



## TIME OF GRACE®

# *What Is Love? What's My First Love?*

## Study Notes

### *Summary*

Why is there so much hate in our world? If T-shirts, Pinterest posts, and Bible passages tell us to love one another, why do we so often choose the opposite of love? Jesus' simple answer was that our hearts love to hate, because love is hard. Love costs us. Love is sacrificial. Love isn't self-seeking, but we love to seek ourselves. Since we love to put ourselves first, hate becomes our first choice. This message helps us see the battle behind our daily choices to love and the selfless Savior who gave up his life to prove his love for us all.

- Exodus 20:3 <sup>3</sup> You shall have no other gods before<sup>[a]</sup> me.
- “We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” Martin Luther
- Psalm 48:9 Within your temple, O God, we meditate on your unfailing love.
- Psalm 13:5 <sup>5</sup> But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.
- Psalm 90:14 <sup>14</sup> Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.
- Psalm 36:7 <sup>7</sup> How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
- Matthew 6:33 <sup>33</sup> But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.
- God is our \_\_\_\_\_ love.
- What now?
  1. Figure out \_\_\_\_\_ order.
  2. Figure out \_\_\_\_\_ order.

3. Thank God for \_\_\_\_\_order.

### *Points to Ponder*

1. Make an intentional plan to “seek first” God’s kingdom by gathering with his people. How would your plan differ from previous years in your life?
2. Share with a trusted friend what good things you are tempted to love too much (comfort, control, power, pleasure, experiences, attention, etc.). Ask them to pray for God to be your first love.
3. Study Luke 9:57-62 and keep your eyes open for how people’s priorities affected their interactions with Jesus.
4. Read Proverbs 3:9. How does giving first (before saving/spending) prove that God is a priority in your life?
5. Start a conversation with a non-Christian friend about what they love most in life and why? If they return the question, share your favorite thoughts from this week’s message.

### *Homework for Next Week*

Read Matthew 5: 43-48

Time of Grace Ministry  
**What Is Love? What's My First Love?**  
Exodus 20:3; Psalm 48:9; Psalm 13:5; Psalm 90:14; Psalm 36:7; Matthew 6:33  
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Back around middle school, a bunch of my friends and I toilet papered one of our neighbor's houses. In the process, we bought from a local hunting store a small bottle of deer urine which we splattered all over his front porch, but before you all start judging me, here is the rest of the story because he started it. Here is what happened.

When I was in middle school, my friends and I got really, really, really into roller hockey and if you ever played roller hockey before, you know that there is one thing that is better than all the other things and that is when the city freshly paves a beautiful new street, which is exactly what happened in our neighborhood. The city trucks came through perfect for roller blades, for passing, for shooting, and we loved it, but the guy who did not love it was the neighbor with the perfect yard. You know, he had that thick, lush, manicured grass. You know, the kind that has really crisp edges on the corners. And so, whenever our roller hockey ball would jump the curb into his yard, we, you know, felt we had no other choice than to take our big, growing adolescent bodies and stamp across his grass in our roller blades and resume the game, and this guy hated it. He hated it so badly he would watch and glower at us from the window. Sometimes he would open the door, stand on his front porch, and stare at us. Sometimes he would yell at us to get off of his yard which is why we kind of hated him. And when the next homecoming came, we made sure to stock up on extra toilet paper and leave him a very special gift from some local middle school students. All organic. Right?

Now, if I am reading the room right, you are still not on my side. So, let me -- well, neither were my daughters when I told them that horrific story. The reason I wanted to share that story with you today is because when I look back at what my friends and I did, I realized that what happened way back in the mid-90s was deeply theological. The reason that guy did not like us and the reason that we kind of hated him back was actually a deeply spiritual and theological thing. It might seem like an odd thing to say, but that is not what St. Augustine would say. You know that name? St. Augustine was one of the most famous Christians of the early church. He lived in the 300s A.D., and he became famous in part for one of his teachings called "Disordered Loves." According to this Christian, so much of life and love and conflict and sin can be explained by the order of the things you love. All right? The thing you loved most. The thing you loved second most. The thing that is third on your list. And when I think of back at all the conflict, it was not because we hated our neighbor or our neighbor hated kids having fun. I think what happened is that we ended up in the same space but with a different order for our loves. Right?

I mean, we were all for loving our neighbors, but we kind of loved playing roller hockey and having fun more than that. Maybe he would have agreed that he agreed to be nice to people, but he kind of loved his perfectly manicured yard more than he loved kids from his neighborhood. And once two people who have different orders for their loves end up in the same room, very, very interesting things can happen.

So, I want to ask you today. Have you ever thought about the order of your loves? Like, the things in your life and your schedule and your budget when you cannot do all the things at this level that comes first in your heart and then what is next, what is third? And the people that you do life with, your parents, your roommates, your classmates, or your pastor, what is the order of their loves and what does that mean as you try to do life together?

Let me visualize it this way. Some of you have seen one of my favorite toys, my jumbo Lego blocks. You know, a lot of you would say that you care about your health, this yellow block on top, or your family, immediate or extended. Some of you are going to school and pursuing your education. Some of you have jobs. Many of us have friends, lots of us, and we appreciate and love our church as well. But the question is not whether you have these things in your life, the question is what order do you put them in?

All right, when you cannot do both, which one do you pick? For example, you are sitting at the dinner table with your parents, your family, and they would love your full attention to catch up on some good conversation. It is been busy with work and with school, but then you hear your phone buzzing from your bedroom because your friends want a little bit of your attention and some good conversation too. So, what do you pick? And how does everyone feel when you ignore the text or take it in the middle of dinner? The order of loves. Or, you have gotten an amazing job opportunity? I mean, really good work, something you would be passionate about, and they are paying maybe up to six figures. But you know that if you choose this, you are not going to have quite as much time for your relationships or for going to the gym or being involved in church. You cannot do all the things. Which things do you do?

Some of you younger people are facing this with school right now. The more I have read about younger generations, the more I realize what an intensely competitive educational system we have created. You know, sometimes to get into the top tier schools, you cannot just be a hardworking student; you have to be a student who sacrifices almost everything. And you have got to do this, and you have got to learn that, and you have got to volunteer here and there. And so, if you want some of the best education and maybe one of the best jobs in years to come, you have to sacrifice sleep, health, peace of mind, close friendships, quantity time with family, being involved every Sunday at church. Right?

As limited human beings we always have to pick, and St. Augustine's brilliant teaching reminded us that you cannot pick everything. So, how about you? If I gave you a second to think about that little colored tower because you could pick the order of your greatest passions. I want you to think about that today because this is so important when it comes to love; to know your priorities, to know their priorities, to know God's priorities. You will never love each other well

or have a close connection to the God of love unless we get this, and I know that from experience.

Some of you are aware I did not have the most successful dating track record as a teenager. In middle school I graduated with zero dates. Freshman year I kept my streak going, and then sophomore and then junior, and then I graduated high school itself without ever having held a girl's hand, but then, just a few months later, weeks into college, I met that beautiful woman over there, and after 19 years of never having gone on a date, she was my priority. But have I ever told you the story that we almost broke up? The summer after we started dating, I was so excited. It was my first summer ever with a girlfriend, and I wanted to be with Kim 24/7. She, on the other hand, did not. She liked me. We were growing in our love for each other, but she had friendships. She was back from college, with friends at home she had not seen in a long time. Honestly, it caused tension in our relationship. We did not order our lives in the same way, and it was really difficult. It was like this really emotional reminder to me that St. Augustine was not teaching us some dry theology. He was teaching us about the things that matter most in life.

And that is why today I want to open this book, the Bible, and talk about the order of your loves. I am not going to tell you what school to try to get into, what job to take, how many hours to spend working on your health and fitness, but I do want to show to you what should be on the top of this tower. What makes the biggest difference, not just in the first position, but in all the positions. So today, we are going to take a quick sprint through the words of Moses, the beautiful lyrics of the Psalms, and then the very teaching of Jesus, and figure out the best order for the loves of our heart. So, first Moses, then the Psalms, and then Jesus. Let us talk about disordered loves.

So, let us begin with Moses. Moses, some of you know, was the guy who originally got the Ten Commandments. Quick survey, how many of you have heard of the Ten Commandments before? Yeah. Mostly all of you. How many of you right now in your head could recite the First Commandment without opening a Bible? Yeah, about a third of you. Okay. Let us practice together. On the count of three we are all going to say the first commandment out loud. Do not be shy. I am going to get you started. Ready? One, two, three. You shall have no -- Oh, interesting. I actually wanted to test you. Right? Because we all started the same way. You shall have no other gods, and then a bunch of you added a couple words at the end, 'before me'. And that is actually what the Scripture says. Now, open up to the original Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, and you would see these words, "You shall have no other gods," period? Nuh-uh. "You shall have no other gods before me." It is almost like God was speaking to his people, and he was pulling out this big God block, and he said, "I do not just want to be your god. I want to be the God who is before and above and more important and a priority always."

The very first commandment on the whole list is that we should have nothing that comes before God. Which actually reminds me a lot of this book. I grew up as a middle schooler, when I was not terrorizing my neighbors, studying the words of Martin Luther's "Small Catechism." You might be familiar with this book. It might be totally new to you. About 500 years ago, this German Christian named Martin Luther wrote "The Small Catechism" because he did not want kids to grow up in the Christian church just going through the motions. All right? You do not

want a single young believer just to rattle off the Ten Commandments or the Apostles' Creed and not get what it meant. And so, in the very first pages of Luther's catechism he starts to explain the Ten Commandments and on page one in this book he talks about the first commandment and then he asks the key classic Lutheran question, "What does this mean?" And have you heard his brilliant answer? In my opinion, one of the best things Martin Luther ever said. I will put it on the screen. He said, "We should fear love and trust in God above all things." And if Martin Luther was your pastor, he might ask you the question, not what do you love, but what do you love the most? And I bet in the quietness of his heart, God would wish and beg and plead that he would be at the top of your list because when you do this your heart and your life is insanely blessed.

And that is what the Psalms say. Did you know the Book of Psalms, the 150 songs in the Old Testament is the most loving place in the entire Bible? The Book of John, I think I mentioned this last week, uses the word love 39 times. It is the number one Book in the New Testament. The Book of Psalms uses the word love 161 times. Do you think John is full of love? Psalms has quadruple the love. And if you would read all those passages where the word love comes up, you would find that there is a word that almost always shows up right before love, and in my opinion, it is the reason why God is worthy of being your number one.

Let me show you just four of the 161 passages from the Psalms. Psalm 48 says "Within your temple, O God, we meditate on your unfailing love." Now, King David used the same phrase in Psalm 13. He says, "But I trust in your unfailing love." Moses wrote Psalm 90. He was not just a prophet but a poet. He said "Satisfy us in the morning, God, with your unfailing love." And then King David said again in Psalm 36 "How priceless is your unfailing love." If you ask God, "God, why would I do this? Why would I seek you first? Why would I give you the best of my time, my first thoughts? Why would you be my greatest passion?" His logical answer would be, "Because I am the only person in the whole universe whose love will never fail."

Friends, this is immensely practical. I wish I had an extra ten minutes that I could talk more about this. When anything else is above God, you are so close to heartbreak. Right? If your family, your girlfriend, your husband, your son is like the source of your life, they will fail you which means your life will fall to pieces. If you find your very identity in being an amazing student who is kept her 4.0 through all these years, or being the person at work who always gets the job, the promotion, the applause, like you are one slip, one moment, one pandemic, one something away from having your heart broken. But if God is right here, if you love these other things, but you love God the most, if you treasure your wife, but you love God even more than your wife, if you appreciate getting good grades, but God means so much more to you than the GPA little number on the report card, you will have so much peace and so much joy because you will have the one thing in your heart that can never fail. "Satisfy us in the morning," Moses said. A prayer I pray almost every morning, "with your unfailing love."

And Jesus knew that too. When his friends were worried about life and what they were going to eat and what they were going to wear and how they were going to live, Jesus spoke these words in Matthew 6. He said "Do not worry but seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." You and I are going to pursue all kinds of things in

this life, but Jesus who loves you more than you will ever comprehend, he says before anything comes on your to do list, seek first the kingdom and the righteousness of God. You might get six figures, and you might end up with a six pack, but none of those can give you the kind of peace that comes from putting God first.

So, put this teaching all together. You shall have no other gods before me. How priceless is your unfailing love? Seek first the kingdom. You come up with the big idea for today's message. If you are taking notes, write this down. God is our first love. God deserves to come first because his love is the only love that never fails.

So, where do we go from here? Before we say amen, before I send you out these doors, if you are watching at home before you log off online, or change the channel on your TV, I want to give you three quick takeaways for this message. If you are taking notes at home or here in church, I would love you to write these down. Here is the first takeaway: that you and I need to figure out our order. Or, to put it in a command form, you need to figure out your order. You cannot all steal my Lego's this week, but if you had to draw a little tower in your program, or on a notepad at home, just be honest with yourself at this stage in your life on what matters more than this and what matters more than that, and where does God fit into that whole picture?

My tip for you would be to think about the things you are excited to do and the things you are not, maybe the things that end up in your schedule and the things that do not, the to-dos that get done and the ones that kind of linger from week to week. Or, open your banking app and just see in the last month what you found money for and what you did not, and I think you are going to have a couple of light bulb moments. For some of you, those light bulb moments will be kind of heavy and convicting. Maybe you are going to realize that you found 40, 45, 50, 60 hours for work, and it is costing you some of the things that kind of matter more in the eyes of God. Figuring out the order of our loves makes so much sense when it comes to the order of our life. So, my first application for you is figure out your order.

Here is number two. Number two, figure out their order. This may take a little bit of detective work, but maybe think of the closest people that you do life with: your parents, your brother, sister, your boss, your closest friends. Can you figure out what their tower would look like? I want you to consider that because I think it would help us love people better. Right? When people have a different order than we do, it is not because they hate us or we hate them. It is just different.

I wish I would have known more about St. Augustine before I went to the hunting store and got that little bottle to pour on my neighbor's front door. He was not a bad person. He just loved his yard. He worked hard on it. The beauty of looking out his front door -- he probably did not hate kids. He just appreciated the hard work and did not want it to be ruined. That makes so much sense to me. And if you would have talked to the local kids who were used to playing on gravelly parking lots where the little pebbles get stuck in your wheels and the ball always jumps and you cannot shoot and explained it to him, I wonder if he would have been more patient with the kids outside. You know, figure out people's order and maybe, just maybe the hate will decrease, and the love will be greater.

If we are turning the caps lock on, if it takes just one person to bring it up at the next family gathering and we are not patient and we are not kind and we are easily angered and we go off about those people and we look down -- listen, that will sabotage the mission of Jesus and the entire purpose of our church. So, it is time for us to take a deep breath. To figure out what people are passionate about and to see if we cannot find some common ground to say, hey, you might love that more than I do, but I see why you do. Figure out your order and then figure out theirs.

And finally, number three and most importantly, thank God for his order. About 2,000 years ago, God came into our world in flesh and blood. His name was Jesus. And because Jesus was God, he had the right to be first, but if you know the gospel story, do you know what Jesus did? He humbled himself. He had the right to take care of his own health, to protect his own family, but instead, Jesus did what almost no one does. He did not put himself first. And it kind of struck me that if I take this block of Jesus, and I do not put it first, it kind of ends up looking like... in the biggest act of love in human history, Jesus rearranged the natural order. God humbled himself so that people like us could be exalted. He did not put himself first so that you and I could be first into the kingdom of heaven. He was willing to give up his right so that you and I would have the right to be called the children of God himself so we could be forgiven, so we could be cleansed, so we could be loved, so that the doors of heaven would be opened to us, so that we would not have to be afraid of the future but know that God adores us as his dear sons and daughters. Because Jesus did that. So, why would you do this and put God first in your everything? My answer would be because he started it, or as one of Jesus' closest friends once wrote, "We love because he loved us first." Let us pray.

Dear Jesus, thank you so much for your sacrifice and especially for your humility. We humans are wired to think of number one, number one, and you are so different, Lord. You humbled yourself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross, and therefore you are exalted to the highest place. You are worthy of our first love. You deserve it, God, and we want to give it, God.

I thank you today for your unfailing love. I thank you that you are a savior that does not just demand to be worshipped. You deserve it. You do not just command us to do it. You compel us by loving us, serving us, and forgiving us of all of our sins.

Now, I am asking you today, Holy Spirit, for some deep conversations. As we talk with our father in prayer this week and as we talk to one another after this message, help us to think deeply about what we love the most and what the implications of that order actually are.

And at the end of the day, God, help us to seek you first knowing that even though a thousand things might fail in the days to come, you never will; for that we praise you, for that we worship you, and for that we long to put you first.

We pray this all, Jesus, in your beautiful name, and God's people said amen.