

## Love God

*Created to Live SENT* Message Series

Week Three

One day when I was attending college in Houston, Texas, I was walking through Love Park with my friend, Kenny. The park was adjacent to the campus of Gulf Coast Bible College. Suddenly, the quiet of the afternoon was interrupted by the ugly sound of fists striking flesh. Immediately, Kenny and I pivoted simultaneously to see four young teens beating another teen. They had chased him down on his bike and were punching and kicking him. It was awful! Stunned, at first we only watched! One of them would knock the poor teen to the ground. Someone else would pick him up and they would take turns wailing away on him!

Instinctively, we ran toward the fight without a real good plan of what to do next. We yelled, “STOP!” to them as we ran. I remember thinking this might not be the brightest thing we had done, but something inside drove us forward. When we got to the teens we surprised them and they stopped the beating and backed away. I told them that no one should be beaten defenseless by four others. They started yelling about him stealing something he said he didn’t steal. Meanwhile we were picking the guy off the ground and started helping him to our car so we could get him to the hospital. The group was yelling at us but didn’t appear to want to pick a fight with us and didn’t keep us from assisting the teen.

Now it was our turn to be caught off guard! What happened next was nothing that we could have imagined! Suddenly, we were surrounded by four gang members on Harleys. They appeared to be the older brothers of the teens and they weren’t happy! They were really upset at us for intervening. They were cussing us and telling us to stay out of it and drop the guy. They jumped off their bikes and threatened to do to us what the younger boys were doing to the guy when we had arrived on the scene and rescued him!

The situation did NOT look good for us! I quickly scanned the horizon but I didn’t see any cavalry coming for us so I did the only thing I could think of to do—I started praying.

I had my arm around the abused teen and as I prayed I kept moving toward the school campus! I made as little eye contact as possible so as not to activate the Alpha dog mentality, but it was too late. The street fighter in Kenny awoke and he began telling the aggressors to keep their mouths shut in colorful language and that is when everything escalated! One of the gang guys jumped off his bike and pulled a knife. The others quickly formed a circle around Harley Bro and Kenny, who had no knife and it was on! Kenny and the Harley Bro were circling each other and for the second time in a short time I was thinking. *This didn’t look good.*

Then I had an idea! *Someone here has to be the leader.* Maybe I can make sense with him. I surveyed the group and selected the largest male. He was watching from the sidelines with great

satisfaction. He had a bear bottle in his hand and wore plenty of metal. I took a chance. Since Kenny and his mouth had their undivided attention, I was under the radar. This could be just the opportunity to risk approaching the “leader” and perhaps to reason with him. So I approached him. I looked him straight in the eyes and said, *Look this fight wasn't our fight and it wasn't your fight. Why should someone get cut and what if the police come all because we aren't using our heads and egos got in the way. Call your guy off. We don't need this and neither do you. Call your guy off!*

I was stunned when he looked at me and looked at his gang and said, *Hey, leave him alone. We don't need this. Let him go. Let's go! We've got better things to do.* The guy offered a few choice words and they all got back on their bikes and left. Even the young teens got on their bikes and followed them away.

I couldn't believe it! It was like the Red Sea parted and we were free. We took the injured teen to our dorm and cleaned him up. He didn't want to go to the hospital. All he wanted to do was get on his bike and go home.

Later as I reflected on that event I wondered, *What does the future look like for those guys? Would they grow up to have a healthy family? Would they get a college degree and land a good job? Would they contribute to society and give back anything that would help others? Would they leave the world a better place because they lived? What do you think?*

Is there anything that could change their destiny? If so what would it be?

The only thing that has a chance would be if someone had the relationship and the courage to tell them about the love of Jesus Christ and His gift of grace. Short of that I can't imagine anything except more fighting, more drinking, more gangs and perhaps prison or an early death.

They had exactly one hope—a relationship with Jesus Christ. I've seen hardened criminals have their lives completely turned around by the love and grace of Jesus. Anything is possible and no one is a lost cause with Jesus!

## **Today**

Today, let's talk about what it looks like to discover a relationship with Jesus. We will talk about how relationships begin small and are a bit fragile in the beginning. Healthy relationships have the capacity to grow and become mutually fulfilling. That kind of relationship with Jesus is possible! You can accept that He loves you and you can declare your love for Him.

## **Your Loving Relationships**

Think for a minute about your personal relationships. You know what it is to love someone. At first it is exciting and scary at the same time. You wonder if they will love you in return. You don't want to be silly or make stupid mistakes. You hope they will be forgiving and see the best in you. Over time you know that you can move past that to a deeper relationship that even becomes unconditional. You know that given time and effort seasoned with plenty of work and time, listening and loving you can develop relationships that are deep and long lasting. I imagine you know exactly what I'm describing and you've worked at developing some yourself.

## **A Relationship with God**

I won't put God on a human plane but it is not a stretch to say that learning to love and accept the love of God starts out in similar ways. He has already made the first move and the greatest investment. He sent Jesus, His only Son to die on the cross for our sins. He raised Jesus from the dead conquering sin and death and the devil all so he could offer a relationship to us every one!

Now it is your move. If you want a love that will be unconditional and you want to walk through life with someone who knows you better than you know yourself and loves you anyway—in fact is crazy about you. Then don't miss this!

Your part is to say, *I do. I do want a relationship with Jesus. I do admit I need forgiveness and I do need a Leader in my life, who won't let me down.*

If this is the true intent of your heart God knows. It is not about the words and how you arrange them. It is not whether you respond by coming forward in a church or sign a card—God knows your heart. You can pray those words right now and the relationship of a lifetime can begin for you.

## **Let's Bow our Heads and Hearts**

This might be your day to find the love you've always been looking for. If that is your desire just pray these words after me a sentence at a time. *Dear Jesus. I need You. I open my heart to You. Please forgive me for going my own way. Take over and lead my life. I accept Your forgiveness and grace. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.*

If you prayed that prayer today or affirmed it, would you please write a note indicating that decision on your Connection Card so we can celebrate with you and give you some Next Step resources? You can pick up the packet at the Welcome Center in the atrium.

## **How to Grow the Relationship**

The rest of our message today let's think together about how to grow in a relationship with God.

Maybe it sounds dramatic or presumptuous to imagine that you could become a friend of God. After all He spoke the universe into existence. He created mountains, oceans, prairies, and glaciers. He designed the ecosystems of our world. He was born into the very world He gave life. He experienced the best life had to offer and the worst. He took the sin of the world on His shoulders when He died a cruel death on the cross to satisfy the curse of sin.

It might be hard to conceive but this Jesus wants to be your friend. To those who followed Him in His day He said,

*I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me.* **John 15:15 NLT**

This next verse demonstrates the kind of trust God puts in us.

*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.* **John 20:21**

Not only does Jesus want to be your friend, He also wants us to befriend others. He was SENT by God, His Father, for us and now He sends us for the sake of others! If we respond, we are living SENT by Him. When we chose to live the *SENT* lifestyle of Jesus we continue the work of God, the Father. Jesus sees us as a friend. Since we are a child of God, we are also a brother. This is our identity. This is our destiny. Don't let anyone or anything deter you from pursuing an intimate relationship with the One who risked everything for you.

A relationship deepens when you spend unhurried time together. It is no different in learning to relate to God. Lovers want to learn all they can about one another. Read God's Word often. Get to know Him to understand Who He is and what He desires of you.

Developing a relationship with God is similar to developing a human relationship. However, there are some dramatic differences. One of the challenges of getting to know God is that you can't see Him or touch Him. It is harder to talk and listen without sensory feedback. Exercise faith and you will find that the spiritual side of your life will come alive. Value the process and give it time.

The relationship you develop with God will be the most important and rewarding investment you ever make.

### **The Created to Live SENT Series**

We have chosen as a congregation to focus on the Created to Live SENT series for six weeks. We want everyone on this journey because we believe that developing a relationship with God is the most important and rewarding investment we can ever make. We will focus together on the weekly readings in the book, backwards, together.

The idea behind the *Created to Live SENT* series is that growing to be like Jesus is a process. It consists of three components. Do you remember the SENT Circle I showed you the first week? Here it is again:



### **The 3Ls**

The three components we talk about we have shortened to abbreviate by labeling them the 3L's. They are Love God, Love people and Live out the love of Jesus. They are intertwined and when one grows all the others grow. Today we are focusing on the Love God component.

In a relationship no one can do the important work of knowing and being known for you. Besides you wouldn't want it that way even if it were possible.

Today we are talking about Loving God. Jesus said the Greatest Commandment is:

*Jesus replied, "You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind."<sup>38</sup> This is the first and greatest commandment.* **Matthew 22:37, 38 NLT**

So how do we get there?

We used the journey vocabulary last week so let's go back to it for a moment. When we are traveling on a journey there are some milestones we would use to mark the journey. Milestones don't make the journey but they are good guides for us to keep us on the right path. Let's start with the milestone of prayer.

### **Prayer**

You saw a humorous example of this if you saw the movie Meet the Parents. This has become my favorite clip in the movie. Ben Stiller, playing the part of Greg, was pretending to be a minister to impress his future in-laws. But when he was asked to pray and give thanks for the meal, he found himself clueless about how to pray to a God he didn't know.

Desperate to impress his future-in-laws, He began addressing God with words outside his normal vocabulary. He used a voice different than his normal conversational tone. It was so noticeable several opened their eyes to see what changed. He soon exhausted any original thoughts and began to quote the words to the *Godspell* tune, *Day by day these things I pray: to see Thee more clearly, to love Thee more dearly and to follow Thee more nearly, day by day by day. Amen!*

I laugh every time I see the clip because it is so true to life. You can't fake what you don't have. It is obvious to you and eventually everyone else is on to you. So let's invest the rest of the time we have in learning how to deepen a relationship with God.

One way to deepen our relationship with God is through prayer. Prayer at its essence is talking with God—not like Ben (or was it Greg) but talking to God as you would talk to your BFF. You know what that is right? It is text shorthand for best friends forever.

### **Prayer is Dialog**

Prayer at its best is personal, natural and a good dialog. All too often we make prayer into a monologue where we do all the talking and none of the listening. Sometimes it is like running through our grocery list of things we want. It can easily be a routine or even a ritual where we feel better because we remembered to pray but it has little impact on how we live our life. Many times our prayers are so general we wouldn't know whether they were ever answered or not.

Does any of that sound familiar?

You don't need a special prayer voice but you do want to take time to listen after you pray. I suggest you mix praying and reading the Bible.

You might pray for a minute or so in a personal way like you might talk to a good friend. Then have the Bible open on your lap and invite God to speak to you as you read His Word.

### **The Bible**

Have a plan to read through the Bible or to read through the Gospels, the four books that tell us the life of Christ. Read a chapter or two a day and as you read stop and pray about what you have read.

For example you might pray, *Why did that happen? Do I ever do that?* Be careful now you are inviting God to speak to you through His Holy spirit.

You might read where the disciples clearly missed the fact that Jesus was born to die. Maybe you say, *God is there something I'm missing?*

God rarely speaks in an audible voice but followers of Jesus have learned to discern when God is speaking. He might use people, events, a song, a great sense of peace or maybe he troubles your heart so much He moves you into action.

Jesus said in **John 10:27**, *My sheep (meaning followers) recognize my voice; I know them, and they follow me.*

You can expect God to speak to you! He will make His will clear to you one way or another. That is a promise. The next milestone is obedience.

### **Obedience**

If you follow and obey the relationship grows and God trusts you with more. If you ignore what He says you don't get more until you've obeyed what you last learned. Relationships deepen when trust grows between the participants. The more we obey, the more we trust. The more we trust Him the more we desire to obey!

The last milestone we will talk about today is really two in one, serving and giving.

### **Serving/Giving**

I put these two together because they are intertwined. Loving relationships just naturally serve and give. It isn't hard when it comes from the heart. It is natural and it feels good to do it. Just like in a healthy relationship, both parties regularly give and serve one another with hardly a second thought. It feels like a privilege to serve and give. There really isn't anything better than giving and receiving and giving again. A love relationship like that feels like a privilege.

### **Closing Illustration**

I'll close with this personal illustration of a way that God taught me to trust Him and it was based on this principal that the greatest way to deepen a relationship is to serve and give.

Sometimes I like to walk and pray aloud. It works well when I'm up early. If I sit still too early in the morning, I can easily fall back asleep. One day I was walking and praying in the Activity Center at Indian Creek Community Church.

I read and I prayed just like we talked about earlier today. I read, *I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised Him from the dead*. I liked the sound of that. I said, *Yes God, I want that!* Power and miracles sounded good.

The next sentence in the scripture text read, *I want to suffer with him, sharing his death, so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead*. Wait a minute! I didn't like the sound of that part of the verse nearly as well as the first part. Is it possible to have the blessing without the suffering?

Suddenly, I realized I was caught in a selfish prayer. I wanted the blessing but not the sacrifice. The Holy Spirit spoke to me through my thoughts, *You can't have a resurrection without a death. You can't know me if you don't suffer*. I shuttered inside. This sounded ominous as if suffering was coming my way.

I wondered if God was preparing me for something that would be similar to the sufferings of Christ. Was this a precursor of difficulty to come? Was it too late to take back my prayer that I wanted to know Him at any cost?

The truth was that I really did want to know Him. I didn't know what all this meant, but it was truly the desire of my heart to know God more intimately.

I can't explain what happened next with logic or with words, but I had an experience with God that I'll try to describe because I think it is helpful. God brought the story of Abraham and Isaac to my mind. You can find the story in Genesis 22.

God communicated with me that He wanted me to offer to Him that which was most important to me! To identify what was most precious to me was the easy part. It was my family. Did this revelation mean I would lose another family member? I knew too well the intense grief and pain involved in losing someone close because I experienced the death of our youngest daughter years earlier.

When I remembered that time, I immediately, pictured my wife, Belinda's face before me. I thought of Kristen, my oldest daughter. My mind turned to my two sons: Jeremy and Luke. The thought of another loss was so heavy I could hardly walk. I fell to my knees and began crying out to God to find another way.

While I was on my knees I heard these words in my spirit, God speaking to me. *Imagine that you were playing solitaire and all you had were face cards. I want you to place every face that is important to you in rows facing up. I can pick up any card I want and take it away from you, and your response to me is to say, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord."* That all sounded ominous.

You may not be familiar with the idea that God speaks to us through our thoughts. I recognize this is very subjective, but I'm simply relating what seemed very apparent to me at the time.

When the question from God touched on everything important to me my concern broadened. Evidently, what God was communicating to me included friends, co-workers, Indian Creek, ministry in general, my home—everything! This was overwhelming!

By now I was laying face down on the carpeted floor. This felt like a warning from God that I was about to have an experience like the story of Job in the Bible. No warm fuzzies that morning. However, there was ultimately a sense of God's presence and His peace gave me the strength to get up and go home. I knew my service to God was about to be purified. I just didn't know how. It didn't take long to find out.

I'll spare you the details, but at that time life was going splendidly well. That was about to change. Over the next several years everything important to me was tested and some disappeared from my life completely.

If I stopped the story there I would do it a gross misrepresentation. The other side of the coin was that the peace and power of God's presence became more and more real to me. I really did come to know Him in ways I never knew were possible.

I'm still a work in process and this purifying work is still going on, but I wouldn't trade anything I lost for the tremendous gain of knowing Him better and becoming more like Him.

Don't be afraid of God or anything He asks you to do. Offer to lay down the cards of your life before Him and tell Him you want to know Him whatever it takes. This is true love. This is true worship. This is what it means to live *SENT*.

### **Three Cards**

As we prepare to respond to what God is saying to us, you will see that the ushers in the aisles have a set of three playing cards for each one of us today. When you get these cards in your hand I'd like you to imagine that God is asking you to lay down everything that is important to you. You can assign the cards to whatever fits for you. One might represent your spouse if you are married or perhaps a parent or good friend. Another might represent a child if you are a parent or maybe it is a job. It could be your health—I think you will know. It is not hard figuring out what is important to us. That isn't the difficult part of this exercise.

The next part is where the stretch comes. Identify what or who the cards represent and then lay them face down on your leg or your lap. You may just hold them so that the face on the cards is facing away from you.

Now I encourage you to pray a prayer of dedication and offer the most important things in your life to God. Surrender your right to hold onto them or exercise your willful control. Let go and give them to God.

I'm going to be quiet here for a few minutes to let you talk to and listen to God for yourself. And then I will close with a prayer of surrender and dedication.

Time with God

### **Prayer**

*Lord Jesus, You are the One who gave us all that we hold dear. The Bible says You are the Giver of every good and perfect gift. And while the gifts we hold in our hand may not seem perfect it feels like we couldn't live without them.*

*We pray today with our will because our spirit is afraid to let go. It is hard to trust because we don't know if you are preparing us to live without them or if you just want us to live for you in such a way that they don't crowd you out of our lives. So we pray with our will today. Please listen to our words and take them to heart—we surrender.*

*We lay down everything dear to us today at Your feet as an act of worship. Like You did with Abraham, we hope You give them back but in any case we take our hands off. We do want to know You and to grow in our relationship with You. We are willing to know You and to know Your sufferings if necessary in order to truly become one with You.*

*We believe You want the best for us and You are completely trustworthy. We also believe you will give them back when You can trust us with them and we wait for Your timing. Draw us close God. Drive out the fear. Protect us from the lies of the enemy. Grow us up in this relationship with You so we are able to know You, love You and trust You in all things.*

*We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen*

As we go from here today please know that although this is a sobering time it is also the pathway to joy. You will experience your relationship with Jesus coming alive. You will be free from creating any idols. You'll notice the drag and drift of your life becoming less and less. You will experience more joy and peace than you ever thought possible. And one day you will look back on this time and think, *That was one of the best things I ever did. I wouldn't trade that experience for anything.*

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