

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was and who is to come. Amen.

¹ And God spoke all these words: ² “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. ³ “You shall have no other gods before me. ⁴ “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments. **This is God’s Word.**

Dear People of God,

God is love. John included that phrase in one of his letters (1 John 4:8) and people use that phrase to describe God. If you search for that phrase on the internet you will get 11 million references but what does it mean? As we consider the portion of scripture before us we want to take a look at, **“God’s Love for Us,”** and in response to that, **“Our Love for God.”**

I. The Children of Israel had left the captivity of Egypt and had been “on the road” for 3 months. They arrive at Mt. Sinai and set up camp in front of the mountain. Moses went up the mountain to talk to God and came back and told the people everything God had said to him. The people respond in a positive way, **“We will do everything the LORD has said,”** (Exodus 19:8). Then God directed Moses to prepare the people because in three days he was going to speak to them directly.

On the 3rd day, God covered the mountain in a cloud and there was thunder and lightning and a loud trumpet blast and the people gathered and God said, **“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”** We can’t even imagine what that must have been like – God speaking directly to his people. All those symbols of God’s glory must have been frightening as well as amazing and then God speaks and reminds them of his love for them.

He is the LORD – the gracious and merciful God; Jehovah – the God of promise and salvation. He is the one who rescued them from Egypt – the land where they were held in slavery and he adds a personal touch with the assurance, I am your God – not some distant God who is impersonal and doesn’t care but your personal God who is watching over you and who cares about you.

And then God begins with what we call the 10 Commandments. **“You shall have no other gods before me.”** He explains that this means we aren’t to have any idols or false gods or worship anything but the one true God. That’s pretty easy to understand but God includes this warning, **“For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me,”** God wants to be the only God in our lives. He doesn’t want us to give anyone or anything else the love and trust and honor that he deserves. And if we stray from this commandment it not only can have an impact on our lives, but it can lead our children and grandchildren away from the one true God as well.

This is serious stuff and we all would say I get it – I don't break this commandment – I only worship the one true God. Keeping the 1st commandment isn't a hard thing for me, but we don't realize the other things that tend to sneak into our lives and take over and before we know it, we have broken this commandment.

Think about it. What controls your life? What drives your decisions? Is it the kids or grandkids and their schedules? Is it your job that has taken over your life or maybe the desire for more money and a higher position? Is it sports or a hobby? All those things by themselves aren't bad – they could even be a blessing – unless we get obsessed with them – unless they become the number one priority in our lives – then we have problems. Why? Because they keep us away from the one true God and his Word. After a while we might begin to think we don't need God and we drift further and further away until we are listening to everything but God.

- a. An old fable that has been passed down for generations tells about an elderly man who was traveling with a boy and a donkey. As they walked through a village, the man was leading the donkey and the boy was walking behind. The townspeople said the old man was a **fool for not** riding, so to please them he climbed up on the animal's back.
- b. When they came to the next village, the people said the old man was cruel to let the child walk while he enjoyed the ride. So, to please them, he got off and set the boy on the animal's back and continued on his way.
- c. In the third village, people accused the child of being lazy for making the old man walk, and the suggestion was made that they both ride. So the man climbed on and they set off again.
- d. In the fourth village, the townspeople were indignant at the cruelty to the donkey because he was made to carry two people. The frustrated man was last seen carrying the donkey down the road.

We smile, but this story makes a good point. If we listen to the world and let it guide our lives we get pulled in every direction and we quickly become confused and frustrated. But if we listen to God he guides in one direction – to the cross where we find forgiveness through faith in his Son and to his Word where we find a lamp to guide us through life. God's Word isn't constantly changing and pulling us in many directions, rather it keeps us focused on one thing – God's love for us as seen in God's actions towards us and our response to God's love and guidance. Martin Luther summed up the best response as he wrote his explanation to the 1st commandment – that we should fear, love and trust in God above everything else.

II. To fear God is to honor him, to worship him and to praise him. Honor includes recognition – to recognize how great our God is and what he has done for us. During this season of Lent we focus on God's love and we want to honor and praise God for his love that comes to us through faith.

We also want to love God above everything else. That isn't so hard to understand either but we are only able to love because God loved us first. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians wrote, **“Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children ² and live a life of love, just as Christ**

loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (Ephesians 5:1-2) Paul takes us back to the cross of Lent to remind us of God’s great love for us and how that moves us to love as Christ loved us – without reservation.

And the love that God has for us leads us to trust him. I think that sometimes is the hardest because, by nature, we want to take care of ourselves. We like to think we don’t need anyone or anything – I can do it on my own. So it is hard to acknowledge that God is in control and at times there is nothing we can do but trust in him. Even then, we still want to tell God how to take care of our problems. But anytime we place our trust in ourselves and leave God out of the picture we have a misplaced trust. **“Trust the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding,”** (Proverbs 3:5) and you will not be disappointed.

Our God is an awesome God. There is no other God like him and he loves us personally! Every false god the world invents rules from a basis of fear and the followers of these false gods live in fear. But not so with Christians, rather than God’s vengeance you and I have God’s forgiveness. Rather than punishment in some unspeakable place our Lord freely provides us with heaven. It is fitting that the Lord begins his most important guidelines for believers with the powerful words, **“You shall have no other gods.”** By showing us his great love God gives us the motivation to fear, love and trust in him above all things.

We happily agree with the prophet Micah who writes about God, **“Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy.”** (Micah 7:18). Again, there is no other god like our God, our LORD loves to show mercy – a character trait that is even contrary to our own sinful nature. Understanding all this, can we do any less than to fear, love and trust in the only true God above all things? Amen.