

Back to Basics, Part 1: Who is God?

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

2 February, 2025

Children's Talk: How to Love God

The Word has many rules in it. It actually has hundreds of rules! With so many rules it can be easy to lose track of them all. So someone once asked Jesus what the most important rule was. Of all those many rules, which was the one that was most important to keep. I wonder how you would answer that question? Here is what Jesus said:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:35-40)

The most important rule is to love the Lord as much as you can.

If we are going to keep this rule, we need to know who God is. You can't love someone very well if you don't know them! So let's think of all the things we know about the Lord, as we look at one picture of Him. What do we know about the Lord?

Knowing the Lord is the first step in loving Him. The second step is harder in some ways. Jesus gave us a clue as to how to love the Lord. If you remember the first question, it was what is the most important rule. But Jesus actually mentioned two rules. After loving the Lord, the second rule is loving other people. And in fact, these two rules are the same: the best way to love the Lord is by loving the people He loves; and that means everyone!

So how can we love other people? What are some of the things we can do to show people that we love them? When we do all of those things, and listen to what the Lord says about loving people and doing what is right, that is also how we love the Lord Himself.

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Over the next four weeks we are going to be getting back to basics; the basics of what the New Church is all about. In order to do that we need to focus in on the most fundamental ideas, the most important ideas, the ideas that filter into and shape everything else. That can be complicated. The overarching faith of a church is a complex and at times confusing thing to tackle. I would guess that if we asked everyone in this room what the most important thing about the New Church was to you, we would get many answers. This was a question that people put to Jesus, and His answer will guide how we start this series of going back to basics:

Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:35-40)

The first and foremost commandment is to Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. Nothing matters more than that. So that is where we will start this series. With God: who He is and what He is like.

Before I even get to who God is from a New Church point of view though, I want to give some thought to why this is the answer Jesus gave. Why is loving God with everything you've got more important than anything else? More important even than loving the neighbour? The Teaching of the New Church explain how this starting point shapes everything that follows when it comes to faith:

Having thus treated of the Triune God, it is necessary to treat also of the Divine trinity, which is known and yet unknown in the Christian world; for only through this can a right idea of God be acquired; and a right idea of God in the church is like the sanctuary and altar in a temple, or like the crown upon the head and the sceptre in the hand of a king on his throne; for on a right idea of God the whole body of theology hangs, like a chain on its first link; and if you

will believe it, everyone is allotted his place in the heavens in accordance with his idea of God. (*True Christian Religion* §163)

A right idea of God is like the first link in a chain. I have here a chain. And it's a fairly strong chain. I certainly can't pull it apart with my bare hands. But if the first link is weak, it does not matter how strong the rest of the chain is. It could be a thousand times stronger than this one; and yet it would still all fall to the ground if the first link is weak. Our idea of God shapes everything else; and if it is a damaging or destructive idea of God, it will damage and destroy our faith.

Take for instance a view of God that says He is just; and specifically, that His need for justice requires that appropriate punishment be doled out for every sin that a person commits. This is indeed one conception of God that exists out there in the Christian world. The person who holds this belief may also believe in mercy, and love for the neighbour, and forgiveness; but their relationship with punishment and guilt will be tainted by who they think God is. It will affect their own self-worth and feelings of shame when they do wrong; it will creep into how they view other people when they sin and get away with it. Because God is by definition good, and God demands retribution to atone for sin, then retribution must itself be good. That's not to say that this person themselves will be vengeful in practice. But their view of God will allow for that attitude to creep into their thoughts and feelings. Our view of God is intimately tied up with everything we believe about ourselves, other people, and how to live a good life.

So what is a "right" idea of God? Who is this God that we are supposed to love? It's trite to say that "God is Love," but it is also perhaps the truest thing that can be said about God. He is Love. And that love is not limited to any one group of people. His Love extends to all and yearns to pull all into His loving embrace, to

bring them as close to Himself as is possible. This love is said in the Teachings of the New Church to be made up of three essential things:

The essence of God's love consists of three things, namely, to love others outside of Himself, to desire to be one with them, and from Himself to render them blessed. (*True Christian Religion* §43)

To love others outside of Himself is the entire reason for our existence. The human race, and you personally, were created so that God could love someone other than Himself. To be one with us is God's constant wish: to have us as close as possible to Himself, and to have His love be a constant presence in our lives, with no separation between us. And through that presence, His only goal is that we should be blessed and happy, which is the driving factor in every last little thing that He teaches us and tells us, and is why He has heaven in store for us, to live there, to eternity, in a joy that is unimaginable to us on Earth now.

These three facts about God's love are so crucial for our understanding of who He is. Just remembering these three things could fundamentally change not just our relationship with Him, but with ourselves and others, and the way we choose to live. If you take nothing else away from this sermon, I hope it's to remember these three things, and so I thought maybe we could do a few hand motions to help us remember. Start with hands over the heart, because we are talking about God's love. First extend the hands outward: God's love needs people to love; you, and everyone you meet, was created to be loved by God. Second, put your hands together, interlocking your fingers: God wants to be connected to you, to be so connected that you and He are one; He doesn't want to love people from afar, He wants to be intimately involved in their lives; Third, lift your hands upward, palms up: He wants to make us happy; everything that God does, every commandment, every teaching, every single movement of Providence, is motivated by making people happy.

I want to shift gears now though and give thought to how God presents Himself to us. We have been talking about the essence of God, the core of His being, which is a bit abstract. God is not just a concept or an idea or a force of nature. He is a person who we can have a personal relationship with. This is why in the Word we encounter the person of God, specifically Jesus Christ. And here is where things can get a bit muddled. Who is God? The Father? The Son? Jehovah? Jesus? I'll share just one of the many passages that describes Jesus talking to His Father as if to a separate entity. I've picked this passage because it touches on the essence of God, i.e. wanting to be one with us and wanting to make us happy:

I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.

And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them." (John 17:20-23, 26)

Ok, there's a lot going on here. But pretty clearly Jesus is talking to a separate being, the Father, and yet at the exact same time talking about their oneness. So are they separate? The Teachings of the New Church say no: Jesus and the Father are one being, one person, one individual. Why then are they spoken of as separate? There is actually a very good reason: it's the only way we can learn and have a true, full picture of who God is. The Word is written this way because it's the only way to start to get that right idea of God that is so important:

In the sense of the letter [that is, in the literal meaning of the Bible] here and elsewhere the appearance is that another, who is higher, is meant by "Jehovah;" but the sense of the letter is such as to separate what the internal sense unites; and this for the reason that the man who is to be instructed from the sense of the letter cannot have an idea of a one, unless he first has an idea of more than one; for a one with man is formed from many; or what is the same, from successive things is formed that which is simultaneous. (*Secrets of Heaven* §3035)

What this passage is saying is that if we started with the idea of an omnipotent God who ruled the universe, who at the same time is profoundly involved in our individuals lives and cares for us as if we were His personal friends, we wouldn't cope with it. It doesn't track in our minds. It's really hard to think of a single individual who is both so vast as to govern the universe and yet so personal as to care about the details of our lives. So the Word has two ways of talking about God: as the almighty, omnipotent Father who rules the Universe; and as His Son, who came down to live a human life and have a personal relationship with people.

The work of faith is to start to understand and experience both concepts of God together as one and the same person. We see this process reflected even in the disciples.

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; and from now on you know Him and have seen Him."
Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us."
Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? (John 14:6-10)

The struggle the disciples had is the same one that we have in understanding God. They got that God was all powerful; and they knew first hand that in Jesus they had a personal, deep relationship. Their trouble was that as separate being, something was missing. God would forever remain a far distant figure, an inscrutable force of nature; and Jesus would forever be nothing more than a friend; a good friend, yes, and an inspiring one, but still just one more person they could relate to.

But Jesus pushed them to see deeper. Something shifts when we are able to pull these two ideas together. We can begin to see that in building a personal relationship with Jesus, we are at the same time coming to know the God of the universe. They are one and the same. The power that moves the sun and the stars

and oversees the order of the universe, that created the oceans and the mountains and all things on Earth, is the same one that nudges your heart to be kind to your neighbour, that places in your mind the idea to do the right thing, that guides you to be useful and helpful to the people around you.