

What's at the heart of a marriage relationship? When two people decide to get married they typically move into the same house, share the same last name, oftentimes they will try to have children, they vacation together and eat meals together and share a bank account. There are so many aspects to married life, but at the very heart of marriage isn't logistics or last names—it's love, a covenant relationship with one another where you promise to be with one another, and pursue one another, and cherish one another, and be faithful to one another, for as long as you both shall live. You can get a lot of things wrong in marriage, but if you truly, deeply, sincerely love one another, everything tends to eventually fall into place. It is no surprise that when God describes his relationship with his people, he likens it to a marriage relationship, a beautiful covenant of love. That is what I am here to talk about today: what it looks like for us to be people, and for The Creek to be a church, enraptured by and consumed with love for God. Our threefold vision as a church is to love God, love people, and make disciples of Jesus Christ, but it all starts with love for God.

There was a time during Jesus' ministry that a religious leader approached Jesus to ask him a question. He asked, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" (Mark 12:28). The person who asked it was trying to trap Jesus. It seems like a trick question. There are 613 commands in the Old Testament. All of them are from God, so how can one be more important than the other? But Jesus said, there is a right answer: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30). Of every command in the Bible, Jesus himself tells us this is the most important thing we can possibly do. If we get this right, we can mess up in a lot of other areas and still end up ok. But even if we get every other possible thing right, if we get this wrong, we've missed it.

We see a great case study of this in Revelation 2, where Jesus is speaking to the church in Ephesus and he says: "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary" (Revelation 2:2-3). Did you see all those commendable, inspiring things that Jesus has to say about the church in that city? He commends their deeds, their hard work, their perseverance; he commends them for being wholesome and not tolerating wicked people, for caring about faithful theology testing and exposing false apostles. He says they have persevered, they have endured hardships, and he says in all of that they have not grown weary, they are still in the fight! That's remarkable. They have done so many things well. But after saying all of those wonderful things do you know what he says next in verse 4? "Yet I hold this against you..." Do you have any guesses what he is going to say? What his chief concern for them is? "You have forsaken the love you had at first." Jesus is saying it's not enough to commit to a life of good deeds and hard work, a life of moral purity and of doctrinal integrity. If we have everything else right but lose our first love, we have lost it all. To see just how serious Jesus is, he goes on to say in verse 5, "Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place." When Jesus says he will remove your lampstand, the lampstand all throughout Revelation represents the church. He's saying if you don't begin to love me like you did at first, if you don't put loving me above everything else, then regardless of all the other good things you are doing, I will personally come and bring an end to your church. This is not Satan attacking the church, religious extremists persecuting the church, a seductive culture enticing the church; this is Jesus himself bringing an end to the church. Why would he do that? Jesus is not interested in a church that is going through the motions and doing the right, religious things, he wants a people, he wants a church passionately in love with him.

God is our Father, he is our savior, and more than anything else, he just wants us to love him. Being a dad, I get this. A few weeks ago I opened up one of my all-time favorite Christmas gifts. When I was in a

different stage of life if you asked me about the ultimate Christmas gift I might have said, “New Jordans, or a new set of golf clubs, a new shot shotgun or bow, or a fun, experiential trip with a friend.” All those things are great, but this year Keren gave me a photo album with hundreds of pictures of my kids and me. I opened it up, sat there, and started crying. My kids were right next to me! But I love them so much and was overwhelmed with gratitude and joy to relive all the memories over the last several years. As a dad, I love them so much, and nothing brings me greater joy than getting love from them. My two older kids are both rather competitive. I give them both identical glasses of milk every morning and they always race to see who finishes it first. It’s usually Addie. If my kids are not eating their food very fast all I have to do is say, “I wonder who is going to finish their plate first?” They quickly size up their opponent and start shoveling whatever they have left into their mouths. That’s who my kids are, and I shamelessly use it to my advantage. Almost every day I say, “I wonder which one of my kids can give me the biggest hug?” Wherever they are in the house they come sprinting to me and hold me as tight as they can. What brings a father greater joy than the love and embrace of his children?

Imagine our heavenly father. He loves you a billion times more, infinitely more, than I love my kids. And what he wants more than anything else is for you to love him, too. Our love for God is merely a response to God’s love for us. God is the one who created us and gave us life. God is the one who redeemed us and saved us from our sins. God is the one who, every single day, gives us breath in our lungs and an invitation to have a relationship with him. Man-made religion creates a god and then formulates a long list of religious tasks that must be done in order to get that so-called god to look on you with favor. True religion is about God creating us, pursuing us, redeeming us, all out of his great love for us. What he wants from us in return is simply to love him back. 1 John 4:10 says, “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” We love God because he first loved us. And in response to that love, that infinitely great love, that love that cost the life of his son, we can’t hold anything back.

Think about the marriage analogy again. What exactly does it mean for a person to love their spouse? Does it mean that when you think about them you get a warm, fuzzy, sensation somewhere inside of you? Does it mean that you think good, positive thoughts about them? That’s probably a small part of it, but we all know that love has to be so much more than just the biochemical activity inside of us. It can’t only be releases of dopamine and oxytocin at strategic times. If you get all the warm fuzzies when you think about your spouse, but you are seeing someone else on the side, how much is your “love” for them going to mean to them? It has to be more. Love has to be practical, tangible, and manifest in real life. The same is true in our love for God. When we think about God and pray to God, we should be filled with warmth and joy and gratitude, but loving God is so much more than that. It has to be practical; it has to be tangible. What does it look like? From everything I’ve read in Scripture I want to share three words that express what love for God looks like.

Loving God looks like faithfulness. In my marriage with Keren I have to be faithful to her. I can’t claim that I love her if I’m texting other women, meeting up with other women, constantly thinking about other women. I have to be faithful and devoted to her alone. If we are going to love God, the same is true: we have to be faithful to him alone. When God gave his people the ten commandments, he expected many things of them: don’t murder, don’t commit adultery, don’t lie, don’t steal, don’t dishonor your parents. But what is the very first of the ten commandments? “You shall have no other gods before me,” (Exodus 20:3). It could be also translated, “You shall have no other gods besides me.” God wants us to be faithful to him alone. He wants us to realize that of all the things that have value and worth in the world, and in our lives, he is infinitely greater.

One time Jesus told a story of a man who was out working in a field. You can imagine he was preparing the soil, tilling up the ground, and all of a sudden struck something solid. He assumed, like every other time he hit something, that it was a rock that needed to be removed from the field. He started digging, and

when he moved enough of the solid, he realized it was not a rock. He finally unearthed it and realized it was a treasure chest. He opened it up and realized it was filled with gold and jewels and priceless artifacts, wealth beyond his wildest dreams. What did he decide to do? He buried it again and then went and sold everything he owned to be able to have enough money to buy that field so that the treasure could be rightfully his. He realized it was of greater value than everything else, so he leveraged it all to get it. That's what Jesus says our relationship with God is to be like. We are to see he is of infinitely greater worth than anything this world has to offer and so be devoted to him and him alone.

One of the ways you can tell what you are most devoted to is simply by asking: what do you find yourself thinking about when you're not trying to think about anything? When you just have a few moments of silence, in the car, lying in bed at night, waiting in line, what does your mind gravitate to? Your kids, your job, your favorite team, your hobbies, your bank account, your reputation or social standing? Here's the reality: whatever you think about the most is likely the god you most frequently worship. We want to express our love for God by having no gods before him or beside him, for him and him alone to be the center of our focus, the magnet that pulls our thoughts and effects to that which is higher, that which is greater.

The first moments when we wake up are a chance not to open the email or the calendar or the news but to have a moment to worship God and devote the day to him. We can set a reminder on our phones to ding once an hour, and we don't have to go and spend 10 minutes in prayer, but we can take 15 seconds to thank God, praise God, and recenter our focus and attention on him. We can end the evening prayerfully examining everything that day, asking God to show us where he was present, the worshipful ways we responded to him, the places we missed him and did things our way instead of his, and ask for peaceful rest and a more faithful day tomorrow than today. Simple steps, easy steps, but ways to make sure that we are faithful to him and to him alone!

Loving God looks like pursuit. In my marriage with Keren, it's not enough for the two of us to look back at our wedding pictures and reflect on the day we were married. It's not enough for us to look back on the great holidays and dates and experiences we've had in the past. We have to pursue one another today. Most married couples have at least gone through seasons where things get stale and routine. One or both of you gets so focused on work, and the kids, and the house, and all the responsibilities of life that you end up becoming good partners in life but lose the passion. Every good marriage needs ongoing pursuit. You have to keep romancing each other, going on dates, taking walks, writing letters, giving gifts, talking about your dreams. What's true in a marriage is true with God. There has to be pursuit.

In Matthew 24:15 Jesus is describing what will happen as things in the world get darker and darker and he says, "The love of most will grow cold." We don't want our love for God to grow cold, we don't want the fire to die out, we want to see it grow, we want to see the flame get larger and larger. "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul thirsts for you!" (Psalm 42:1). Listen to the words of Psalm 63:1-4:

You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water. I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands.

St. Augustine said, "To have found God and pursue him still is the soul's paradox of love." That's what we are called to. Simon Ponsoy put it this way:

The desire for more of God is a sign of spiritual health. The mature want more. We recognize that a marriage where one partner no longer desires more intimacy is in trouble, so also the Christian who no longer wants to know, grow, hear, see, touch, serve, love, and be changed by God is

likewise in trouble. The desire for more of God is an essential part of the spiritual life. Redemption is not just from sin, death, and hell, but to and for blazing intimacy with Jesus. Too often we have reduced the work of Christ to some metaphysical, judicial exchange where sins are forgiven and missed the fact that it is marriage of consuming, consummating love.

When the Scriptures talk about loving God, that's the vision. Not a cold, stale, going-through-the-motions religion, but a passionate, intense, exhilarating relationship. Sometimes it will feel like a teenager falling in love. Other times it will feel like a couple who has been married for 50 years, who has lived all their life together and is more committed to one another now than they've ever been. God wants that with you and for you; do you want that with him? Will you say yes to meeting to him in the word? Will you say yes to meeting him in prayer? Will you say yes to meeting him in worship? Will you say yes to meeting him at church every Sunday? Will you say yes to meeting him in communion? Will you say yes to meeting him in your small group every week? God has given us so many avenues to pursue him and every time we say yes, we take another step toward deepening our relationship with him. When Pastor John Piper takes people's confession in the water, he doesn't ask them if they believe in Jesus, he asks them if Jesus is their treasure, their greatest joy and delight. That's the kind of love God wants.

Loving God looks like faithfulness, it looks like pursuit, and loving God looks like obedience. We don't like to use the word obedience in a marriage relationship because in a marriage we are peers and equals, but one of the ways you show your spouse you love them is, when they ask you to do something, you do it. And you don't wait to do it for three weeks, you don't do it with a begrudging attitude, you do it right away, you do it with joy. Our relationship with God should be similar with the one difference that we are not peer or equals, he is the King, and we are his servants. Jesus said in Luke 14:15, "If you love me, keep my commands." And listen to 1 John 5:3, "In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands." The reality is that adults hate talking about submission and obedience, but if we want to show our love to God, we have to listen to what he's told us, submit our lives to his will, and obey the commands he's given us.

Usually once or twice a day I'll see my son doing something he shouldn't be doing. He'll be taking a toy from his sister or playing too close to the fire, or moving furniture around the house to build a fort. When I see it, I'll tell him to stop what he's doing. He's four, so do you know how he responds every time? He begins to rattle off all reasons why he should ignore my instructions and keep doing what he's doing. But because I want my son to grow into a respectful man of character, I cut him off and say, "Hudson, I'm not interested in your telling me why you are doing the wrong thing; I'm interested in your listening to my voice and doing what I say." God's heart for us is so similar. He's not interested in our excuses of why we keep on drinking too much, why we keep on going back to pornography, why we refuse to tithe on our income—he's interested in us listening to his voice and doing what he says. One of the greatest ways we can show we love God is by keeping his commands. This isn't white-knuckled religiosity, where we keep a long list of rules to earn our way into his grace. Just the opposite. This is glad and joyful obedience, the only logical response to having already received his grace.

Every night, as we get our kids ready for bed, we brush their teeth and put on pjs and go around the circle and tell God what we are thankful for. Then we tuck our kids in bed and pray for each of them. After we pray for them, I have a little routine I do with Addie. I say, "I have a secret for you." Her eyes get big and she nods to indicate she wants to hear it. I lean in as close as I can and whisper, "I love you so much." She smiles and says, "Me, me, me." And I say, "You want to tell me a secret?" She says, "Yes." "Do you think I'll like it?" "Yes." I lean in and she says, "I love you, too." We do that 3 or 4 times every night. It usually brings tears of joy to my eyes: a father and his child in a sweet embrace, reminding each other how much they love one another.

That's what God wants to do in your life. He's given you the gift of life. He's given his Son on the cross. He's given you every blessing in your life. In a million different ways he's leaned in and whispered, "I

love you so much.” All he wants is for you to whisper back: “I love you, too.” As a church, that is our mission. To do everything we can to say to God, “With all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, with faithfulness, pursuit, and obedience, I love you.”