

Present Yourself: Part 1 - Loving God

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Date: 30 December 2018

Preacher: Jesse Kincer

[0 : 0 0] Thank you, thank you. Come on, thank you very much. And great to be here with you guys. Thanks for coming. And it's been, hopefully, for all of you, a wonderful Christmas, a holiday heading into the New Year's, and trust that you've had not too much food, but just enough food, as I have. So January is when we now start to try to run that off and exercise that off, right? Everything that we did in December. But as Bear alluded to, he calls himself Alan, we call him Bear because that's how we know. As he alluded to, one of the big things we really want to grow in is this thing of prayer. And so we're going to do a couple of stand-alone sermons, today being one, next week being another, where we look into what that looks like to grow in our relationship and communing with God. And so we can get into a lot of wrong thinking and bad motives for growing in prayer. And I don't want that to be the case. I want our need and our desire to grow in prayer to come from a gospel-centered, gospel-saturated motivation, because I think that is what is going to stick. And so today we're kind of looking at that, loving God. And so we're going to start in Genesis chapter 3 in verse 8 and work from there. And if it's your first time with us, man, we're so glad that you're here visiting with us. For all of those people that aren't here today because they're either sick or deployed or in training somewhere or on vacation elsewhere, we trust that as you listen to this later in the week online, that you are blessed by it. So Genesis 3 verses 8, it says this,

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. And the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, Where are you? And he said, I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked and I hid myself.

So what this is, this is the first interaction between God and man after what is normally titled the fall, after sin enters the world because of man's disobedience to God. And so these verses, what they do is they explain every root motive mankind has and what we lost when we fell from grace. So much of understanding who we are, why we do what we do, why we do it badly, is actually written into these few short verses. See, sin results in Adam saying, what does he feel? He feels naked, right? And that doesn't mean he lost his blue jeans. That isn't what's going on here.

What he's saying is he feels exposed, he feels vulnerable and unfit to be in God's presence. See, prior to sin, all that Adam knew was God's love for him and his love from God and his love for God. He had access to God's unmitigated presence. And so he enjoyed that. But then sin brought with it this new base emotion that Adam hadn't known up to this point. It said Adam was afraid.

So Adam used to just know love with God, but then all of a sudden this new motivation enters in called fear because of sin. And this fear compelled him to hide from God instead of running to him. And he did this for very good reasons because fear is connected with an expectation of punishment or retribution.

[3 : 3 1] And God had told them, if you do this thing, if you sin, there's going to be consequences. You will surely die. 1 John 4, 18 helps us understand this. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment. And whoever fears has not been perfected in love. I would venture to argue that just about everything we do as humans stems from one of these two motives, love or fear. Now, there is healthy fear, right? That keeps us from jumping off 10-story buildings. That's like a healthy fear, you might say. One might even argue that there are bad things done in the name of love, right? And I would kind of counter-argue that it would be worth investigating what you're talking about, what you mean by that kind of love, because a lot of today, what is considered love is really selfish lust and passion being worked out, or it's just shallow sentiment that we call love. But for the sake of this sermon and the context of this passage we just read, love and fear have to do with how we think, how we act, and how we relate to God. Now, while these verses show man's fall from grace, they also prove and show us what is restored when

God brings us back into his grace through faith in Jesus Christ. See, God created man, God created us to enjoy him in perfect love, and God saves us. He saved each one of us and recreated us. He fixed our broken hearts, our fearful hearts to once again enjoy him in his perfecting perfect love. And he's perfecting our love for him through the gospel and time with him. See, the gospel guides our love for God. Now, when we talk about loving God, it may not be so obvious how we do that. How do we love someone? How do we love a being that we cannot see? How do we love God? How do we show our love for God? You know, we can think that it has to be some magical grand gesture, like being on the bachelor or something, right? It's not like God's waiting for us to give us the rose, right? He's not waiting for us to sweep him off his feet and take him to some exotic destination for this amazing grand gesture of how much we love him. And this kind of idea like, man, I got to go big for God all the time to show him how much I love him.

But we often think that's how it works. And so what happens is people with too little inhibitions and not enough good sense end up being the Christian heroes of our day. They keep the ones that really get accolades for how much they love God and show how they love God. They're the kind of personalities that are just way too comfortable with PDAs, you know? And it seems like nothing really embarrasses them when it comes to demonstrating expressions of love. So much bad, embarrassing Christian culture is set up around this. You know, back in my day, it was the guy with the amazing testimony and permed hair who could sing and talk for an hour in front of an audience. Or we're led to believe that we need to make God these big promises, you know? Man, God, I'm going to go to the darkest jungles of Africa.

That's the only way I could really love you if I just lay my life down in that way. So we get into this false sense of what it really means to love God. But God, he isn't necessarily asking those things of us at all. I mean, it's way simpler than that. Loving God is responding to his love.

So how do we do that? Well, it's a lot simpler than we make it out to be. We simply present ourselves to him. How do you love God? Man, I want to leave you with this today. If you walk away with anything today, loving God means you come and you present yourself to him. Romans 6.13 says this, do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death into life. And your members to God as instruments of righteousness. Roman 12.1 says this, I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, by what God has done, by his grace, to present your bodies, present yourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Now, things fight against this because we aren't perfect and so we sin and sin brings fear with it and fears children, guilt and shame. And this motivates us to hide from God, right? And this is how we fight against it. We fight against it with the gospel because the gospel brings us good news. It tells us we've been brought from death to life by the mercies of God. We've been brought out of fear and judgment into grace and acceptance because of what God has done. We don't have to earn our way back into God's presence. We don't have to prove our worth and work our way in all the while afraid of an angry God who might be upset with us and kick us out at any moment if we don't act rightly or act correctly. Now, Jesus said, no one can come to the Father except through me.

[8 : 57] See, the pathway to God's presence isn't through our performance. It isn't through building our spiritual resume to give to him to say how you deserve to be with you. It's not showing him lavish PDAs or these grand promises of how we're going to die for him in the most radical ways. Now, the pathway to God's presence is through Jesus. See, through Jesus, we get to present ourselves to God. We present ourselves to him in a relationship of restored love. That is the ultimate blessing of God's salvation. That's why God saved us. God saved us because his whole desire is to bring us back to himself, to bridge that gap that we lost, that separated us from God because of sin. And now, because of what he's done, we get to enjoy God judgment, judgment-free. Hebrews 10 verse 19 says this, therefore, brothers, since we have confidence, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is through his flesh. And since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near.

Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith. The gospel, man, it reminds us, it tells us that because of Jesus, we get to run into the presence of the almighty God who always welcomes us, always welcomes us. Now, to ground this in real life, how this works out, we present ourselves to God by coming to him. And this is drawing near. And we draw near through God's pathways of grace. Some of the best known ones we know are praise and prayer and Bible reading,

right? These are the most basic things and those basic pathways we experience God's presence, right? These are the OG, the old school things that we do. They're grace-paved pathways that lead us into experiencing the love of God, the Father. See, the gospel, what it does, it doesn't say, you better get to doing this. No.

And it gives us the confidence to enter God's presence. And it says, man, we get to do that. So then, you know what, guys? Man, let us draw near. We can draw through with confidence. We don't come afraid. We don't come fearful to a God of retribution. We come to a God, a Father who loves us and accepts us in Jesus Christ and welcomes us in and is inviting us into his presence. These aren't dutiful tasks that we do to satisfy a demanding God. These are privileged promises to enjoy God's presence and in his presence be refreshed and strengthened and perfected by his perfect love. Now, while it would be great to think that our time with God is always going to be something we want to do, guess what? It's not. It won't. As amazing as I just made that sound, it's going to be a struggle and a difficulty sometimes to even want to be with God in his presence, to want to practice those things. And so it takes some intentionality to maintain and pursue time with God, but it's so worth it. And here's why it's hard sometimes, guys, is because we have an enemy that is invested in keeping us from spending time with God.

Satan, our indwelling sin, the world, they're all in cahoots together. They're not for our relationship with God. They're against our relationship with God. And so we see because of them, our love from God is constantly under assault. Now, this doesn't mean that we fight on our own. We're not like some spiritual rambos running around flexing our muscles and shooting at the enemy with explosive arrows, taking on the forces of darkness by ourselves. And instead, what we do is we don't fight that way. Man, all we do is we cling to the gospel. We go back to the gospel because it's the fortress to which we run to that guards our love for God. The gospel guards our love for God. It keeps, you know, and one thing that it does, as we're rooted and grounded in the gospel and saturated in the gospel and understand all that it is, it keeps our relationship from becoming purely functional with God. And this can happen.

John, in the book Revelation, wrote to a church, Sardis. He wrote to a church that was all about work, work, work, work, work. Then it says, you know what, guys? You become lukewarm. In your love for me, you went, you're not hot. You're not cold. You're just kind of tepid. And it says of them, you know what, Jesus is outside the door of your church meeting knocking. Anybody want to hear my voice and let me in? I'm ready to come in. See, what happened is this church got so busy doing churchy stuff. And they got so busy with activities that they left God out of it. And that's the danger. [13:58] We can fill our lives with church programs and church activities that keep us so busy that we never have time to present ourselves to God. And that is a huge danger. I don't want us to become that. But maybe it's not church stuff that's keeping us from God. You know, what fills up our hours so that time with God gets pushed to the margin? What vision or desire that you and I cling to keeps us from clinging to God? You know, if we think Satan's best tactic to take us out is to get us to commit some big, heinous sin, then he's fooled us. He's fooled us, guys. Long before we stop fighting our lust, our greed, our anger, our envy, and our fear, we stop fighting for regular time with God.

See, Satan is less interested in moving our love from God from hot to cold. And he likes our hearts to be in that lukewarm place, that tempid temperature. And one of the ways he gets this done is through making us so busy that we forgo spending time with our most important relationship. A good example of how this works out, I love C.S. Lewis. And he wrote this fictional story of imagining what it would look like for a mentor demon to apprentice a demon on how to produce an ineffectual Christian. It's called the Scrutate Letters. It's a really good read. And so it says this, this mentor demon is writing to his apprentice demon named Wormwood. Dear Wormwood, do everything in your power to keep your patient, the Christian, from regular communion with our enemy, or God, and convince him that being busy in life and ministry is an acceptable excuse not to spend regular time in prayer. Now, he uses prayer as one of the examples, but that could be time with God in any fashion or form. See, we have to fight against this temptation toward a busyness that pushes God to the margins of our lives. One pastor wrote, you know what, one of the big reasons our souls are sick today is because we are so busy as people, we don't take time to stop and push pause in our lives and just enjoy God and spend time with him. And see, if Satan can't keep us from God's presence through busyness, he's got some other things that he tries to do. He tries to take us out in some other ways. You know, he'll get us to present

ourselves to God for all the wrong reasons. You know, just because we have a devotional life doesn't mean that everything's great, you know, because our devotional life can become a source of pride and self-righteousness for us. We can begin looking at ourselves and thinking, look how much time I spend with God and look down our nose at others who don't do the same as we do. We can become arrogant like a Pharisee, boasting in what we've done and even coming to God in our time with him and saying, look what all I've done. Look at all that I do for you, God. And at least I'm not like one of these guys, these sinners, these less mature Christians who aren't as committed as I am.

[17 : 10] As if coming to God in a way that he should be praising us for what we're doing, right? Or we can come to God with selfish motives, to ask God to give us stuff, to spend on ourselves.

Kind of like the Janis Joplin, oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes-Benz, right? And we can come to God with the whole thing like Donnie always says, Lord, make my teeth whiter and give me gold chains and a bigger house, whatever it may be. We can come to God always just looking for what's in his hands and never seek his face. And as we fight this assault on our hearts and our motives, and all's we have to fight with is the truth of the gospel. All's we have to cling to is the truth of the gospel. The gospel guards our love. And you know how it does this? It brings us back to the source of our love. The gospel generates our love for God. I can remember what it was like as an early follower of Jesus and had those seasons of not feeling a desire or a motivation to spend time with God. It just wasn't fun. It seemed a lot more like a chore and an imposed duty than any kind of delight that I would want to do. And then days would turn into weeks since the last time I really presented myself to God. I really spent time with God. And you know what? Ultimately, that would result in me being full of guilt and shame. And I would start to grow this fear and this fear that God stopped loving me because I wasn't loving him enough and showing him my love enough because I wasn't spending time with him. And then what that resulted in is just me acting just like Adam. I didn't run to

God's presence. I would actually hide from God, right? How would I do this? Well, actually, I would just kind of bolster my church activities. I'd fill up my calendar. I'd start overworking and over-serving and over-fellowshipping. Because if I could just do, do, do, do, do, then I wouldn't have to get to the reality of what I felt and deal with those things. And then finally, God in his grace would speak to me through someone. Maybe it was a sermon or a friend. And basically, he was just through them getting me to say, you know what, Jesse, where are you? Like he said to Adam, where are you?

And this kept happening. I kept getting into this cycle until I got the gospel, right? Suddenly, I realized my relationship with God wasn't based on what I did, but it was based on what God had done for me. It was based on what Jesus did for me. 1 John 4, 19 says, we love because God first loved us.

I started to realize, you know what? God's love is an initiating love. And it's always been that way. Even when I go back and I look at this passage of Adam in the garden, of what's happening, God came down to Adam in the garden. God came seeking him out, right? It was an act of God initiating love. God initiating his presence. God bringing himself. He came to Adam. He drew near. He acted first. We simply respond to him. And as we do, God pours his perfect love into us. And what do we do?

[20 : 27] As he pours his perfect love into us, we simply return it back to him. We present ourselves out of love for him, not out of fear. His perfect love is perfecting us. And it's perfecting our love for him.

See, the more we sit and abide in God's love, the less we experience fear and her children guilt and shame. So even when we don't have the most devoted devotion ever devoted, that's okay. We know that God still loves us. It doesn't kickstart a shame cycle for us when we haven't spent time with God in a few days or even a week or a few weeks or a month or a year. It doesn't kickstart any shame cycle, no matter what the enemy tries to come at us with, any lies that he tries to come at us with to try to keep us from God's presence. It doesn't promote that fear that makes us run from God. See, what we do is when we see the gospel and when we're rooted in the gospel, when we remember that God initiated, God had acted first, it changes the game. We look to Jesus. He is the gospel proof that God initiated, right? Jesus came down to earth unrequested. God sent him. God's love, God's presence put on flesh and walked among us, dwelt with us, right? His name was Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus came to forgive our sins, to take away the guilt and the shame that

we experienced in our sin that makes us run and hide from the presence of God, that makes us unworthy and unfit to be in the presence of God. Jesus fixed all those things.

And the gospel reminds us of what real love is, that unchanging love, what that ultimate love looks like. It does whatever it takes to bridge the gap that separates us from the love of God and God's presence. See, when we look to Adam in the garden, man, we look and we see ourselves, right? We confess, man, our sin, because of our sin, because of my sin towards you, Lord God, I was cut off from your love and I was cut off from your presence. But then you came. Then you sent your son and you fixed it.

The first question in the Old Testament was God asking Adam, where are you? The first question in the New Testament was from the wise men looking for Jesus, asking, where is he? Wise men seeking him.

These men were coming to present themselves to this promised Savior to worship him. God had given these men insight into saying, you know what? I've sent my son. I've sent the promised Savior of the world. This is where he's being born. I'm going to lead you to him. And God called them and they responded. They sought him out to worship him. Jesus came in the flesh. Jesus came to us, presented himself to us so that we could present ourselves to God. That is the goodness of the gospel. That is the motivation of why we come to him. That is why we present ourselves to God, not out of fear, not out of debt obligation, man, but because of love. And I want us this year to think about, man, as we think about what it looks like to follow Jesus as a disciple and being a disciple of Jesus is being a Jesus apprentice and looking at his life and saying, you know what? Jesus showed us the way to live. That we get access to the Father just like Jesus had access to the Father. We get to enjoy the

[24 : 11] Father just like Jesus enjoyed the Father. And Jesus didn't come to the Father out of fear and obligation. Man, he came to the Father because he delighted in the Father. He came to the Father because he loved the Father. And through Jesus, God calls us his sons and his daughters, and we have that same amazing access. I could sit here. I can sit here and try to manipulate you to get you to pray this year through fear. And you know what would happen? You would do it for a little bit. And then if it wasn't going well, you tap out and give up. And then you just feel full of despair, maybe even shame or guilt. And I don't want that to be the case. All I want to hold out to you is this amazing God who gives us this amazing gospel, who calls us into this amazing relationship with him, this relationship of love and grace. And it doesn't matter if you pray every single day, and it doesn't matter if you pray once a week, once a month, once a year. He's not going to love you any less. But I want to tell you this. His love is so good. His love is so amazing.

And when you and I present ourselves to him, we step in to receiving that love, experiencing that love, and that love changes us. And that is what keeps us going. That is what keeps us wanting to come back and presenting ourselves to him. We get a taste of something that is better than everything we've ever experienced. And that is the hunger we want. That is the motivation we have to press into God.

How do we respond? If you're not a Christian, man, I hope that you heard my heart today. God doesn't want you to come to him with your resume to earn your way into his presence.

We were all in the same boat. Our sin cut us off from God, cut us off from his love, caught us off from his presence. But because Jesus came, because God sent his son, he came down to earth, he died a death we could not die. He received the punishment for our sins. And by his blood, those sins are washed away. We get to come into the presence of God. We get to come as children of God.

And that's what we are. That's what he calls us. We get that. And guess what? You can have that too. If you're here and not a Christian, I want to invite you. I want to invite you to respond, to respond to this amazing gospel that God has held out to you today. Come to him in faith and come and repent for your sins. You're not going to find an angry God as he calls you to come in.

[26 : 58] You're going to find a throne of grace. He's a king. You're going to find a throne of grace and you're going to find mercy and you're going to find love. Come to him. If you are a Christian, I want us to consider all that we talked about today, all that we looked about today, how God reversed what Adam did. The first Adam came and because of him, we lost the presence of God.

And Romans talks about Jesus who is the second Adam who came. And because of what he did and what he earned for us, we now get the privilege of God's presence once again. Man, let's receive our salvation as this amazing gift that God didn't save us just so that we could have a cushy

life here on earth. He saved us so that we get to be in his presence. And I want to encourage you, let that motivate you from this day forward. Let that motivate you to come to him and present yourself to him. And when you are feeling ashamed, when the enemy comes and he tries to make you feel guilty for not measuring up or for not doing enough, fight using the gospel. Push back into God's love, get re-motivated in the right way. Let's pray together. Lord, I thank you for your promise. Lord, your gospel is so amazing. What you did for us is so amazing. Jesus, you came, you were God's presence that came to earth. You put on flesh. You walked among us. You healed. You forgave. Lord, you died on the cross for our sins. You rose again. Lord, you're seated on the throne now. You're caring for us. And he says, you're constantly praying for us and loving us even from there. And you give us the gift of your immediate presence, your presence that's here with us now all the time, your Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit, you're here. You're God with us. You're the presence of God that we get to enjoy. And so I just pray this year that we would tap into that. That there's a lot of seemingly legitimate reasons that we can push you to the margins, Lord God. But I pray this year as we get a taste of how good you are, as we get a taste of how amazing it is to be in your presence, Lord God, that it would cause us to go back to our calendars. It would cause us to go back to our to-do list. It would cause us to reprioritize our lives so that we're carving out time to be with you, coming to you, presenting ourselves to you, saying, here I am. Here I am, your son, to praise you, to thank you, to ask for your help, knowing that you receive me and you love when we come to you. Amen.