

## **Loving God**

### **By David Feddes**

If you want to find out the most basic truth about yourself, if you want to know who you really are and what makes you feel and think and act the way you do, it's not all that complicated. You just need the right person to ask you the right questions. Now, there are lots of persons who emphasize understanding yourself and ask questions that are supposed to help you do that. But not just any person will do, and not just any questions will do. You need the right person with the right questions.

Long ago the philosopher Socrates declared, "Know thyself," and he became famous for the questions he asked in his effort to help people know themselves. More recently, psychologists have tried to help people know themselves, often through a process of questioning. They come up with personality profiles that help them analyze what makes us feel and act the way we do. Educators do something similar. They try to identify students by various learning types, based on answers to certain key questions about the student. At times these approaches can reveal things that are interesting, even helpful, but they can be awfully complicated, and they still don't get to the core of who you really are.

If you want to get down to basics, there is someone who can take you straight to the heart of the matter with just three simple questions. That may sound hard to believe, but it's true. This person is the world's greatest expert on human nature and personality. His name is Jesus, and he can identify the kind of person you are with only three questions.

Jesus' first question is, "Do you love me?"

Jesus' second question is, "Do you love me?"

And his third question is, "Do you love me?"

It's that simple: no games or gimmicks, no complicated questionnaires or fancy theories, no beating around the bush—just one basic question. If you want to know the most important and central thing about yourself, then let Jesus look you straight in the eye and ask, "Do you love me? Honestly now, do you? Do you have a personal attachment to me, to my very self?"

### **The Unavoidable Question**

It's a simple question but not an easy one. If Jesus is a stranger to you, if you don't know much about him and you've never had much to do with church, it may feel odd and upsetting to be asked whether you love Jesus. Your answer, obviously, is no, you don't love him—you can't love someone you don't even know. But why should you have to answer that question in the first place? It's awkward to be put on the spot by a stranger and asked whether you love him.

Then again, even if Jesus isn't a complete stranger, it may feel awkward and embarrassing to be asked if you love him. You may know a lot about Jesus from the Bible and be a long-time member of a church, and yet Jesus' question "Do you love me?" can still make you squirm.

You might say, "Love you? Well, Jesus, I think you lived a good life and set a fine example, and I really respect your teachings." But Jesus says, "That's not what I asked. Answer the question: 'Do you love me?'"

You might say, "I believe you did many great miracles, and I believe you are the Son of God." But Jesus replies, "That's not the question. The question is, 'Do you love me?'"

You might say, "I believe you died for people's sins and rose again from the dead. I know you are ruler of all things." But Jesus replies, "I'm glad you know that, but you still haven't answered my question. Do you love me?"

You might say, "I've been baptized. I go to church. I read my Bible. I try to be a good person. I even do volunteer work to help the poor and sick." But Jesus says, "Good for you! But stop avoiding the question. *Do you love me?*"

You might even say, "I'm a pastor, a teacher, a leader in the church. I'm always busy talking about God and working for religious causes." But Jesus says, "Please answer the question. Do you love me? Do you?"

It's a question none of us can avoid, a question that cuts through everything else about us and gets at the very core of who we are and what motivates us. If you don't love Jesus, then the central fact of your personality is that you have no connection with the Lord and Savior of the world, and you are at odds with the God who made you. If you do love Jesus, then the central fact of your personality is that you are in tune with God himself at the core of who you are. All other questions, no matter how important they might be, are secondary compared to that one simple question of Jesus: "Do you love me?"

No one can avoid answering that question. Even Simon Peter, the most prominent and outspoken of Jesus' disciples, had to face Jesus and look him in the eyes and give an honest answer as Jesus asked him three times, "Do you love me?" Peter had followed Jesus and learned from him for three years. He had preached about Jesus. He had done miracles in Jesus' name. But when the time of crisis came and Jesus was arrested, Peter denied three times that he ever knew Jesus. After Jesus rose from the dead, Peter's core identity remained in question. What sort of man was he? Did God still have any use for him, or was he worthless? Did he belong to Jesus, or didn't he? When the risen Lord Jesus came to Peter, he could have said all sorts of things and asked all sorts of questions, but he simply asked Peter, "Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?"

It grieved Peter deeply when Jesus questioned his love, especially the third time. But Peter had to give an answer, and despite his discomfort and wounded feelings, Peter was able to say each time, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Whatever was weak in Peter, whatever might still be wrong with him, he did love Jesus, and he knew that Jesus knew it. Jesus made Peter search his heart and gave Peter the opportunity to reaffirm his love, and the Lord reaffirmed Peter as an apostle and commissioned him to care for Christ's flock.

### **Answering the Question**

What about you? Your personality may not be like Peter's, the details of your life may be different from his, but Jesus' question to you is the same question he asked

Peter: "Do you love me?" It's not just a Bible text asking that question or a preacher quoting it. Jesus himself is asking, and he's asking you personally: *Do you love me?*

If you can honestly say yes to Jesus, wonderful! None of us would dare to say that we love Jesus perfectly, but by God's grace, some of us can say with Peter, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. You know all things. You know my sins and weaknesses and failures, but you also know that I really do love you." Having Jesus question your love may be uncomfortable and even painful at times, but you may end up reassured, like Peter, that your love for Jesus is genuine and that the Lord has reaffirmed your relationship to him and your calling to work for him.

But what if honesty forces you to say, "No, Jesus, I don't love you"? What if you can't give a positive answer to Jesus' question? Well, even then, the question can do you good. It can drive you to be realistic with Jesus and with yourself. You may discover a dreadful void at the core of who you are, an awful dryness and deadness in your most important relationship, your relationship to God. That discovery may be distressing, but it may also be the first step on the road to becoming a new person.

When you hear Jesus saying, "Do you love me?" you may have to respond, "No, Lord, I don't love you. I don't relate to you as a personal presence in my life, and I don't love you—I just don't. I have to admit it. And up to now it hasn't bothered me much. But now that you ask me about it, Jesus, I'm starting to see that I can't go on this way. I can't go on thinking I'm a good person when I have no love at all for the One whom I ought to love above all. I don't love you, Lord, and that is terribly wrong. I'm sorry. I feel so hollow. Something is missing from the core of my life, and that something is you. Help me to know you and your love, Lord Jesus, and help me to love you in return." Facing your lack of love may disturb you, but at the same time it can arouse in you a longing—and longing often leads to love.

Jesus wants more than anything to be loved by people who have tasted his love. How do we know this? Well, when Jesus re-commissioned the apostle Peter, the Lord's only question was, "Do you love me?" And when Jesus was asked the most important command in Scripture, he replied, "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).

But wait a minute. Jesus' great question says, "Do you love *me*?" But the great command is, "Love the Lord your *God*." Aren't these two different loves? No, Jesus made it clear that love for him and love for God are one and the same, for as Jesus put it, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). Jesus told people who rejected him, "I know you. I know that you do not have the love of the Father in your hearts" (John 5:42). "If God were your Father, you would love me" (John 8:42). Loving God is identical with loving Jesus. In loving Jesus, we love his Father and his Holy Spirit as well. So when Jesus says, "Do you love me?" he's really saying, "Do you love me as the Lord your God? Do you love me with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength?" Please think about that.

### **With All Your Heart**

Do you love Jesus with all your *heart*? The word *heart* here doesn't refer to the organ that pumps your blood; your heart is your core identity, your deepest self. Is

Jesus the central factor of your existence? Is your heart, your deepest self, attached and bonded to Jesus in a personal way?

Maybe the question baffles you. Love Jesus with all your heart? What could that mean? If your mother asked, "Do you love me?" you might say, "Yes, Mom, I love you with all my heart." If you have children and one of them asked, "Do you love me?" you'd hug your little one and say, "I love you very much, with all my heart." If your spouse said, "Do you love me?" you'd respond with a kiss and with warm assurances of heartfelt love—at least if your marriage is healthy.

But Jesus? How can you love him? If you've had little or no connection with church or the Bible or anything related to Jesus, how can you love a total stranger? And even if you do know a bit about Jesus—you know he lived long ago and perhaps you even know some of his teachings or events from his life—how can you love him with all your heart? After all, you know about Queen Victoria and Albert Einstein and other historical figures, but even if you admire them, you can't honestly say you love them with all your heart. Knowing about figures from the past is hardly the same as loving them. They're not in the same class as family members and others you love.

The only way it makes sense to love Jesus with all your heart is if he is more than a historical figure to you, if he is a living, real person who is active in your life right now—just as living and real to you as your own family members, and even more dear. Jesus asks, "Am I the love of your heart, the highest and dearest attachment of your inmost self?"

Beware of loving anybody or anything ahead of Jesus. The Bible says that in the last days, the time before Jesus returns, "People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money ... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power" (2 Timothy 3:2-5). When you love yourself or money or pleasure more than you love Jesus, you can still go through the motions of religion, but you have only a dead form, not the living power of love burning in your heart.

In the Bible Jesus rebukes a church of people who are lukewarm toward him. Picturing the heart as a house, Jesus says to them and to us, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me" (Revelation 3:20). Jesus refuses to be a distant historical figure who gets lip service from lukewarm churchgoers. Jesus is a living person who confronts you here and now, knocking at the door of your heart. If you hear his voice and open the door, he will come in and make himself at home with you and be your dearest friend. Is your heart a home for Jesus? Do you love him with all your heart?

### **With All Your Soul**

The next aspect of loving the Lord is to love him with all your soul. What does that mean? Sometimes the word *soul* can refer to the invisible part of us that goes on existing between the time our bodies die and the time they are resurrected. But here the word *soul* most likely refers to our feelings and desires, our emotions and inclinations, our passions and enthusiasms. Religion without soul, Christianity without emotion and deep feeling, is defective and dreary, if not dead.

Some people are so afraid of emotionalism that they stifle genuine emotion. But the Lord wants us to love him with all the emotion and feeling in our soul: to desire him,

to delight in him, to shudder with horror when we offend him, to tremble with awe in his presence, to burn with passion for the Lord we love.

In the Bible, Jesus addresses people in a church in Ephesus and praises them for their hard work in serving God, for their clear thinking in rejecting phony teachers, for standing firm in hard times, and for refusing to put up with immorality. Solid doctrine, steadfast bravery, moral purity—doesn't that church sound almost ideal? "Yet," says Jesus after saying all these positive things, "I have this against you: You have forsaken your first love" (Revelation 2:4).

You can think straight, act morally, and stand firm out of a grim sense of duty, but all of that won't satisfy Jesus if you've lost your first love. Do you love Jesus with soul-stirring passion, with delight, with the warm emotion and feeling of first love? Do you love Jesus with all your soul?

### **With All Your Mind**

Let's explore another dimension of love. Do you love the Lord with all your mind? You may find the question a bit odd. What's the mind got to do with it? What does thinking have to do with loving? Well, consider this. Suppose a woman says, "I love my husband. I'd rather not hear what he says, I'd rather not know his thoughts, I'd rather not discuss things with him, I don't want my mind to be bothered with what's on his mind, but I love him." Her so-called "love" would be sick, wouldn't it?

And it's even sicker to suppose that you can love God without devoting your mind to him. Jesus wants you to love him with your mind, your intellect, your powers of reason, your imagination, and make every thought and idea an expression of love to him. If you fill your mind with trashy paperbacks but seldom open your Bible, if you flood your imagination with the sex and violence and consumerism of the entertainment industry but seldom look at a tree or gaze at the sky and meditate on how wonderful your Creator is, if you flop in front of the television every night and seldom stretch your mind by reading a challenging book or thinking hard about a part of the Bible that puzzles you, you are failing to love God with your whole mind.

God's people in the Bible spoke of the Lord's words and thoughts as sweeter than honey, more precious than gold. They loved to focus their minds on the Lord and meditate on his truth. And they didn't shy away from thinking hard about difficult problems. What about you? Do you love God with all your mind? Do you love to read the Bible and relish thinking some of God's thoughts after him? Do you admire and adore God's power and wisdom in creating and controlling the world? Do you love meditating on God's plan in saving you and his plan for world history and for his new creation? If so, you won't rest content with a few general ideas. You'll want to learn as much as you can and understand as much as you're capable of.

Loving Jesus with heart and soul must not be separated from loving him with your mind. Too many of us tend to divide emotion from intellect. We separate feeling from thinking. Some Christians express strong emotions in worship but seem afraid of exercising their minds. Other Christians emphasize clear thinking and sound teaching but seem afraid of anything to do with feelings. But loving Jesus involves deep feeling *and* sound thinking. Our minds must be in touch with the Lord's reality, or any feelings we have will just be shallow sentimentality. By the same token, our hearts and souls

must be stirred by our encounter with God, or our thoughts will just be dry, dead concepts rattling around in our brain. Jesus calls us to love him with all our soul *and* all our mind. What God has joined together, let us not separate. Let us love him with knowledge that is radiant with feeling, with logic fired by a holy passion.

### **With All Your Strength**

There's one final aspect of loving the Lord to consider: do you love him with all your strength—with all your energy and effort, with determination and will and action? Love is a deep inner affection, as we've seen, but it takes a definite outward form: pouring your energy into doing what pleases the Lord. Each time Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me" and Peter said yes, Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." In other words, "If you love me, get to work! Obey my commands and do the job I've assigned you.

Jesus says in the Bible, "If you love me, you will obey what I command. Whoever has my commands and obeys me, he is the one who loves me" (John 14:15,21). Part of loving the Lord with your mind is finding out from the Bible what his commands are and figuring out what they mean for your situation; and then, once you know in your mind what the Lord wants you to do, you show your love for him by throwing all your strength into doing what he says. You obey his commands about rejecting idols and respecting his name and worshiping him, and you also obey his commands to love other people and treat them the way you would want to be treated. True love for Jesus produces energetic, obedient action. As one Christian put it, "The nearer we come to our Father's heart the more submissive we are to his commands." That's what it means to love the Lord with all our strength.

One more time, then, let Jesus ask you the question that penetrates every aspect of who you are and reveals the most basic truth about you. Consider quietly and carefully and prayerfully his question: "Do you love me? Your love will never be perfect or complete this side of heaven, but do you have a love for me that is real and alive and growing in every part of your being? Is love for me springing up in your heart? Is it stirring your soul? Is it shining in your mind? Is it directing your strength and action? Do you love me?"

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