

## To Know What Love Is – 3. Love Disrupted

Deuteronomy 11:13-21

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This week, Luke and I celebrated 13 years of marriage. We went out for dinner to celebrate. The restaurant was a the kind that seated people together for a shared meal. The food was delicious and meticulously plated. But it turned out the real treat was experiencing it with others. We were seated next to another couple, celebrating a birthday. They were also newlyweds, married just two years. Towards the end of the meal they said, “What’s your secret for such a long marriage?”

I’ll admit, it surprised me. I don’t think of ours as a long marriage. My parents have been married over 40 years, my grandparents were married for nearly 70 when my grandpa died. By comparison, ours seems rather short.

But it turns out, in the US the average marriage ends after 8 years. This is what gives us the phrase, “7 year itch,” I suppose, and many name that to be a time when marriage is the hardest. One report I read says that while marriages experience hard times, or dissolution, for a variety of reasons- commonly it is because of “poor communication and listening skills, a lack of empathy and partners having unrealistic expectations of one another.”

Friendships fair slightly better, with the average friendship lasting 10 years. And as it turns out, the deterioration of friendship is often due to the same struggles in communication, empathy, and expectations.

At the same time, when asked, people will overwhelmingly say that their relationships- whether marriage, family, or friendships, are the most important things in their lives. And numerous studies point to the same conclusion- often the “secret” to a happy or long life is maintaining good, close relationships. So how does our lived reality veer so far from our desires and need for close relationships?

St Augustine, one of the great theologians and philosophers of Western Christianity, set out to answer this very question after reading Cicero’s conclusion that “every person sets out to be happy, but the majority are thoroughly wretched.”

Turns out the people living around the year 400 had the same basic struggles as we do in 2024. Augustine set out to discover why it is that most people are so discontent. His conclusion was that for most of us, our lives are lived “out of order” and we have disordered our love. That is, *what* we love becomes out of order with *how* or *who* we love.

Augustine was convinced that what defines a person more than anything is what they love. But that sometimes, we get off track. He named this “disordered loves” - by which he meant that we often love less-important things more, and more-important things less than we ought, and this wrong prioritization leads to unhappiness and disorder in our lives.

Now, I want to pause briefly, before exploring this further and say: sometimes the dissolution of a relationship is the right thing. Sometimes the ending of a relationship is the way we experience real healing and happiness within ourselves or with others. Sometimes our love becomes re-ordered by the ending of a relationship.

But also: many times when we struggle in relationships- with God, with family and friends, with colleagues- it’s because we’ve just gotten off track, and our priorities or love have gotten temporarily out of order. This is our

real focus today: how do we keep our love “in order” so that we can experience all the blessings of a well-loved life?

Jesus teaches us that the most important thing is that we first love God, then love our neighbor as we love ourselves. And following our love of God, our love of others and our self, is our love of other important things in our life: our love of meaningful work, hobbies, travel and the like. But sometimes, our love gets disrupted, and we find ourselves loving things or experiences before people, or find even our love of God taking a backseat.

Augustine defined sin as disordered love. When we fail to love God first, and our neighbor and selves secondly, but instead place other things- like love of sports or travel, of money or success or power first ... Augustine says here is where we will stumble and find troubles in maintaining our relationships and finding happiness or contentment in life. It isn't that all these other aspects of our life aren't good, it's just that if we find ourselves in a place where our love of God and one another is not primary, that we will struggle.

My guess is that all of us have at one point or another experienced a disordered love. Often it happens slowly and unintentionally. We might, for example, believe that our best friend or partner is our most important relationship. But then, our calendars are filled with appointments and meetings. Our time together becomes fleeting, and when we are together we zone out watching a show, scrolling, or passively talking about our days rather than really connecting. And suddenly, we find that our behaviors aren't aligned with our intentions or desires.

A number of years ago, when my kids were little, I found myself feeling really lonely. Looking at my calendar, it wouldn't appear I'd have time to feel lonely- I was busy with play dates, church and community events, even date nights and time with friends. But I realized, that while I desired intimacy and connection with my people, my time was actually spent with a lot of busyness.

How often has someone asked you: how have you been? And your first response is; busy.

A busy life doesn't always mean a happy one. Sometimes the culprit of this, is that our love has gotten out of order. Our behaviors or activities have become misaligned with our priorities.

And that's precisely where I found myself. My life had gotten out of order - it was busy, but I was lonely because i was prioritizing the wrong things. I was missing out on real connection and deepening relationships. I felt isolated, even though I was hardly ever alone. Do you know what I mean?

As you know by now, one of my core beliefs is that God has made us to be in community. We're made to receive and give love, to experience God's gifts thru relationships with others. And when we recognize that we've gotten off track, God invites us to try again. Sometimes this means seeking forgiveness, sometimes it means redirecting our behaviors or actions, and sometimes it means simply re-prioritize who and how we love.

In that season, where my love was disordered — when my calendar was full, but my heart lonely - God called me to be more intentional about how I spent my time. So, I reached out to three girlfriends, who were also clergy. And I asked them: what if we dedicated one long afternoon a month to connect? I was clear in my goals: I wanted intentional and thoughtful time. Turns out, I wasn't the only busy person feeling lonely. We began gathering monthly (and have continued this for over 5 years). When we're together, we take turns “checking in” with honesty. We don't give the polite answer, but the real one. And we name what we're struggling with, where we're finding joy, and what we're learning and working on.

Quickly these lunches became a priority and a life line. I found myself marking this as sacred space, protecting my calendar. And though it was sometimes tempting to give the “easy” answer, it was always more fruitful to give the real one.

Now I couldn't tell you how their projects at work were going, or what team their kid played soccer with, or the simple ways they spent their days. But I know what makes their heart beat, what gives them joy and hope, I know how they experience, and face, their fears.

In our reading from 1 John today we hear, "Don't love the world or the things in the world... Everything that is in the world—the craving for whatever the body feels, the craving for whatever the eyes see and the arrogant pride in one's possessions—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world and its cravings are passing away, but the person who does the will of God remains forever."

Practically speaking, I think what we're being taught here is that the things that keep us busy, are not always the same things which lead us to joy. The pressures of our daily lives - to succeed in our careers, to have the cleanest house or nicest car, even our desire for our kids to have it all... these pressures are not the behaviors that lead us to a joyful life. In fact sometimes, these pressures can distract or alienate us from the people most important.

Early in my career, I met with a man who had had an incredible career as an educator. By many measures he was incredibly successful: he'd won awards, he'd become a sought after speaker, he was well respected in his field. But he had many regrets because all that success came at a cost. He rarely shared a meal with his family, he missed many of his kids games and events, he spent vacations working - unable to fully unplug. The cost he said, that while his career was successful, his relationship with his children suffered. And overtime they lost touch, and now rarely spoke. With the wisdom that comes with age, he realized he had loved out of order. By spending his life chasing his love of his career, he placed his love of God and his family secondary- and they suffered for it.

He told me that day: the work can wait. "My kids didn't care about my awards, they cared that I missed out on their life." He had worked his whole life to support his family, as a sign of his love. But what he missed was the opportunity to connect and prioritize those whom he loved.

Of course the "things of this world" as John names them, are necessary. It's how we make our lives, pay for our homes, support our selves and families. And it's not wrong to love your work, or to work hard, or have flourishing hobbies. But what John reminds us, is that all of these things are meant to be the "supporting characters" in our lives. They are meant to support our primary call to love God and love one another.

Jesus says, in John 10, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." Jesus desires that our lives are not merely busy, but fulfilled and abundant in experiencing the gifts of God. These gifts include knowing, in our heart that God loves us, and experiencing that love with one another in community through our care, our time, our investment of ourselves.

At the end of their life, people most often speak of the people they loved. The pets they cherished. Their faith they nurtured. The people and organizations with whom they served to make an impact in the world. These are what they name as signs of an abundant life. They rarely speak of the things which fill our calendars, the cleanliness of their homes, or even successes in their careers. These things might support the best parts of their lives, but are rarely the best thing themselves.

The challenge, of course, is to keep the most important things the most important things. In Deuteronomy 11, we read:

**"Now, if you completely obey God's commandments that I am giving you right now, by loving the Lord your God and by serving him with all your heart and all your being, then God will provide rain for your**

land at the right time...God will also make your fields lush for your livestock, and you will eat and be satisfied.”

In these verses, we're reminded that when our love is in right order, we will experience an abundant and joyful life. In the words of the author, your “fields will be lush, you will eat and be satisfied.” In other words, when you live in order, the rest of your life will flourish.

When you keep your love of God and one another as primary, everything else will fall into place. Your work will have greater purpose, your relationships will flourish, your dreams and goals for life will come into greater focus, because your priorities, your love is in order. This is the abundant life Jesus promises. A life that is centered in love will also have more joy, peace, and contentment.

So how do we do this? Well, a few verses later in Deuteronomy, we read this:

**Place these words I'm speaking on your heart and in your very being. Tie them on your hand as a sign. They should be on your forehead as a symbol. Teach them to your children, by talking about them when you are sitting around your house and when you are out and about, when you are lying down and when you are getting up. Write them on your house's doorframes and on your city's gates.**

In other words: keep God's love in front. Keep it around you and make it an everyday part of your life. It's how you begin your day and how you end it. And it's how you center your words and actions throughout.

Let me give you 5 simple practices that I think will help you keep your love of God, and one another, central to your life. These will sound familiar to you, because they are the same 5 practices, we ask every member here at Messiah to commit to. And that's because, we believe that this practices are how we keep our love aligned. And when doing so, our faith, our relationships and our lives will flourish and thrive. So they are:

**WORSHIP, PRAY, SERVE, GIVE, WITNESS**

Let's talk briefly about each one. First up; **WORSHIP**. That is to make worship a regular part of your life. It might mean worshipping in person, online, or with our COTG podcast. It might also look like making worship a daily part of your life, by reading scripture, listening for God's wisdom, and singing along to a worship song.

When we worship, we are making intentional time to place our love of God first. We're opening ourselves to be changed and transformed by God, setting the foundation for how we love one another and center our lives.

Then, we ask people to **PRAY** daily and frequently. When we pray, we are making it a priority to listen to God, to seek forgiveness, and strengthen our relationship with Christ. But prayer, coupled with the other vows, is also how we invest and nurture our relationship with God. And it teaches us how to be in relationship with others. When we practice seeking forgiveness from God, we learn how to ask and offer it to others. When we practice focusing on our conversation with God, we learn how to give our best attention to others.

And when we bring our whole selves to God in prayer, sharing our joys and celebrations, but also our worries and fears- we lay the ground work for being open and vulnerable with one another. We learn the practice of connection, which in turn strengthens our spiritual lives, but also our relationships with one another and the role around us. It increases our awareness, our compassion and empathy - which all help us to love more fully.

The third vow we ask of folks is to **SERVE**. And we invite people to serve both inside and outside of the church. This is how we put our faith - our love - into action. It's how we make our love not just something we feel or say, but something we do. And by serving, we keep at the forefront the second part of the Greatest Commandment. That is, to love others as ourselves.

Fourthly, we ask people to **GIVE** and what we mean here, is to invite us to live with a spirit of generosity. To love God and others by giving of our finances, but also of our time, energy, and gifts. Here we practice sharing the abundant life of Christ with others. It's how we partner with God in making God's kingdom-dreams come true. It's how we invest in future generations, how we care for the poor, how we protect the vulnerable.

Jesus says in Matthew 6, "where your treasure is, your heart will be also." The way we spend our money, fill our calendars, share our gifts - they all tell a story. And as followers of Jesus, we're invited to tell a story of love. What does the story of your home budget or your personal calendar tell? Does it speak of a life aligned with love of God and one another? Or does it tell a story of disordered love, of forgetfulness, foolishness, or busyness?

And lastly, we invite every member to promise to make a **WITNESS**. In other words, tell your story. How has the love of God made a difference in your life? How has Messiah Church impacted your life? How does the love of Christ alive in you given an abundant life?

I know this can be scary, but when we tell our story we're telling people about the power of love. We're inviting them to know and be transformed by the same grace that has changed us. And, by telling our story we are keeping fresh our commitment to love in our lives. Bearing witness about what's most important, helps us keep all these other practices, too, so that our love stays a priority.

Worship, prayer, service, giving, and witness. Five spiritual practices God invites us into so that our love remains in right order. When we center our days around these practices, our love of God, and our love for one another, stays in focus. And with it, we will experience that abundant life Jesus promises.

And so if you're here today, and are feeling like, "oh man, I really know what that disordered love feels like." If you're feeling like your priorities have gotten mixed up, or your life is more busy than peaceful, more self-focused than other-focused. If you're feeling alone or lost or discouraged, I want to encourage you to try to focus on these 5 practices each day for a week. Then notice, how has your love been reordered? How has your life been given focus and abundance?

And while the book of Deuteronomy suggested placing God's word on your forehead or doorpost, we've made a graphic for you, to use as a wallpaper on your phone. A little daily reminder for you to Love daily, God and your neighbor. *You can find these on your Messiah Church app, in the resources tab, or on our website.*

Friends you are loved. May you know it, may you share it, and may you have it abundantly. Let us pray: God of life, God of love. You have called us to follow you and to experience a good and abundant life. Help us to keep our love for you and one another a daily priority. Give us focus, give us patience, and give us confidence to know that even when we've gone astray- that your love for us is strong, calling us again toward you. Amen.

## **GPS**

### **Weekly Prayer**

Gracious God, open my heart to hear you speaking. I confess I have not loved you, or my neighbor, fully. Forgive me, dear God, and renew me. Help me to embody a love that is generous, patient, faithful, and kind. In your name I pray, amen.

## **Monday, 5/27**

### **S Exodus 20:1-3, Deuteronomy 11:13-16**

O Before listing any of the ten commandments, God reminds Israel of their history - that it was God who freed them from slavery. Following the commandments are not, then, a means of earning God's favor. We already have that. Rather, they are a sign of our love for God.

A The Jewish and Christian faith that shaped the Bible (and, later, the Muslim faith too) taught what we call "monotheism"—that is, that there is only one true God who deserves our worship and praise. Remember, the Israelites had just left Egypt, a land that worshipped multiple "gods" of nature, as well as their Pharaohs. How might this commandment remain relevant for us? How do we make "other gods" of things around us? And when we do, how might we change our behaviors to worship the one true God?

P Holy God, holy and mighty, holy and immortal, you are worthy of my love, worship, and praise. Keep my eyes, and heart, on you that I stand strong against temptation to make allegiance to any one but you. Amen.

## **Tuesday 5/28**

### **S Acts 10:34-36, Romans 10:9-13**

O In Acts 10, Peter said God "doesn't show partiality," and that the good news is that Christ is Lord of all. It can be easy to think that "we" know the "right way" to worship and follow Jesus. Indeed, since the early church Christians have disagreed. But we're reminded that God celebrates our diversity of background and practices, calling us to find unity in love.

A If God's love and grace extend to all, regardless of background or belief, as today's readings say, how should this influence your interactions and relationships? The passage from Romans 10 spoke of God's impartiality and desire to save all people. How does this fit with the reality of suffering and injustice in the world? How does this influence our actions and behaviors?

P God, I humbly come before you, recognizing You are the Lord of all creation. Your boundless love knows no borders, reaching every corner of the world and embracing people of every nation. Amen.

## **Wednesday, 5/29**

### **S Matthew 6:20-21, 24-25**

O Jesus' teaching echoed the wisdom of ancient Hebrew sages in saying that amassing "treasures" of this world does not produce a satisfying life. Sadly, many in Jesus' day overlooked or ignored that part of their tradition. But Jesus said treasure in heaven, treasure by God's standards, is the most precious item we can "collect." Our heart follows our treasure—and what we treasure shows where our heart's loyalties really lie.

A Jesus was clear. He didn't say we "shouldn't" serve both God and money. He said we "cannot" do that. (The Greek word translated "money" meant all types of material goods.) Note, Jesus did not oppose wealth. He strongly opposed putting wealth above God in our priorities. Our hearts have room for only one ultimate master. When you face ethical choices, or career or family decisions, what determines your course: God's values, or the material and social payoffs you expect?

P Holy God, sometimes my priorities get out of order, in little things or even in big things. Help me prioritize you above all else in my life, to honor you as my true master. Amen.

**Thursday, 5/30**

**S Colossians 3:1-5, 12-14**

O As we study “love,” we know there are many ways in which people link “love” with false “gods,” attitudes or acts that lead us away from God’s design for our lives. Verse 5 in today’s Scripture reading gave a broad list of some of those false “gods” that vie for our love and loyalty. But a few verses later, we’re also given a list to help guide our attitudes and actions to stay aligned with God.

A I wonder what our own lists would look like – what are the things that pull us away from God? Perhaps worry, busy-ness, or fear of missing out would make our lists. An old colleague once said, “if the devil can’t make you sin, he’ll make you busy.” How does the second list (vs 12) help guide our actions in a new way? Can compassion combat worry? Can humility offer rest for our busyness? Today, try focusing on the ways God invites you to “put on love” and think “about things above”.

P Lord Jesus, whenever my life ends, I want to have my greatest treasure stored up with you. Guide me into the kind of life that is rich toward you. Amen.

**Friday, 5/31**

**S Romans 6:12-16**

O The apostle Paul tirelessly preached about God’s grace to sinful humans, and reminded us that grace is always bigger than our sin. One mocking response might be, “great! No need to change my life, as there is always grace!” But in these verses (v15), Paul reminds us that following God includes *trying* to change our ways and do better. God desires that we know an abundant and thriving life. But to know this, we must change our ways to know and experience God’s love.

A We tend to think we *choose* all our actions, but that ignores the power of habits. What hurtful habits have for a time (or still) held you captive? Do you want a life captive by sin, or freed by Christ? N. T. Wright asked Christians, “Think of the ways in which, in your former life, you employed a lot of energy in going after things which you now regard as wrong. Are you using that same energy, imagination and initiative in working for God’s kingdom, in extending his covenant purposes in the world?” How can Jesus’ love free you to live in energetic, imaginative, kingdom-building ways?

P God, I choose you to be the one I obey, the one who shapes my life. Free me from damaging thoughts and actions, set my life aglow as an outpost of your love. Amen.

**Saturday, 6/1**

**S Deuteronomy 11:13-21**

O In these verses, we’re given instruction for how to follow God’s commandments. These instructions include binding them to our heart, our home, and to future generations. They also tell us to keep God’s word in front of us in all way say and do.

A How do you remember to keep God’s commandments? Some of us have art hung in our homes, tattoos, or even stickers on our water bottles to help us remember. My kids have backpack tags (give to them from Messiah Church) that remind them of God’s love. Small, daily reminders of how God loves us, *and* how God calls us to act in love are important to help us remain faithful. Look around, are there places where you could use a reminder of God’s love and invitation?

P God of creation, thank you for loving me and inviting me to faithful discipleship. Help me to notice you every day, and be assured of your presence and guidance. Amen.