

Horizon 2035: Loving God – Matthew 22:34-40

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First, it's great to be back among you after a couple weeks off for our wedding. Laura and I were honored by your presence at the wedding, your loving cards, and the many contributions you made in our honor to Santa Elves, Inc., the non-profit organization that Laura co-founded that provides Christmas gifts to foster children in our area at Christmastime. Those gifts to Santa Elves now total \$11,500!

It's odd that the Santa Elves board of directors has encouraged us to get married again next year. 😊

I said this at the wedding, and it bears repeating in this setting: When people gather with a common joy and in a spirit of celebration and unity, it suggests what the great heavenly banquet will be for all of us. A place where there will be no more crying and no more pain. A place where there will only be a spirit of joy and an absence of sadness. That's what May 31 felt like for Laura and me, and we hope it felt the same for those of you who were there.

Those kinds of moments, I also believe, honor God. For when God sees God's people together in that setting, with so much love for one another, and with so much kindness and compassion, God must be pleased. God feels that love.

"What is the greatest commandment in the law?" one of the experts asked Jesus as a test. Jesus said in response, "Love the Lord with all your heart, soul, and mind. This is the first and greatest commandment."

Loving God is the greatest law. And it's not a law that can be overturned by a higher court. In fact, later on in the chapter, Matthew says that nobody else dared ask Jesus any more questions after that.

In fact, according to Mark's gospel, the same lawyer who posed the question said to Jesus, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength', and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself', — this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.' When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God'" (Mark 12:32-34). He got it.

Love God. There's no greater law than that.

We love lots of things. We love our family members and friends. We love our pets, we love our sports teams, we love our music, we love our backyards and our vacations and our coffee and our flowers and our golf and our hunting and fishing and our social media! Yes, let's not forget our social media. What would we do without Tik Tok?

Jesus, though, says that nothing comes before our love for God. And that love for God is displayed however we as individuals and we as a community do something God would be pleased by.

That wedding that so many of you attended on May 31 had to have pleased God. The words of the ceremony—the readings about devotion to each other and loving each other and how God loves us first, the words of the bride and groom avowing that commitment, the music that echoed outside in that beautiful, outdoor sanctuary, the people who gathered with you—dressed

like they knew something beautiful was happening that day. The good food and drink, the dancing, the smiles, the sharing, the kindness and respect for one another — friends and strangers alike. All Laura and I did was set the stage. You showed your love for God by your gathering and loving of each other. God was the audience. God witnessed our love.

Speaking of God being the audience, the great philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said that God is the audience every time we gather for worship. We, together, are the actors in worship, with the worship leaders serving as prompters. God is the audience, not the people sitting in the pews or in their outdoor chairs.

That definition is critical for us to remember, as we are constantly tempted to bend our worship toward entertainment, with the hopes that the music or spoken words will do a better job of keeping our attention rather than God's.

God is honored, God is loved, when we are authentic in our serving up praise to God. And whether it's through our speaking voices, singing voices, our guitars, our percussion instruments here, or our organ inside the sanctuary, everything we do should serve as our worship of the God who is present, the One who is receiving our love.

We love God better when we're together doing it. When the worship leaders check their egos at the door, when the congregation gathers humbly in need of forgiveness, when outsiders pull up and feel welcome — that this is their worship too — when they first get out of their cars, then God feels our love.

Indeed, to love God is to live life in a way that responds to God's goodness ... with our hearts and our souls and our minds. In other words, our love for God is not passive; on the contrary, it is very active, visible and demonstrative. In fact, to use the words

heart, soul and mind pretty much covers everything that we are — our total selves. This is how we are to love God: with everything in our being, all that we are, and the best versions of ourselves. When we love God, we're all in. Nothing is held back.

We get distracted, of course, at times. We stumble—loving others and other things more than God. We find ourselves at times in the wilderness, unable to get ourselves found, lost and kept from loving.

The author Frederick Buechner writes, “To be commanded to love God at all, let alone in the wilderness, is like being commanded to be well when we are sick, to sing for joy when we are dying of thirst, to run when our legs are broken. But this is the great and first commandment nonetheless. Even in the wilderness — especially in the wilderness — you shall love him.

The final secret, I think, is this: that the words “You shall love the Lord your God” become in the end, less a command than a promise. And the promise is that, yes, on the weary feet of faith and the fragile wings of hope, we will come to love him at last as from the first he has loved us — loved us even in the wilderness, especially in the wilderness, because he has been in the wilderness with us. He has been in the wilderness for us. He has been acquainted with our grief.”

Tom Boogaart, writing in *Reformed Journal* a few years ago, told the story of his encounter on a walk one day.

As I was walking through Kollen Park in Holland, Michigan along the shoreline of Lake Macatawa, I overheard a young mother and her two daughters. The younger daughter, maybe 4 years old, was forging ahead and the older daughter, maybe 10 years old, was in conversation with her mother.

As I passed I heard the mother say, "Would you rather have one flower or 20 flowers?" I had no idea what in the conversation led to that question, but the older daughter answered, "I'd rather have 20 flowers,"

Would this young woman, I wondered, ever hear a counter truth, someone who would tell her that one thing in life could be more than enough? ...

I started to ruminate on the theme of "one thing" in Scripture.

I thought about the story in which Martha came to Jesus complaining about her sister Mary who was not helping her prepare for the upcoming meal. To this complaint the Lord answered: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her (Luke 10:41)." Many things worry and distract us to the point that we, like Martha, can no longer see the one crucial thing standing right in front of us, the better part of life that can never be taken from us.

In his response to Martha, Jesus is reminding his followers of the Shema and applying its truth to everyday life. Moses implored the people of Israel: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). ...

So I want to say to that little girl walking with her mother and sister along the shore of Lake Macatawa: Do not listen to the peddlers of our materialist culture; let not your heart be distracted by many things. There is a fullness that is emptiness, and an emptiness that is fullness. An empty heart has more space for God and, filled with the love of God, has more awareness of the world so loved by God and more courage to engage the forces that threaten to undo it.

I want to say to that little girl that there is one flower more beautiful than 20 other flowers, one worthy of your full attention.

Love God with everything you have.

Among the many markers of our identity here at FPC is this: we gather—in our worship, education, service, and fellowship—with a commitment to loving God—relentlessly. And in our services here on Sunday mornings (both casual and traditional), in our fellowship among one another around coffee pots and dinner tables, in our serving others through projects like Posies for the Pantry and Volunteer Ministry Center, and in conversations where we ask serious and open questions about who God is and how we relate to this God, we are expressing a love for God that we have promised.

And God sees it, and God is pleased.