

Bible Study for The Story of God and Us – 3 Great Loves

1. If a friend were to ask you what are the fundamentals of the Christian faith, what would you say?

When Jesus was asked about the fundamental elements of the faith, he replied with uncharacteristic directness. Referring to the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus said in Matthew 22:36-40:

³⁶“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷ He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

2. Where are these two commandments originally found?
 - a. Genesis
 - b. Exodus
 - c. Leviticus*
 - d. Deuteronomy*

Although he was only asked about the first commandment, Jesus included the second commandment in his answer. This double reference shows us that Jesus believed there is a close relationship between the two commandments. They are interconnected and both cannot exist without the other. Love of God entails loving your neighbour and loving your neighbour is one of the most important ways of loving God.

3. Who did Jesus say is at the center of action in these two commandments?

The Greatest Commandment declares, “‘*You* shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind. And *you* shall love your neighbor as yourself.” How far we are able to love God and others has a lot to do with how we see ourselves in relation to God. Our ability to love God and others is inextricably linked to how we love ourselves.

4. Do you agree that loving yourself is important? Why or why not?

Why does self-love come first? Because when we try to love someone else before we have first embraced what is loveable in ourselves, our love for them inevitably devolves into a continual effort to get from them the kind of love we imagine will make us feel worthy. At best, we give love in order to get love, which turns love into a commodity, a transaction. At worst, we try to coerce love from one another in a million little ways.

5. How was love modelled to you when you were growing up? What was helpful or harmful to you?

Total depravity is a theological concept that has infused deeply into our understanding of sin and grace. Total depravity frames humans not as good people who sometimes mess up but as messed-up people who, with God’s help, can do some good things—but nothing completely free of selfishness or error. We are unable to make a choice that is unquestionably, entirely good. None of our actions, loves, or thoughts can be truly without sin. The whole motivation behind this teaching is to highlight people’s dire need for God. The problem is while it’s true we are all in need

of God's grace, concepts like total depravity have made it difficult, perhaps even impossible, for many of us to accept that we are worthy and loveable in God's eyes.

How we see ourselves in relation to God affects the way we relate to God. Shame causes us to hide from God. God is not the one who separates God's self from us. The sense of separation is an emotional estrangement due to shame.

"My heart sank because in one wrenching moment I realized that the true ugliness of our depravity lies not in the fact that we have offended a God who hates us, but in the fact that we have offended a God who desperately and relentlessly loves us. The hyper-Calvinists have it backwards. We do not grasp the full weight of our sin by claiming we are inherently worthless to God, but by acknowledging that we are infinitely valuable to God." -Rachel Held Evans

6. Do you see yourself as inherently worthless to God or infinitely valuable to God? Why?

7. How has God shown you grace and love in your life?

"The voice of shame within us is crafty, not necessarily because it is saying bad things about us, but because it is saying partial things about us. Sometimes, it uses half-truths that are hard to argue with and dresses them up as the whole truth—it speaks of the very real, very unpleasant stuff inside of us as if it's the only stuff inside of us. Of course we've made mistakes. This is being human. Instead of talking back to our shame, we can listen for another voice—the voice of grace. Grace doesn't try to challenge the half-truth claims of our shame. Instead, the voice of grace reminds us of the whole truth: You sometimes fail, _____, and you are beautiful and beloved. The voice of grace doesn't challenge the story we've been told by our shame—it totally subverts it by reminding us of the rest of the story." -Kelly Flanagan, *Loveable*

Grace tells you you're a mess but also lovely, broken but also beautiful, full of darkness but also light. Grace is the love that sees the ugly along with the beautiful, and joyfully holds both together in a tender embrace...much like *Kintsugi*.

Jesus said to his disciples, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another...By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35)

"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love...No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and God's love is perfected in us." (1 John 4:7,8,12)

Love is the living sermon.

In the days of the early church, what made someone a "true Christian" was his or her reputation for love.

8. What are you known for?

Unfortunately, the Church and Christians have not been known for love. Christians are known more for our hypocrisy and judgmentalism than for our love and compassion. Greg Boyd writes, "For the church to lack love is for the church to lack everything. No heresy could conceivably be worse!"

In *The Great Spiritual Migration*, Brian McLaren invites us to imagine a different world:

“Imagine if love, not law, was the standard by which we learned to examine ourselves and confess our sins against God, neighbor, and the earth we share.... Imagine if the great holidays and seasons of the Christian year were redesigned to emphasize love. Advent would be the season of preparing our hearts to receive God’s love. Epiphany would train us to keep our eyes open for expressions of compassion in our daily lives. Lent would be an honest self-examination of our maturity in love and a renewal of our commitment to grow in it. Instead of giving up chocolate or coffee for Lent, we would stop criticizing or gossiping about or interrupting others. Maundy Thursday would refocus us on the great and new commandment; Good Friday would present the suffering of crucifixion as the suffering of love; Holy Saturday would allow us to lament and grieve the lack of love in our lives and world; and Easter would celebrate the revolutionary power of death-defying love...All this involve challenges to celebrate and express love in new ways—to new people, to ourselves, to the earth, and to God—including time to tell stories about our experiences of doing so.”

Where it comes to love, we all begin somewhere and we try to do better each day.

9. How can you do better in loving yourself, God and others? How can we do better as a community?