

## Learning to Love Well

My time, as a 15 year old young person, was spent at Islington Evangel Center in Toronto, Canada. Pastor Leonard Evens preached every Sunday morning, for the entire year that I was there, about some aspect of, "The Love of God."

*(I will develop this story personally)*

The hymn, "Oh Love of God," was written by Frederick Lehman in 1917 nearing the end of World War 1. It was actually a translation of a German hymn called "O Liebe Gottes."

Verse 1,

The love of God is greater far  
Than tongue or pen can ever tell.  
It goes beyond the highest star  
And reaches to the lowest hell.  
The guilty pair, bowed down with care,  
God gave His Son to win;  
His erring child He reconciled  
And pardoned from his sin.

Chorus,

O love of God, how rich and pure!  
How measureless and strong!  
It shall forevermore endure—  
The saints' and angels' song.

The Bible is God's story about His love for His creation.

Jesus' whole life was the consummation of God's love letter to us and the Bible in total is his loving letter as is often quoted as His "Instruction Manual for Mankind."

So, today let's explore some of the specific references regarding God's love for us.

**SCRIPTURE: Mark 12:30, 31 (NIV):**

**30** 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'

**31** The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

Jesus was quoting directly from Deuteronomy Chapter 6, and Leviticus Chapter 19.

**SCRIPTURE: Deuteronomy 6: 4- 12 (NIV)**

4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

5 **Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.**

6 These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts.

7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.

9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

10 When the Lord your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you—a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build,

11 houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied,

12 Be careful that you do not forget the Lord , who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

**SCRIPTURE: Leviticus 19: 18 (NIV)**

“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, **but love your neighbor as yourself.** I am the Lord.

The Bible teaches extensively about the love of God and how this love is expressed towards humanity. According to scripture, God's love is unconditional, meaning that it is not based on how worthy or deserving we are. God’s love is a reflection of His character and nature, as the very essence of who He is.

**SCRIPTURE: John 3:16 (NIV)** One of the most well-known verses describing God’s love

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

This verse speaks to the incredible depth of God's love, as it compelled Him to sacrifice His own Son not only for the sake of all humanity, but for each one of us individually.

The Bible contains many beautiful verses that speak to the theme of the love of God.

#### SCRIPTURES:

1. Romans 5:8 NIV - "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."
2. 1 John 4: 9-10 NIV - "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."
3. Psalm 86:15 NIV - "But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness."
4. 1 Corinthians 13:13 NIV - "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

These verses and many others speak to the depth and breadth of God's love for humanity.

Throughout the Bible, we see examples of God's love demonstrated through His acts of kindness, compassion, and forgiveness.

#### **SCRIPTURE:** Romans 5:8 NIV

"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

This verse assures us that even in our own brokenness and sinfulness, God's love for us remains steadfast.

Ultimately, the Bible teaches that the love of God is "NOT" something that can be fully comprehended or measured by human standards. God's love is infinite, eternal, and unchanging, and it is His gift to all who seek to receive it through faith in Jesus Christ

Sometimes people struggle with understanding the difference between how God is revealed in the Old Testament, as opposed to how God is revealed in the New Testament

The depiction of God in the Old Testament and the New Testament is often considered to be quite different.

One common misunderstanding is that in the Old Testament, God is depicted as this powerful and strict deity who imposes His laws on his people and is quick to punish those who disobey Him. This misunderstanding causes some readers of the Bible to think that God appears as vengeful.

In contrast, the New Testament presents God as a loving, merciful, and forgiving Father, who sent His only son, Jesus Christ, to save humanity. God is often referred to as "the Father" in the New Testament, and is depicted as compassionate, patient, and kind towards those who believe in Him.

Overall, while there are certainly differences between these two depictions of God, it is important to recognize that both portrayals identify the same God and are part of the same overarching story of humanity's relationship with God. Throughout the Old Testament, God is merciful and long-suffering.

One of many illustrations of God's longsuffering nature revealed in the Old Testament is His dealings with the people of Nineveh.

SCRIPTURE: Jonah 3: 6-10

<sup>6</sup>When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. <sup>7</sup>This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh:

"By the decree of the king and his nobles:

Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. <sup>8</sup>But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. <sup>9</sup>Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."

<sup>10</sup>When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

SCRIPTURE: Jonah 4:1-2

<sup>1</sup>But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. <sup>2</sup>He prayed to the LORD, "Isn't this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

Jesus' teachings are incredibly relevant today, and His commandment to "love God and love our neighbor as ourselves," is certainly one of the most important. To apply this teaching, we should start by examining how we can love God with all our hearts.

Dr. Mark Gordon Fee's concept of "First Loved" essentially means that in order for us to love ourselves and others properly, we first need to receive God's love ourselves.

**SCRIPTURE: I John 4:19 NIV**

**"We love because He first loved us."**

From the inflow and the overflow of God's love, we develop healthy relationships and connections with ourselves and others.

As we receive and nurture God's love as the source of our identity, His love releases authentic love for ourselves and genuine love for others. This kind of love stands in stark contrast from the narcissistic, selfish type of love demonstrated by this world today.

God wants us to learn to identify negative thought patterns, beliefs, or lies from the enemy preventing us from receiving His holy pure love.

Derek Prince was one of the leading charismatic theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In a video interview that I did with Derek Prince in 1999, he stated that he had served God for most of his adult life and ... "did not know the love of the Father." Derek reflected on his many years of Biblical scholarship, writing, and teaching before truly coming to know how much God, the Father, loved him personally.

The ability to love ourselves genuinely and appropriately, comes from truly knowing that we are "First Loved" by God. As we are infused with God's love, we experience well-being. We prioritize loving ourselves and we cultivate positive godly relationships.

**God's love is the ultimate source of healing and wholeness.**

**SCRIPTURE: 1 John 4:18 NIV**

"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love."

This verse speaks to the power of God's love to help us overcome our fears, including fears that may lead us to act defensively or reactively towards others.

One way to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength is to prioritize and develop a deep personal relationship with Him through prayer, worship, and meditating on what the Bible teaches. Loving God, means obeying His commandments and following His example of compassion, forgiveness, and humility.

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 7:12 NIV

12 So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

When it comes to loving our neighbors as ourselves, we should seek to treat others with the same love, kindness, and respect that we desire for ourselves.

This means reaching out to those in need, whether they are our neighbors down the street, or people on the other side of the world regardless of race, age or socioeconomic status.

In short, living out Jesus' teachings requires a commitment to both loving God and loving our fellow human beings.

Cultivating our daily relationship with God through prayer, reading scripture, and participating in worship provides us with the spiritual strength and guidance to become more loving, confident, and secure in our identity as children of God.

Several writers, educators, and teachers have explored the topic of self-love and loving others from a Biblical perspective. Here are a few worth mentioning:

- **C.S. Lewis:** As a Christian author and theologian, Lewis wrote extensively on the topic of love and its various forms. In his book, "The Four Loves," Lewis explores the nature of love, including the love of self and love of others. He also wrote about developing a deeper love for God, which informs and inspires our love for others.
- **Henri Nouwen:** A Catholic priest, writer, and teacher, emphasized the importance of vulnerability, compassion, and the practice of spiritual disciplines in cultivating a deeper love for others. His book "The Return of the Prodigal Son" explores the theme of God the Father's unconditional love, and how God's love guides us in our relationships with others.
- **Richard Foster:** as a Quaker author and teacher, wrote extensively about the spiritual disciplines and their role in nurturing a deeper love for God and others. His classic book "Celebration of Discipline" offers practical guidance for cultivating spiritual practices like prayer, fasting, and solitude, all of which can enhance our relationships with others.

These are just a few examples of Christian thinkers who have explored the theme of love from a Biblical perspective. Their teachings provide valuable insights into how we can love God, ourselves, and others, in a meaningful and transformative way.

**C.S. Lewis' book: "The Four Loves,"** explores four different types of love (these are Lewis' terms): affection, friendship, eros, and charity.

1. **Affection:** Greek word, (Storge) This type of love is characterized by feelings of warmth, familiarity, and tenderness. It is the type of love we feel towards family members, pets, or even inanimate objects we value. e.g., I love this painting. Lewis argues that affection is an important foundation for other types of love.
2. **Friendship:** Greek word, (Philia) Friendship is a deep, mutual bond between individuals who share common interests, values, and experiences. Unlike affection, which is often based on familiarity, friendship requires a deliberate choice to cultivate a relationship. Lewis describes friendship as the least selfish of all loves, since it is based on a desire to see the other person flourish rather than to satisfy one's own needs.
3. **Eros:** the Greek word Eros is Romantic love, characterized by passion, desire, and longing. It involves not only physical attraction but also the desire to know and be known by another person. Lewis argues that eros can be a powerful force for good, but it can also be dangerous if it is not guided by reason and morality.
4. **Charity:** Greek word is "**Agape,**" is the highest form of love. It is a selfless, unconditional love that seeks the good of others above one's own interests. Charity does not depend on the worthiness of the object of love, but rather on the Giver of love. Lewis sees charity as the ultimate goal of human life, since it reflects the nature of God's love for us.

Lewis shares that all four types of love are important and necessary in our lives, but they must be balanced and guided by reason and morality to prevent them from becoming distorted or harmful.

**Henri Nouwen** develops the story of the Prodigal Son.

**SCRIPTURE: Luke 15:11-32**

**11** Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons.

**12** The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them."

**13** "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.

**14** After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.

**15** So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.

**16** He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

**17** “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!

**18** I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

**19** I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’

**20** So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

**21** “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

**22** “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

**23** Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate.

**24** For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

**25** “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing.

**26** So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.

**27** ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

**28** “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.

**29** But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.

**30** But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

**31** “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.

**32** But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

Henri Nouwen's book "The Return of the Prodigal Son" reflects on this Parable of the Prodigal Son. Nouwen explores the themes of forgiveness, reconciliation, and the unconditional love of God using the three main characters in the parable—the father, the younger son, and the elder son—to illustrate different aspects of the human condition and our relationship with God.



Nouwen's main point is that all of us are either the younger son, who seeks pleasure and freedom, but ultimately finds himself in a state of emptiness and despair, or the elder son, who tries to earn approval and validation through his dutiful obedience, but becomes cold, resentful and bitter. The father in the parable represents God, who welcomes both sons back into his embrace with open arms and unconditional love.

Nouwen contends that our journey towards God involves accepting our brokenness and turning towards our Heavenly Father in humility, just as the younger son did. To receive and experience the love of our Father, we must learn to let go of our resentment and self-righteousness. Only the truly repentant prodigal son was able to receive His Father's love and experience His healing and forgiveness.

**Richard Foster's "Celebration of Discipline"** is a classic Christian book that highlights spiritual practices that deepen one's relationship with God. Some of the major themes of the book include:

- 1.The importance of solitude and meditation in fostering spiritual growth and silence as a way to hear God's voice.
- 2.Disciplines of engagement, or ways of living out one's faith in the world, such as service, submission, and corporate worship.
- 3.The role of confession, accountability, and guidance from others in spiritual formation.
- 4.The value of simplicity, both in material possessions and in daily living, as a way to focus on what truly matters.
- 5.The need for disciplines of celebration - giving thanks and rejoicing in God's goodness and graciousness.

*(From Celebration of Discipline)*

The Spiritual Disciplines are God's means of grace by which we are enabled to bring our little, individualized power pack (*which*) we call the human body and place it before God as a "living sacrifice," as the wise apostle Paul put it in.

SCRIPTURE: Romans 12:1 NIV

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

“Having done this, the Disciplines have reached the end of their tether. God then steps into our small offering and produces in us graces and virtues we could hardly imagine. (*Foster contends*) The Spiritual Disciplines are the means God uses to build in us an inner person that is characterized by peace, joy and freedom.”

*(Foster... Celebration of Discipline)*

“We must not be led to believe that the Disciplines are only for spiritual giants and hence beyond our reach, or only for contemplatives who devote all their time to prayer and meditation. Far from it. God intends the Disciplines of the spiritual life to be for ordinary human beings: people who have jobs, who care for children, who wash dishes and mow lawns. In fact, the Disciplines are best exercised in the midst of our relationships with our husband or wife, our brothers and sisters, our friends and neighbors.

Neither should we think of the Spiritual Disciplines as some dull drudgery aimed at exterminating laughter from the face of the earth. Joy is the keynote of all the Disciplines. The purpose of the Disciplines is liberation from the stifling slavery to self-interest and fear. When the inner spirit is liberated from all that weighs it down, it can hardly be described as dull drudgery. Singing, dancing, even shouting characterize the Disciplines of the spiritual life.”

**SCRIPTURE: 1 John 4:18**

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This verse speaks to the power of God's love to help us overcome our fears, including fears that may lead us to act defensively or reactively towards God and others.

*(Back to the history of the Hymn, "O Love of God")*

The history of this hymn is an amazing story! The words of this hymn were written by a patient suffering from severe depression and anxiety, on the wall of his room in a mental institution where he was confined for years, unable to cope with the challenges of the outside world.

One day, a chaplain happened to visit the patient's room. As they were talking, the chaplain noticed some words scrawled across the wall. Intrigued, he asked the patient about them.

The patient explained that he had always been drawn to the words, which spoke of the limitless love of God. He had been struggling with feelings of hopelessness and despair, but reading these words gave him comfort and reassurance.

The chaplain was deeply moved by the patient's story and decided to share these words with others. Soon, the words which had been written into a hymn, were being passed around the mental institution; more and more patients were finding comfort in them. The staff even decided to paint those words on the wall of the patient's room, so that they would be a constant and even a bold reminder of the power of God's love.

Years later, when the patient had passed away, the staff at the mental institution decided to paint those words on all the walls of the facility. They wanted everyone who walked through those halls to be reminded of the hope and comfort that can come from faith. And so, the story of the precious patient and the hymn lives on as a testament to the power of God's love to heal and transform lives.

Verse 3, of the hymn, "Oh Love of God"

**Could we with ink the ocean fill,  
And were the skies of parchment made;  
Were every stalk on earth a quill,  
And every man a scribe by trade;  
To write the love of God above  
Would drain the ocean dry;  
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,  
Though stretched from sky to sky.**

**Chorus,  
O love of God, how rich and pure!  
How measureless and strong!  
It shall forevermore endure—  
The saints' and angels' song.**