-worth. But for a lot of people, our problem isn't usually loving ourselves enough. It's that it's enough for us to just love ourselves.

As humans in a fractured world, we all struggle with self-absorption. And this keeps us from loving people in a God-honoring way.

Look at this painfully accurate assessment of the effects of self-absorption in our culture from Psychology Today:

“Our relationships are damaged, sometimes irreparably, by a self-preoccupation that undermines the closeness, or intimacy, that all relationships require if they're to be nurturing and resilient. Constant self-absorption undermines our capacity for empathy and true understanding of the thoughts, feelings, needs, and desires of others. It's extremely difficult to clearly appreciate the world that exists outside ourselves when most of the time our focus is directed inwards.”

A lot of our self-centeredness, however, is just the water we swim in. As David Foster Wallace writes,

"Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe; the realest, most vivid, and important person in existence. We rarely think about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness because it's so socially repulsive. But it's pretty much the same for all of us. It is our default setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth. Think about it: there is no experience you have had that you are not the absolute center of. The world as you experience it is there in front of YOU or behind YOU, to the left or right of YOU, on YOUR TV or YOUR monitor. And so on. Other people's thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real.”

Wallace is right. Selfishness is the air we breathe. Everything from Burger King's, “Have It YOUR Way,” to UPS's, “What can brown do for YOU?” leads us either consciously or subconsciously to think first and foremost of ourselves.

Now, take a moment to **read Luke 10:30-37.**



In the provided space, jot down a couple of ways you see selflessness on the part of the Samaritan. Then reflect on what characteristics of the Samaritan need to be true of you in order to love others well.

When Jesus was asked which commandment was greatest, he gave a two-part answer: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength” (which we covered last week).

But then he said, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Because of how focused we can be on ourselves, if there’s one glaring area we can grow in, it’s learning to love others *like* ourselves.

The Challenge to Love

As this week wraps up, we want to make sure we don’t just talk about loving, but that we put ourselves in situations *to* love. Here’s are three ways to challenge yourself to love this week:

1. Write a prayer to God about developing a heart of selflessness like the Samaritan man in **Luke 10**. Then, write that prayer on some sticky notes and put them in places you frequent. Finally, commit to praying that prayer for the next 7 days every time you see it.
2. As you go throughout your week – from the house to work to the grocery store and everything in between – pay special attention to people who annoy or irk you. When you notice those feelings, stop what you’re doing and pray for that person. Then, ask yourself, “How would my view of this person change if I viewed them as the *Imago Dei*?”



3. Identify one person (a coworker, a family member, a friend, a gym acquaintance, a spouse, etc.) that you can love tangibly this week. Identify them, and then list out three ways to love them in action. Lastly, commit to completing those actions.