

Program Transcripts

For February 2016



IN
SEARCH
OF THE LORD'S WAY[®]

SEARCH PROGRAMS

February 2016

Topics subject to change without notice

FEBRUARY 7 – DOES JESUS CARE?

Life can suddenly become harsh, causing us to question whether the Lord cares. In times of pain does Jesus really care about us?

FEBRUARY 14 – GOD'S LOVE FOR US

God made this wonderful world for us to live in and gave His only Son to save us. Every good thing comes from Him. The love of God reaches to us in a thousand ways. Our task is to recognize and respond to it.

FEBRUARY 21 – OUR LOVE FOR GOD

God expects His people to love Him with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. When we love God supremely it changes our lives for the better. Nothing would make this world a better place than a greater love for God.

FEBRUARY 28 – LOVING OTHERS

One of the ways we love God is by loving others. When the world seeks for true Christianity, they look first for a loving spirit among brethren. The great challenge of life is to love others the way Jesus loved us.

Does Jesus Care?

Life can suddenly come crashing down, causing us to question whether the Lord cares. In times of pain, we ask, does Jesus really care about us? We have no doubts that the Bible will give us the truth, so we keep on looking to it for the answers. Our goal is to please God because we love Him and we want to be close to Him.

Longing to be close to God is natural, and especially when you're hurting. The sons of Korah, in Psalm 42, describe the heartache of longing for God. "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, while *they* say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'"

When tough times come, many times people feel God is distant. They wonder if the Lord is watching and if He cares. They long for God's help and comfort. Does Jesus care when our hearts are broken with the loss of a loved one, when the bills pile up, when the children are hungry, or when we can't seem to get well? Does God hear our prayers?

Nothing, however, escapes the notice of God. Luke 12:6 says that not even a sparrow can fall to the ground apart from God's knowledge. God not only sees what happens outwardly, He also sees the troubles inside your heart. He knows all about you because He created you. There's never been a single moment in your life when God hasn't wanted to be close to you and bless you.

Our reading today comes from the Gospel According to Mark, chapter 4:35-39. "On that day, when evening came, He said to them, 'Let us go over to the other side.' Leaving the crowd, they took Him along with them in the boat, just as He was; and other boats were with Him. And there arose a fierce gale of wind, and the waves were breaking over the boat so much that the boat was already filling up. Jesus Himself was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke Him and said to Him, 'Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?' And He got up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Hush, be still.' And the wind died down and it became perfectly calm." Let's pray together. O Father, we're thankful that Your son Jesus and You can be a part of our lives, that You can still the storms that we face. Father, help us to be obedient to Your will in all things. In Jesus' name, Amen!

Frightening, life-threatening storms happen suddenly on the Sea of Galilee. In this storm Jesus is asleep, with "his head on a cushion." The disciples cry out "Master, don't you care that we're perishing?" We all ask questions like this when we're frightened and we need an answer. We see the world's agonies and we wonder if God is paying attention. We need help from someone bigger than we are and we need it now.

Jesus didn't answer their question. Instead, He rebuked the storm and He made the water calm. Then Jesus asked His disciples, "How is it that you have no faith?" The real question is not whether Jesus cares, but whether we believe. Of course, Jesus cares. Mark describes how the Lord Jesus delivered Legion, a demon-possessed man, who lived like a beast (Mark 5:1-20). Later in the chapter, Jesus healed a woman who had a hemorrhage for twelve years, and then He raised the daughter of Jairus.

Someone objects, "But why doesn't God stop every problem? Why does the Lord seem asleep and uncaring?" Are you assuming that if God doesn't stop all our problems that He doesn't care about us? Some folks want God to keep us free from struggles or difficulties. It's tempting to question God's love when we face challenges or disappointments. We think if God really loves us, He'll protect us from any and every problem.

Is a painless world, free from any problem, really the best world for us? Oh, it may be convenient and it may even be comfortable, but is it best for our character, for our growth as individuals? Doesn't the person who has no problems and has everything his way often get spoiled and think the world revolves around him? Don't challenges shape us into people of character?

The Bible says, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2-4). We may see our trials and struggles the wrong way. We may not realize that God permits them because He sees a greater good with them than without them. Struggles help us to become the strong people that God desires. So let's rejoice in our trials because God uses them to mold us into His people.

James 1:12 says, "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him." It doesn't say, "Blessed is the man who has no troubles," but "blessed is a man who perseveres under trial." He's the man who won't quit on God when things get rough. Because he loves God even in tough times, God will reward him with a crown of life.

The Lord demonstrates that He cares in many ways. You might ask, "Well how?" First, He shows He understands suffering in that He himself suffered for our sins. He Himself endured the punishment that was rightfully ours. First Peter 2:24 says, "That He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed."

God loved His Son, Jesus, but He didn't stop the crucifixion. Jesus prayed with tears in the Garden to let this cup pass, but God sacrificed His Son because He loved you and me, just as He loved His Son. Jesus also prayed, "Your will be done." Atoning for sin was more important to Jesus than freedom from suffering. Have you considered how greatly our Father suffered in sacrificing His Son? No one has grieved more over human evil than God has. No one has suffered more than Jesus who bore the cross for our sins. He showed unmistakably how much He loved us. This loving God asks us to trust Him when we cry out for help.

First Peter 2:21-23 says, "For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He didn't revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but He kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously." This is what the disciples in the boat needed to do, and what we need to do: and that is to entrust our souls to God! First Peter 5:7 urges us to cast "all our anxiety on Him, because He cares for you."

God inspired Paul to write the book of Romans at a time when the Roman Christians began facing great persecution. Paul asked, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we're being killed all the daylong; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered'" (Romans 8:35-36).

Paul answers this question in verses 37 to 39, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Their problems did not separate them from the love of God and, my friend, your problems won't separate you from His love either.

God didn't stop the apostles from being beaten, Stephen from being stoned, or James from the sword. God didn't keep Paul from imprisonment or remove his thorn in the flesh. Yet, not one of these men ever doubted God's love. They knew God would never put more on them than they could bear.

God isn't hiding when our trials come. He's faithful! You can trust Him! Nothing that you'll encounter today, tomorrow, or at any time will ever be bigger than what God and you together can handle. He doesn't remove all our problem; but God does give us the strength to bear those burdens and challenges. When that problem gets so big that we can't handle it alone, God steps in so we'll never get overcome by it. Remember the promise of Jesus in Matthew 11:28-30, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

God sometimes uses the physical struggles that we face to keep us from doing ourselves spiritual harm. God gave the apostle Paul some tremendous, miraculous revelations to help him in his ministry. But God didn't want Paul to exalt himself, and so He gave him that "thorn in the flesh" to torment him and keep him from exalting himself (2 Corinthians 12:7). Paul prayed three times for the Lord to take away his "thorn in the flesh"; but God refused and said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness."

Paul had to understand that this thorn was not going away. Was he bitter? No! He learned something valuable: God's power is perfected in weakness. Paul said, "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). Struggles remind us of our need for God and how God can powerfully work in our lives.

God's grace is indeed sufficient. Suffering may torment your body, but it can't take away your soul. Suffering may open up for you an opportunity to see the great power of God to help you sustain yourself even in times of great weakness. Jesus does indeed care. Just as Jesus wept with Mary and Martha at the death of Lazarus, so He weeps with us. The Lord knows when we hurt and He provides comfort.

Some continue to ask, "Why doesn't the Lord just stop all evil now?" If the Lord stopped all evil, wouldn't that evil also include you? If we ask God to stop all evil, we need to consider the evil things that we do. Your sin hurts; it hurts God; it hurts you; and it hurts other people. The Lord loves you enough to show you a better way and asks you to change your life by repenting.

Repentance is not some punishment, but it's how we heal. The Lord knows that there's a better person inside of you, wanting to come out. He knows that your repentance will not only bless your life but bless all the people that you touch. When you come to Christ and you stop that sin, you bless people that you formerly hurt. He graciously gives us time to repent; He's patient. Second Peter 3:9 says, "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance."

Jesus loved us enough to give us a righteous example to follow. He showed us how to forgive and how to be forgiven. He gave us his Word to guide our lives, and He answers our prayers. He says, "And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask Him anything according to His will He hears us. And we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of Him" (1 John 5:14-15).

Times of crisis call for the best in people. Bravery, heroism, love, self-sacrifice—all of these things flourish in times of crisis. Yet, people who exhibit such traits are cherished and are

honored as having gone “above and beyond the call of duty.” Was this not the very point Christ was making when He said: “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends”? (John 15:13).

The most important question is not “why did this happen to me?” but rather “what shall I do now?” Some reject God and abandon Him when sorrow comes their way. Some turn inward in self-pity. Others exercise their faith and find that God has not forgotten them. They entrust their souls to Him and find His promise is true: “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose” (Romans 8:28).

Not everything that happens to us is good, oh no; but let's not assume that the only way that God can care for us is to prevent our troubles. God also shows His care and His power by taking the hardest things in our lives and using them for good, to bless us and to bless others. God has the power to prevent, yes; and we have no idea all the harm from which He has protected us already. But God also has the power to take things at their worst and make good out of them. He can also do that for you.

So, instead of blaming God for our pains, let's look to Him for strength. Struggles remind us that God never intended this world to be our home. We're pilgrims, and our lives here are brief. Paul said, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18). So, we too must learn to see with the eye of faith and trust. The last chapter of our lives has not yet been written. When Jesus comes again, He will bless and comfort His own. Let's pray. O Father, we're thankful that in Your love You have not only prepared for us a way of life that can lead to better things here, but better things to be with You in the future. Help us to be obedient to Your will. In Jesus' name, Amen!

Jesus cares about you. He wants to be your friend. He cares about your physical welfare, your finances, your family, your soul, and your future. More than anything, He cares about your soul. The Lord Jesus knows all about you, the good and the bad. He even knows the number of hairs on your head. In spite of it all, He loves you and cares greatly about every detail of your life.

Sometimes we concentrate so much on our longing for God to act that we forget God is longing for a relationship with us. The Lord deeply desires that we draw close to Him. When we forget Him or get caught up in sin, He yearns for His people to come back to Him. The Lord Jesus died on the cross for sinful people, yearning to have a relationship with them.

Do you have a close, loving relationship with God? Does the Lord see you as someone who is truly devoted to Him? In your quiet moments as you look into your heart, do you see yourself as a friend to God? If you haven't given yourself to the Lord, today is the right day to come to Him. Come to the Lord in faith, trusting in Him and in His Word. Confess Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. In repentance, make Jesus your Lord; and let Him rule your life.

Having done these things, be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. In baptism, the Lord will cleanse you from sin (Acts 22:16); He'll cause you to be born again (John 3:5); and He'll give you newness of life (Romans 6:4). In baptism, the Lord will add you to His church (Acts 2:47).

When you become a Christian, you'll find the strength and the grace to deal with all of life's struggles. God cares enough to give us the strength to bear what He does not take away. Trust Him! Trust Him!

God's Love for Us

If we could but grasp how greatly God loves us, it would change our lives. No one loves you like the Lord Jesus. From start to finish, the Bible is God's supreme story of love and redemption. The more we read the Bible, the more we can understand the heart of God who created us and sustains our very existence. Though mankind can be hard to love, God has never faltered in wanting to bless those who seek His face and draw near. James 1:17 says, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change."

God hasn't hidden His love for us; God has displayed it beyond dispute in the death of Jesus Christ upon the cross. The Bible says, "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6-8). We were weak, ungodly, and sinners; but Christ was still willing to die for our sins, to wash us clean by His blood. Such love is truly abundant and beyond comprehension.

Jesus bore the cross to forgive us of our sins and then to open a door for us to have a loving relationship with our Father in Heaven. The Lord loved us when we were weak and couldn't save ourselves. He helped us when we were ungodly and had little thought of Him. He died for us while we were sinners who had offended Him. Christ loved our souls when we didn't deserve it, when we didn't understand it, or even appreciate it. Such amazing love!

Our reading today comes from Paul's letter to the Ephesians 3:14-19. "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; *and* that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God." My, what a wonderful prayer. Let's pray together. O Father, may each one listening today come to comprehend the great love that You have for them. And, Father, may we do Your will always on earth as it's done in heaven. In Jesus' name, Amen!

The Old Testament uses a rich and amazing word to describe the love that God has for His people. The Bible says that God is abounding in this kind of love. Some versions call it "steadfast love," some "lovingkindness," and some simply just "mercy."

Psalm 103:8-14 says, "The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust."

"Steadfast" love is the deepest and best love; it's the kind of true love that doesn't let go and doesn't fail. It's loyal, faithful, kind, and good. It's compassionate and merciful. This type of love is built upon a voluntary covenant, an everlasting commitment to those who are in His favor. Psalm 86:15 says, "But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and

abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” Because the God of Heaven is kind and good, He’s willing to pardon and forgive our sins if we remain faithful to Him.

When you consider all that Jesus gave up in bearing the cross to save us from sin, you cannot doubt His love. If anything, the magnificent love of Jesus was stubborn, unyielding, and utterly unselfish. Jesus didn’t merely give up something; He sacrificed Himself completely. On the cross the innocent Lord Jesus sacrificed everything. He kept silent and did nothing while men slandered Him, falsely accused Him, condemned Him, scourged Him, mocked Him, and crucified Him. First Peter 2:22-24 says, “He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he didn’t revile in return; when he suffered, he didn’t threaten, but He continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly (or righteously). He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree (it was personal), that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. For by his wounds you have been healed.”

Jesus bore the punishment and death for our sins, and it’s the punishment that we should have borne; He bore it personally in his own body. The Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:6). His suffering was physical and spiritual. Second Corinthians 5:21 says, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Everything that Jesus did, He did out of an undeniable and pure love for us. Can you imagine what it must have been like for Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane to know that he would suffer scourging and crucifixion? According to Matthew 26:38, Jesus was greatly troubled and sorrowful, even to the point of death. Luke 22:44 says, “And being in agony He prayed more earnestly; and His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.”

They didn’t simply bind Jesus; they nailed His hands and feet to a rugged cross and suspended Him in the most agonizing position. As they crucified Him, He prayed that the Father would forgive them. They mocked Him, insulted Him, and did their very worst to Him. Through all of His suffering, Jesus remained quiet; He uttered no threats. He didn’t even revile them in return. He didn’t call for the twelve legions of angels to wipe them out. No! The Lord’s stubborn love lasted for six long hours on the cross. No matter how ugly men were to Jesus, Jesus’ steadfast love held Him to the cross. He loved us to the end!

First Timothy 2:3-4 says, “This is good, and it’s pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Second Peter 3:9 says, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” God doesn’t want anybody to be lost, but our heavenly Father grants us the freedom to choose Him or to choose sin. You can’t make someone love you by force. God wants us to know Him, and to know the truth, and to love Him freely for Who He is. This means we must be free to choose Him or reject Him. God loves everyone, but His blessing and grace are reserved for those who choose to love Him. We must freely and lovingly choose to believe in Him, to repent of our sins, and to follow Him.

Occasionally people speak of God’s “unconditional love.” Yes, I know Jesus said in Matthew 5:45 that God “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” God is certainly good to all! Jesus didn’t bear the cross for us because we were so good and deserved it. No, Jesus died for us because we were sinful and needed saving. In that sense, He unconditionally took the initiative, but we cannot for that reason assume that to remain in God’s love we can do whatever we wish. We can’t assume God’s love for us will continue to bless us if we turn from Him.

The Lord's steadfast love, His covenant love of promise, has conditions. The Lord Jesus said, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me" (John 14:23-24). God promises His love and He promises His abiding presence to those who love Him and keep His words. A person who doesn't love God won't care about keeping God's words.

It's a fantasy to think that we can sin all we wish and still count on the grace of God. It's fantasy to think that we can rebel against God and still be right with Him. It's fantasy to think that we can remake God in our own image and still please Him. It's fantasy to think that we can rewrite His commandments, ignore His holiness, corrupt His character, and forget His justice but still count on His love.

Hebrews 10:26-31 says, "For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay.' And again, 'The Lord will judge his people.' It's a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." Oh friend, we must never take the love and grace of God for granted. It's too valuable to squander.

You might be thinking at this point, "Phil don't you remember that the Bible says, 'God is love.'" Yes, I know 1 John 4:8. But picking a passage out of the Bible and ignoring other verses that are just as inspired isn't accurately handling the Word of God. We shouldn't understand 1 John 4:8 that "God is love," without also consulting 1 John 1:5-7. These verses say: "This is the message which we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, then we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin."

As J. I. Packer said in his book, *Knowing God*, "the God who is love is first and foremost light, and sentimental ideas of his love as an indulgent, benevolent softness, divorced from moral standards and concerns, must therefore be ruled out from the start. God's love is holy love. The God whom Jesus made known is not a God who is indifferent to moral distinctions, but a God who loves righteously and righteousness and He hates iniquity, a God whose ideal for his children is that they should 'be perfect. . . as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:48). He will not take into his company any person, however orthodox in mind, who will not follow after holiness of life."

Hebrews 12:14 says, "Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." Some might wonder if God loves us, why would He insist on our living holy lives? Some think that if God loved us, He wouldn't demand that we live by all those rules. But let's stop here and think. Is God trivial? Are His laws petty? No! God insists His people live holy lives so as to protect us and give us peace. We should consider the righteous way of life that Jesus commands as a precious gift, not as a burden or something petty or trivial. God isn't being mean when He asks us to treat others kindly or to refrain from evil. Everyone benefits when we live good lives. God's goodness is one of the ways that He shows His love.

When we sin against God by breaking His commandments, He disciplines us with love. Godly discipline is not abuse; it's training given for our good. Proverbs 3:11-12 says, "My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights." The book of Hebrews explains in Hebrews 12 verses 10 and 11 that God "disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." God disciplines our sins that we may share in His holiness and live with Him. He acts for the long-term good, not simply for the moment.

Our society despises discipline, thinking love leaves people alone to do anything they want. They believe that speaking against any behavior is mean-spirited and judgmental. But God speaks against sin out of love, not meanness. Remaining silent about sinful behaviors that ruin lives is far more cruel than simply warning someone. God speaks out against sin because He cares, and He wants to bless us.

Why is this important? Because the Lord created you for more than what takes place in this life. God loves you and is interested in your life here on earth and in the hereafter. He wants you to live with Him forever in heaven. Along with Paul, we pray "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; *and* that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God." Let's pray together. Father, help us to know Your love and to love You so much that we will be willing to do Your will. Oh, may Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus' name, Amen!

The Lord Jesus touched lives throughout His ministry. He healed the sick, the lepers, the blind, and the deaf. He raised the dead, walked on water, stilled the storm, and fed the multitudes. When men did their worst to Him, He prayed, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do." Peter described Jesus in Acts 10:38 as One who "went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him." The Lord Jesus is still doing good in the lives of men and women. He leads them out of bondage to sin to become children of God. He leads them out of distress into hope, out of doubt into faith, and out of apathy into love.

We need the love of God in our lives every day! The more we grasp how much He loves us, the more we'll determine to demonstrate that same kind of lasting, committed love. Knowing the love of God will make us better fathers and husbands, better mothers and wives, better citizens, better children, and better friends. God's love teaches us patience and kindness, compassion and forgiveness, and forbearance and loyalty. Love motivates us to be holy and faithful. It teaches us how to love the truth and to live with integrity and virtue. We need God's love to become better people.

The love of God should make you want to become a better Christian. When you become a Christian by placing your trust in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, when you are turning away from sin, when you're confessing Christ before others, and when you're baptized into Christ, you become a Christian. When you're baptized, the Lord washes away your sins; He adds you to His family, the church. And nothing you will do today is more important than becoming a Christian and professing Your love for God. Won't you become one today?

We do ask that you get involved with a church of Christ in your area. They're the reason that we don't ask for money. If you're looking for a church home, a Biblical church home, we'll be happy to help you find one. Churches of Christ love and they want guests to come and worship with them; and if you go and worship there, you'll be glad that you did.

Our Love for God

God loves us greatly, but have you considered that God wants you to love Him greatly? Today, we're exploring what it means to love God. When you love God, you'll also love His Word found exclusively in the Bible. The Bible tells the story of the amazing love and grace of God, how God has watched over us all through the years. It's more than a simple love letter; it reveals His steadfast love towards us and what He expects from us. The Bible teaches us how to love God.

Love begins with a decision, but true love for God cannot remain with simply a decision. It must grow until it becomes the first priority. Love starts in the heart but shows in the life. True love will not stay hidden; it'll prove itself by the way that it behaves. Love must act. Romans 5:8 says, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." God demonstrated His love for us by sending Jesus to the cross. The Lord Jesus sacrificed His life on His own initiative when we didn't ask for it, didn't deserve it, and didn't quite understand it. That's true love.

The word "love" is often misused. For instance, people say that they love something when what they really mean is that they like or enjoy it. They may enjoy it greatly, but it certainly isn't the focus of their lives. Loving God can never be on the same level as loving ice cream. Many say they love God when truthfully they only like Him. They've never taken God seriously enough to make a lifelong, complete commitment to Him. They never let God make a difference in their moral or spiritual choices. They love the joy of the grace and forgiveness of God as long as God doesn't mess with their lives. They love Him but want to do as they themselves please.

Our reading today comes from Mark 12:28-31. "One of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, 'What commandment is the foremost of all?' Jesus answered, 'The foremost is, 'HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD; AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH.' The second is this, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' There is no other commandment greater than these.'" That's from the lips of the Lord Jesus Christ.

If I asked you if you loved God, how would you answer? Many people would quickly answer yes, but how does your love for God demonstrate itself in your life? It's easy to say that you love God. The Lord, however, defines love in ways that may differ from the common understanding of love. We use and misuse the word "love" so frequently that it's hard to define real love. Today let's explore how love for God demonstrates itself.

First, I would ask you, do you appreciate God? Love begins with thankfulness. Genuine love for God pays attention to the love that God has shown. Have you considered all of your blessings that come from God's hand and are you truly thankful? Love and thanksgiving intertwine; you can't have one without the other. The person who counts his blessings grows to appreciate and to love, and the person who loves won't fail to remember the kindness and goodness of the Lord.

I've always loved the words of Jeremiah that are found in the book of Lamentations. Jeremiah wrote this book at the time when his world was falling apart. He saw the love of God in good times and in the worst of times. The Babylonians had once again invaded Jerusalem in 587 BC; and they tore down the temple and destroyed the city. Yet Jeremiah could say in Lamentations 3:22-24, "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they

are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 'The LORD is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him.'"

Jeremiah never gave up on God. True love never fails. We live in a society ready to quit on anyone they don't like for any reason. Many keep a remote in their hands, ready to change channels the moment they hear something that doesn't please them. Some feel God is only worthy of our love as long as He does what we want or what we agree with. Instead of obeying God, many feel God ought to obey us. They judge the God who created them, forgetting that He's the source of every blessing they have. The air they breathe, the water they drink, the food that they eat come from His hand. They selfishly stop appreciating and acknowledging the God who made them and sustains their lives.

Many blame God if anything in their lives turns sour. They even blame God for the heartaches that they create for themselves. We should never suppose God has forgotten us or has stopped loving us because times are difficult. When the Roman Christians were going through some rough times, Paul said, "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" (Romans 8:31-32). When times are tough, instead of forsaking God, let's draw near to Him.

Second, do you desire God? Are you interested in Him? Do you wish to draw close to Him? When people love each other, they want to spend time together. The Lord wants to spend time with you, and He wants you to spend time with Him. Can you imagine loving someone but never communicating with that person? When you consider the time that you spend with God, how loved do you think God feels? We hear God's heart and message by a close study of the Word, and we share our hearts with God when we pray. Our relationship with God deepens as we worship Him. Love involves time and communication. Do you read your Bible, pray, and worship God regularly?

How long has it been since you read the Bible at length? The Lord Jesus said, "It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). We need every word that God says. It nourishes our souls; it keeps us going in the right direction; it builds us up; and it gives us hope. Oh, I tell you if there was ever a time, we need the Bible today.

Let me ask you, when was the last time you spent just a half-hour in prayer? When was the last time that you worshiped at church? Many of you attend church, I know; but do you really worship there? Is your worship focused; is it sincere and true. You remember the Lord Jesus said, "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24). I fear many folks go to church, have a good time as a spectator, visit friends, but may fail to worship God. Loving God means focusing on what He has done for us and on what He teaches us.

God hears our worship and looks into our hearts. God complained through Malachi, the prophet, that the Jews were making offerings that were polluted. They substituted animals that were blind, and sick, and lame, and blemished for the good ones. Worship was no longer meaningful, because they were saying, "What a weariness this is!" and they sniffed at it in disgust. The LORD of hosts asks, "When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Well present that to your governor;

will he accept you or show you favor?" (Malachi 1:8). Today, in place of worship, many offer entertainment or meaningless rituals.

Some think that God ought to be pleased with whatever we offer Him, but is He? Loving God means paying enough attention to Him so as to do what pleases Him. Don't you want God to pay attention to your requests? Why should you think that God is willing to accept whatever we offer?

We need hearts that long for God. The sons of Korah wrote, "As the deer pants for flowing streams, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?" (Psalm 42:1-2). They longed to worship God, to be close to Him. David too had that kind of ache for God. David said, "O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water" (Psalm 63:1). We love God by seeking Him and drawing close to Him. We should love Him so much that we can't spend not even one day without Him.

Drawing close to God means that we live righteously. The Lord Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matthew 5:6). Hungering and thirsting is common for food, but do you hunger—I mean, really hunger—for righteousness? If you truly love God, you will long to be right with Him. No one wants to be in conflict with the person that they love. Loving God also means loving what He loves. He loves what's good and right, but God despises what is hurtful and wrong. God despises sin because He loves you and knows how sin will hurt you. Loving God means loving righteousness.

In Matthew 6:33, the Lord said, "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." Many want God but don't understand that having God necessitates being "right" with God. You can't have the grace and favor of God and then just continue in sin. Romans 6:1-2 asks, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?"

Third, are you committed to God? True love involves commitment. Many want the joy of love but without any strings attached. That isn't love—it's selfishness. Love without commitment is fickle and can't be trusted. We live in a society that's afraid of committed love. Millions of couples live together without the commitment of marriage. They want the better but not the worse, the richer but not the poorer, the health but not the sickness. Love without commitment is a fantasy. Without a commitment, lasting love isn't possible.

People talk much about placing trust in God, and so we should. God is utterly trustworthy. But trusting God means you're willing to put yourself into His hands. May I ask you, "Can God trust you? Are you trustworthy? Can God trust you to love Him for a lifetime? If you want God to be committed to you, are you willing to be committed to Him?" Someone says, "Well I don't like to be tied down." The Lord Jesus wasn't tied down; He was nailed down. He didn't merely talk about love and commitment; He demonstrated it.

Loving God fully and wholeheartedly means putting Him first, before anything or anyone. He said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26-27). The word "hate" here does not mean to despise, but means to love less. If you compare your love for Jesus to your family or even yourself, you will love Jesus more.

Commitment to the Lord means staying away from evil. Romans 12:2 says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that by testing you may discern what the will of God is, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Love also means giving myself to what is good. James 1:27 says, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." Pure religion means helping those who are in need. We show our love for God by loving and helping people.

Committed love means listening to the Lord and keeping His commandments. The Lord Jesus simply said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). Jesus wasn't putting a burden on us that He didn't bear Himself. The Lord said, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. And if you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love" (John 15: 9-10). Love listens; love pays attention; and love submits to the will of the One that we love.

God says, "And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says 'I know him' but doesn't keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked" (1 John 2:3-6). My friend, you can't separate obedience from the love for God. Love means living the way Jesus lived, caring for others as He cared, forgiving as He forgave, and doing what is right just as He did.

Why are we asking and talking about all this? Because God wants us to love Him the way that He loves us. God has loved us with a great love and He wants us to love Him with a great love. When we consider His grace and forgiveness, His daily blessings, His guidance in the Word, and the eternal home that He has prepared for us in heaven, how could we help but love God with all of our hearts, and all of our souls, and all of our minds, and all of our strength? Let's love God!

Love always makes a commitment. You can say "I love God" when you're willing to make a lifelong, serious commitment to Him. Loving God requires more than words. God doesn't want fair-weather friends or nominal followers. He wants people who will love Him fully, freely, and faithfully. He wants people who will labor for His cause, who won't give up when things get tough. He wants people who will follow His teaching, love His truth, and not compromise the faith.

Will you decide today to be His disciple, to deny yourself, and take up your cross and follow Him? If you want His love and grace to bless you, commit yourself to Him. We become Christians by putting our trust in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. Our faith isn't private; we must confess it before others. With our faith, we must turn from sin to righteousness, from error to truth, and from evil to good. Repentance means turning from sin to the Lord and His will.

Our faith, and love, and repentance will lead us to obey the Lord in baptism. Baptism is biblical; it's how God unites us with Christ and saves us. Romans 6:4-7 says, "Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we've become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin." Oh, let God free you from sin, be baptized!

Loving Others

The highest calling of life is to love God and to love others. How well are you fulfilling that calling? God's way brings peace and unity. It leads people to treat each other fairly and kindly. God's way is humble and compassionate. It's never selfish, never callous, and never hateful. God's way builds up rather than puffs up; it encourages with hope and comfort rather than manipulate with doubt and fear. The more you know about God, the more you'll love Him and His teaching. The more you follow His ways, the more blessing you will see. Don't push God out of your life or let others lead you away from Him. Love Him, serve Him, and lead others to love Him, too.

The Christian faith can be summed up in two commandments of Jesus found in Mark 12:30-31, "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." In fact, every commandment in Scripture is really an explanation of how to love God and how to love people. You simply can't follow the Lord without loving Him and loving others.

The Lord Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, gave us what some call the golden rule. The Lord said, "In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12). Righteous people, who love the Lord, ask the question, "How do I want to be treated?" They treat others the way that they would like to be treated. What if everyone followed this golden rule? Wouldn't our society be a better place?

Our reading today comes from Paul's Epistle to the Colossians 3:12-15. "So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things *put on* love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful."

Love is our highest calling. Nothing is more important than loving God and loving other people. You'll likely recall what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I'm a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing." Without love we can't fulfill our purpose in life; we become empty; and we gain nothing. If love is that important, then we ought to learn what love is and how it behaves. Let me make these suggestions:

First, love warms a cold heart. The opposite of love is not hate but apathy or indifference. A cold heart can walk on by and never get involved. Negative and hurtful experiences can dull the heart, can depress the spirit, and can drive away compassion. Love warms your heart, makes you alive, and causes you to feel and to act.

Selfishness and apathy lead people to sit by and do nothing, while others suffer. First John 3:16-18 says, "We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children,

let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.” Love starts in the heart, but it doesn’t end there. Love doesn’t merely talk about doing something. Love acts!

Many people today live lonely, isolated lives. One-fourth of all the households in America have only one person in them. Researchers say that 40 percent of people relate more with others over a cell phone or a computer than they do in real life. Many family gatherings have little conversation and lots of texting. I visited a home recently and the first thing the host did was ban all use of smart phones. He wanted us to talk. I recently read that the number of people who have no one to discuss important matters with has tripled in the last twenty years. Loneliness can lead to depression and illness. We need each other; we need to love and to be loved. It’s essential to life.

Second, love sacrifices its will and itself for another’s best interest. Love is never self-seeking or self-serving. First Corinthians 13:5 says love “does not seek its own.” Another version says “it doesn’t insist on its own way.” Love puts itself last and others first. Love seeks to please more than it seeks to win. Love tries to understand by seeing things through another’s eyes. God urges us, “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4).

Many years ago, Francis of Assisi prayed a prayer worth remembering; he said, “Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life.”

Third, when problems and conflict arise, love seeks reconciliation. The Bible says, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men” (Romans 12:18). God has always wanted His people to have a compassionate and understanding heart. Philippians 4:5 says, “Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near.” We need a gentle spirit, one that is sweet and reasonable rather than one that stays angry and grows hateful.

Sometimes that means humbly and sincerely apologizing to those whom you have wronged. The Lord Jesus taught, “Therefore if you’re presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering” (Matthew 5:23-24). If you know you’ve offended someone, don’t wait until that person confronts you; go to him or her and get it straightened out.

Sometimes others offend us. Love moves us to want to remain friends and to forgive; so it’s willing to go privately and humbly to the other to work things out. The Lord Jesus said, “If your brother sins (and some versions say, sins against you), you go and show him his fault in private; and if he listens to you, you have won your brother” (Matthew 18:15). Our world would be a much better place if two people at odds with each other would follow this teaching. Instead of trying to resolve an issue, many grumble and gossip. Proverbs 16:28 says, “A perverse man spreads strife, And a slanderer separates intimate friends.” Others seek revenge to get even. Instead of making the problem worse, love strives to get along for reconciliation. Love values talking to someone rather than talking about someone. Gossip is still gossip no matter who’s doing it or who’s hearing it.

We can solve many problems by simply asking some questions. People often assume the worst about others and accuse them of wrongdoing before they know the whole truth. Proverbs 18:17 says, “The first to plead his case seems right, until another comes and examines him.” We may get hurt or angry when we hear part of the story but don’t know all the facts. Sometimes hearing the rest of the story can help us to understand what really happened and why. A few more facts can change our thinking entirely.

I’m reminded of the old story about a fellow at the street corner pushing his wife as a car was approaching. We might at first get all excited about a man pushing his wife as a car approached. But we have to determine what the man was trying to do. If he pushed his wife into the path of the car, he certainly is responsible if any harm comes to her. But what if he pushed her out of the path of the car, endangering himself. Wouldn’t we admire him? Knowing the facts can make a huge difference. Let’s not be so quick to judge.

Fourth, love knows how to forgive. The Bible says, “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:31-32). Knowing that God had enough love to forgive us of our many, many sins, we should be willing to forgive others of their few sins. God’s Word simply says, “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8). Love learns to put offenses behind us and to go on. First Corinthians 13:7-8 says, “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.” Love never quits.

Whether you can forgive another is not some small matter; it actually affects your salvation. God expects you to forgive, if you wish to be forgiven. The Lord Jesus said, “For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions” (Matthew 6:14-15). People who want to experience the grace of God have obligations to show mercy to others. James 2:13 says, “For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.” If we wish to be forgiven, we must learn to forgive.

When God forgives us, He no longer holds our sins and trespasses against us. Sometimes we confuse forgiving with forgetting. You can forgive a sin, even if you can’t forget it. Forgiveness is not forgetting; it’s forgetting against. Second Corinthians 5:19 says, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” Our sins are a matter of history. God’s grace touches our hearts because He dealt with our sins rather than because He ignored or denied them. Because Jesus suffered for our sins, God doesn’t count them against us. The fact is that our sins have not disappeared,; the guilt for our sins has. God has forgiven us.

Fifth, love will tell you what you need to hear, not what you want to hear. God’s Word says, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But deceitful are the kisses of an enemy” (Proverbs 27:6). Honesty, even when it hurts, from a true friend is far more loving than half-truths and flattery from someone who means to do you harm. The devil will tell you what you want to hear, whether it’s true or not; but the Lord will tell you what you need to hear to bless your life, even if it hurts your feelings for a short time.

The very best thing you can do for a friend is to introduce him or her to Jesus Christ and the gospel. The gospel is good news of salvation and hope. People need the gospel story of Jesus Christ. They need to know that He died on the cross for their sins; He was buried; and

He rose again on the third day. They need to know about His loving grace and His call for them to repent and obey.

Sixth, loving others means serving others. First Peter 4:10 says, “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.” Whatever talent we possess we should use it to bless the lives of others. Galatians 6:10 says, “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”

Once upon a time, two brothers lived on little adjoining farms. One was single and the other married. One year the wheat crop was cut short by the drought, so that each man had barely enough for his needs. One night the married man lay awake thinking of his brother. “The poor man is single and doesn’t have the comfort and happiness of a home as I do.” And he worried about his harvest. He thought, “Well, I’ll get up and carry some of my sheaves into his field and he’ll be happier.”

On the same night the bachelor lay sleepless and thinking of his brother. “The poor fellow is married, and carries burdens and cares that I don’t have. He’s doubtless worried about his small wheat field. I’ll get up and I’ll carry some of my wheat into his field, and when he sees it, he’ll be happier.”

Out into the darkness of the night those two went, each lugging wheat into the other’s field. The moon came out suddenly from behind a cloud, and they stood facing each other with wheat-sheaves under their arms... I tell you, this is the power of brotherly love—it moves men, it unites brothers and sisters, it supplies each other’s needs.

Why have we spent this time talking about love? Without love in the heart, we are just empty beings. Without love, our lives are filled with loneliness and sadness. Without love, we’ve failed our purpose in life; we have no value, and we make no gains. Oh, we need the love of Jesus in our hearts and in our lives so that we may love others.

God’s Holy Word teaches us how to treat one another. The Lord Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you love one another. And by this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). The Lord wants us to love each other the same way that He loves us. How has He loved us? Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). The Lord Jesus loved us with a great love; He died for us.

When we love one another the way Jesus loved us, people see Christ living in us. Loving others like Jesus did identifies us as Christians. It’s not the only mark of a Christian, but it’s a necessary one. Let me ask you, are you kind to others? Do you forgive others or hold grudges? Are you compassionate or do you have a closed heart? Do you seek peace or do you get even? Do you have a sweet spirit of reasonableness or are you constantly grumbling? Do you try to resolve conflicts or do you gossip and slander others? Do you love like Jesus?

When the love of Jesus is in your heart, you’ll make a change in your life. I hope that you love the Lord enough to follow Him. To become a Christian you must believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and be willing to confess Him in the presence of others. You must cease doing evil and follow Christ in repentance. You must be baptized into Christ, immersed in water for the forgiveness of your sins. Oh, I pray that you’ll become a Christian today.