

Wesley Challenge: Loving God

Matthew 22:34-40

Colossians 3:12-17

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

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Fort Smith, AR

June 7, 2020

I am so excited to be here kicking off this new sermon series “The Wesley Challenge - 21 days to a more authentic faith.” The next 21 days are going to be all about being intentional about deepening our faith! The sermons for the next three weeks will walk us through how we are called to love God, ourselves and our neighbors. Today, we are going to turn our focus upward -- to loving God. I want to begin with these words from Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.[a] 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. 6 Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. 7 Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. 8 Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem[b] on your forehead, 9 and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

These words are so important that they are the core of the Jewish faith and the Christian faith. These words are so important that the words must always be on our minds. We should teach the words to our children and talk about them wherever we go. These words are part of the Jewish prayer called the Shema (Shu mah) the Jewish affirmation of faith. In the Jewish faith these words from Deuteronomy are prayed at the beginning of the day, at the end of the day and even at the end of one’s life. These words are so important that they are to be a part of life every single day from a person’s first days until a person’s last breath.

The message is that every day that we are given is a day to love God, and we must love God in every way that we can!

Loving God is the foundation of the Jewish faith.

Loving God is the foundation of the Christian faith.

One day when Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, he responded by quoting the Shema and adding a second commandment. Jesus said:

“‘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.” (Matthew 22:37-40)

This first commandment “loving God” is our topic for this day. And this first commandment is what we build the second commandment upon. It is also what we are building this sermon series on. You see, if we don’t love the Lord our God with everything that we have, we cannot love ourselves properly, and we cannot carry out the second commandment of loving our neighbor, either.

So, if **every day we are given is a day to love God**, then the question becomes -- how do we do this -- how do we love God? This is exactly what we are going to dig into over the next 21 days in the hopes that we develop some holy habits. We are going to consider some specific ways to love God. We will be practicing things like praying, and reading scripture in new ways. We are going to practice being still before God, but we are also going to practice going out into the world to share God’s love and living our lives the way God would want us to! I want to warn you, that if we take this challenge seriously it really will be challenging. We will definitely have to give something up to focus our attention on God. But isn’t that what loving God is all about? Real love always involves sacrifice.

Now it took me a while to figure this out, but loving God is more than an intellectual pursuit. Jesus is calling us into a personal love---to a “one on one” kind of love that really changes **who** we are and **how** we live. Jesus says we are called to love with our hearts and our minds and our very souls. In our quest to love God, we must learn about God with our minds and accept God’s love with our intellect, but we must also learn who God is and allow our hearts to be transformed. From a very young age I knew **about** Jesus -- I was taught that in church from a young age. But it took many years for me to begin to **know** Jesus. The whole idea of the Wesley challenge is to go beyond “intellectual knowledge of God, and

to develop some spiritual practices, habits and actions that can lead us into a thriving Christian life.” (*The Wesley Challenge*, Chris Folmsbee) The goal is for Jesus to become real to us!

Now, in case you are wondering why this is called the Wesley Challenge I want to introduce you to our special guest for the next three weeks. John Wesley was very methodical about loving God, and we are going to practice some of these methods ourselves. Wesley is the father of Methodism -- a movement within the Church of England which eventually became the United Methodist Church. Wesley’s method for loving God began to take its form in 1729 when he was a 26 year old fellow at Oxford University in England. So imagine being 26 years old and being on campus at Oxford University. There are lots of cool pubs in Oxford, but instead of hanging out and eating fish and chips, John Wesley gathered together his brother Charles and some other young people at Oxford; and they met daily to talk about their faith, to read the classics of faith and to study scripture. They prayed; they worshipped, they committed to fasting twice per week, they took Holy Communion regularly, they visited prisoners and cared for the poor. And one of the things that the young men did when they met was to go through a list of questions pertaining to the way that they were loving God on a daily basis. And it is these questions that we will use to practice our faith daily during the next 3 weeks. The young people in Wesley’s group engaged in a method of self-examination and practice, and so will we. It was a method of accountability for these young men.

Now, this was a pretty unusual thing for college students to do even in 1729, and people began to kind of make fun of them calling them Bible moths or “methodists” as a derogatory term. They came to be called the “holy club.” Now this “holy club” was the beginning of the Methodist movement -- a movement within the Church of England that called believers to a more authentic faith. You see when John Wesley became a priest in the Church of England he thought believers were just going through the motions and that they weren’t truly living out their faith -- he couldn’t see how their hearts and lives had been changed by their belief in Jesus. He couldn’t see evidence that Jesus was real to them.

Wesley encouraged the Anglicans to a real and living faith! He encouraged them to take communion on a regular basis, to pray, to engage with scripture, to commit to small groups, to be generous in their giving, and to go out into the world to care for the poor and the oppressed. This Methodist movement that began in the 1700s in England grew and grew and led to our United Methodist Church. It blows my mind to think about the way that God worked in the hearts and minds of those young people so many years ago to inspire a revival that would change so many lives, even ours and even centuries later!!

But what I want you to hear is this. Yes, John Wesley began seeking God in a serious way when he was 26. But it took many years of consistent, intentional practice before his heart was strangely warmed. You see it wasn't until 1738, 9 years after the Holy Club started meeting, that John Wesley experienced knowing Christ in a personal way. It wasn't until the age of 35 that Wesley's "intellectual conviction transformed into a personal experience" on Aldersgate Street in London. One night after going to a meeting he really didn't even want to go to, everything changed for him. Wesley describes the experience like this:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading [Martin] Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

After years of loving God the best he knew how, he finally understood the love that Christ had for him-----for him personally! He experienced an assurance of his salvation and that his sins were forgiven. Christ became real for John Wesley!

We tend to think about John Wesley as a hero of the faith around here. And he was. But for me, one of the main reasons he was a hero of the faith is that he was a very real, very ordinary human being who struggled to know God--he struggled to love God--he struggled to

experience God personally! He struggled with doubt even as a priest. He failed in his life and in his faith. I encourage you to read about Wesley's life; there are so many stories about failures I don't even have time to tell you about them. The more I have read about Wesley, the more I have been inspired by his failures!! Because through all of those struggles, he continued to consistently and intentionally seek God. He kept at it. He didn't give up on loving God. He saw every day as a day to seek more of God's grace.

And so maybe the lesson from this hero of the faith is that everyday we are given is a day to love God. Loving God is a life-long daily endeavor. Maybe what we can learn from Wesley and what we might learn from this challenge is that when we spend time loving God every day--- our lives **will be transformed**, our families' lives **will be transformed**, our community **will be transformed**, the world **will be transformed**.

John Wesley lived to be 89. Over the course of his life the love of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit enabled him to share that same love of God with no telling how many people. Methodism grew from 4 people to 132,000 during his life. Many lives were changed. And Wesley's legacy and impact continue even to this day as our presence here attests. Today there are 12 million United Methodists across the world. But loving God also empowered Wesley to bring good news to the oppressed in tangible ways -- one of the things I keep thinking about in light of racial injustices of our day is that Wesley spoke up against the evils of slavery in Great Britain. He wrote and preached against slavery. He even courageously preached against slavery in Bristol, the location of a seaport used in the slave trade. In those days, an anti-slavery sermon could not be preached without considerable personal risk to the preacher and a disturbance broke out. One of Wesley's final acts of his life just six days before his death was to write a letter urging William Wilberforce to continue to work to pass a bill abolishing slavery in Parliament.

Perhaps it was through his practice of intentionally loving God that Christ became so real to John Wesley that his heart began to break for the oppressed. Perhaps loving God every day with all of our heart, soul, mind

and strength is exactly what we need in our lives here and now-----maybe this is a time in history when God wants to use us as instruments of his love. There is a lot of injustice out there in the world -- maybe a practice of turning to God daily will help us to see with the eyes of Christ.... maybe in a way we hadn't seen before. We as followers of Christ are called to be courageous and to take a stand - but we can never do that unless we first love God.

It is in loving God daily in all kinds of different ways that Christ becomes real **to** us and **in** us. It is in loving God daily that we will have the strength and power for the work that God puts before us in our day and in our time. Loving God is about more than just seeking our own personal transformation.

Friends, every day that we are given is a day to love God. The days that we grieve are days to love God. The days we suffer are days to love God. The days that we are so filled with joy we can't stand it are days to love God. Days like today where we are struggling to come to grips with our own role in racial injustice are days to love God. The days of pandemic are days to love God. And the days we are overwhelmed with God's blessings are days to love God.

Today is the day to love God.

4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. We will love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our might. We will teach these words to our children and talk about our God wherever we go. We will bind these words of love as a sign on our hands, we will fix them as an emblem on our foreheads, we will write them on the doorposts of your houses and on our gates.

Today is the day to love the Lord our God.