

(Start with Match.com youtube video)

Have you noticed lately how prevalent these commercials are? They are all over the place. I love the stat they bring up, "1 in 5 relationships begin with an online dating site." These websites have exploded! There's match.com, eharmony.com (where they care more about creating relationships than dates), there's even a local one run by Cumulous media, Cupid.com, and dozens more. Why? People are desiring to connect and find love.

Love is something that is inherent to humanity. Many children come from love. For babies, love is all they know for the most part. We love each other, and we love pets, and we love Tim Tebow...well, maybe that last one goes a bit far. At any rate, we seem to be created with this wiring to love something. I believe this to be part of our image reflecting of God because God, as the Bible says over and over again, is a God about love. It's even something He commands of us.

This weeks memory verse from Experiencing God says this, "Jesus replied: **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”**³⁸ **This is the first and greatest commandment,**” (Matthew 22:37-38). Listen to that again. The first and **GREATEST COMMAND** from God is to love God.

Now for those of us who are a part of the Church, we don't question this. It is a right and just command but listen to these words again as if you don't know who God is, as if you have no experience with God, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and GREATEST commandment." This isn't just the first command from God, it is the GREATEST command to love God. If you have no experience with God, it begs the question, "**Why?** I mean what has God done to deserve my love? How can he command me to love him when I don't know him?" You know what, those are GREAT questions that we too often overlook. Why should we love God?

The simple answer would be because He loves us. But how do we know that? In ways has God really shown He loves us, that he deserves our love, that he can command our love? These may seem like nearly blasphemous questions, but those are the very questions in people's minds outside the church when they hear things like this. So let's deal with them. Let's deal with the big one, **How do we know God loves us?**

Well, let's look at some Scriptures. The first thing we see is that God is revealed simply in Creation, **Psalm 19 says,** "¹ **The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.** ² **Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge.** ³ **They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them.** ⁴ **Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun.** ⁵ **It is like a bridegroom coming out of his**

chamber, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. ⁶ It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is deprived of its warmth.” From the heavens, to the sun, God declares himself, but that isn’t all. In Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God. Jesus says this in **Luke**, “**All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.**” (Luke 10:22)

I think we too often take this idea of God revealing himself to us for granted. So many other religions and spiritual philosophies teach that the faithful must EARN their way to a god or gods. In fact our God may be the only example where God actually chooses to come to people to reveal himself. This is not a common idea, and it makes for a unique experience for us as Christians. God, the creator of heaven and earth, reveals himself to us.

Not only does God reveal himself to us, but in that revelation is something special. Jesus further says this in **John**, “**You did not choose me, but I CHOSE you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.**” (John 15:16). **God chooses humanity.** God chooses you and me. God loves us so much that He chooses us. Omnipotent, omnipresent, omni-whatever you can think of God, chooses us. That’s love.

In that choice, though, is an **invitation**. Listen to these words of God, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock.” He’s like that guy on the first date, ready to pick you up. “**Hear I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.**” (Revelation 3:20). Now the question is are we going to open that door? Perhaps you haven’t opened that door because you are still getting ready. Maybe you feel like you need to figure out what to wear, and get pristine before you can invite God in. God doesn’t care about that. Maybe you think the time just isn’t right. You have things you need to get done before you’ll be ready for God. God is there inviting you just the way you are.

Maybe you are nervous though, and you wonder what it is it God has in mind. What is God inviting you to? God answers us this question in Deuteronomy. God makes a promise to the Israelites that is true of us today. When you accept God’s invitation, God is inviting you to a new way of doing things. God says this, “**The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live,**” (Deut. 30:6). Now the circumcise thing is a metaphor, guys, so don’t worry. It is about the end of the verse. **God invites us to LIFE.** Not just “eternal life,” which I think we head to far too often. Seriously, if all we have to offer is something after people are dead, there’s something wrong there. God offers and invites us to LIFE NOW. Here, on this side of eternity.

This probably sounds great to many people, but how does God accomplish this? How does God really bring about a new life now? This is the ongoing expression of God's love: God works within us. Everyday, if we are attentive and diligent and disciplined, God works within us. Paul, an early Church planter, writes about this to a church in Philippi, **"Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose," (Phil 2:13).** God's work doesn't end when we welcome Him into our lives and our hearts, but it is only the beginning. It is a lifelong process that God takes us on to become more and more just and righteous and holy.

However, none of this would be possible if it weren't for the ultimate expression of God's love. 4 weeks ago, we were celebrating Christmas! The moment God became flesh in Jesus Christ. Jesus took on all it meant to be human—our pains and joys. Why? To live a perfect life because we can't. Why? To enable an eternal presence with a Holy God. How? Through His death, resurrection, and ascension. Romans 5 says this, **"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us," (Romans 5:6-8).**

This is love. God didn't wait for us to get pretty. God didn't wait for us to become perfect. God just did it. Died for us, without us earning it. That is love. We were talking at worship design the other day about some of this, and I realized how much being a parent has transformed my understanding of love. I love my kids no matter what trouble they are getting into. I love my kids when they are climbing up on the dining room table. I love my kids when they are dumping cereal everywhere. I love my kids when they turn over a plate of food. I may get frustrated, but I still love them. I love them when they have crib hair and it is just crazy going everywhere. Their condition doesn't matter to me. I love them, and boy, it brings joy to my heart when they express love back and give me kisses and hugs.

It is that and more so with God. God doesn't care about our condition. He just wants us to love him and embrace him and begin a new life with him. And so, we are left with this command, **"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."**³⁸ **This is the first and greatest commandment," (Matthew 22:37-38).** So will you love God? Maybe you want to, but you don't know how.

It requires an investing your time, gifts and abilities, and yes, money. It reminds of a recent interview I heard with LaVar Arrington. He recently made headlines with a few other football players regarding Penn State's choice for a new coach. During the interview, he was asked as to whether he gives to Penn State. He

doesn't, which is fine, but in his response something more was revealed that I think has application for us. He said while he was at Penn State playing, he was only concerned about classes and football. He didn't network or anything else. Just went to classes, play football, "and go," he said. Therefore, it was clear LaVar had no investment in Penn State. He kept his head down, played, and left. At no point did he communicate that he desired a connection at a deeper level. Yet, now he was demanding that connection back.

I wonder how many of us feel that God is distant and far away, but we are not investing any time in Him. Recently, I read and wrote about an atheist who felt this way. She said, "I pleaded with God to reveal himself to me and wondered what was wrong with me that he never did." Yet God reveals himself everywhere, and she never heard or saw. I'm sure many of us feel that way or have felt that way. We feel that God is just so distant, and we don't know where He wants us to be or what He wants us to do.

In these moments, we need to ask ourselves and examine are we truly living out God's command to love him with all we have. Is there something else that we are loving more? Is there someone else? Sometimes, God is there all along, and we just didn't realize it. Our eyes are open but our mind is closed. Sometimes we know God is there, but He just doesn't do what we want Him to do. This perhaps is the biggest part of love too. The love God asks of us and the love God provides doesn't come with strings attached. God loves us no matter what in the very same way many parents love their children. God's command for us to love him also means to love God no matter what God asks of us or desires of us or who God is.

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." Doing this, loving in this way, will take us places we never thought possible...not all of them pleasant, but all of them worth it. Love gets dirty, as I can attest to as a dad. It gets messy, but it is so worth the time and effort. The question is, are we willing to love God that way? Can we truly embrace that kind of love? That is what God is asking of us. That is the kind of love that changes people, changes communities, changes the world.