I want to take you back to 1989 – I was 28 years old and my daughter, Danielle, was 3. That was the year the Disney animated movie “The Little Mermaid” came to the theater. My daughter loved that movie. So, of course, as soon as the videotape came out, we just had to buy it. I must have watched that movie with my daughter close to 200 times. She knew all the songs and sang them constantly. She loved that movie so much, she now has a large mermaid tattoo on her right thigh. She’s 30 now, but the memories of watching that movie together will last a lifetime. As for me, there was one moment in that movie that really struck a chord. I would always get a lump in my throat and would be on the verge of tears. Instead of describing it, I have a short clip of that moment. (show video)

Even though my children are adults now, it’s still important for me to hear them tell me that they love me. When we talk on the phone, we almost always end with an expression of love – there’s even been times when it’s not said that I felt the need to call them right back and let them know how much I love them. No specific reason, it’s just important to me that they know.

It hasn’t always been that way for me. I don’t know about you, but when I was growing up, my family didn’t express our love verbally. I really don’t remember a time when I was young that my parents told me that they loved me. Don’t get me wrong, they were great parents and there was no doubt that they loved me, I could tell that by the way they treated me. They expressed their love in other ways.

But, back in my junior year of high school, my brother and I were at youth group one Sunday evening. As we were waiting to be picked up, one of our aunts came to the church and told us that she was taking us to the hospital. Our father didn’t feel well, so our mother drove him to the emergency room. It turned out he was having a heart attack. Thankfully they caught it in time and the damage was minimal. On our way to the hospital, I could not help thinking about the fact that I couldn’t remember the last time I told my father I loved him. It upset me to think that he could have passed away, never hearing those words come from my mouth. I decided to tell him once we got into the room. Sounds easy, right? I was a nervous wreck. My heart was pounding in my chest and my stomach was a little queasy. When I finally got the chance, however, I looked at my father and said – “Dad, I want you to know that I love you”. And he said “Son, I love you too”. Wow . . . that felt great!

We really didn’t say it much after that, but as I got older and started having my own children, I began to end each phone conversation and each visit with my father with an expression of love. I know my father loves me, there were many ways he has shown it over the years. Telling him I love him is just one way I can show him my love in return.

The bible says “we should love the Lord, our God, our Heavenly Father, with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind. And, during this Lenten season and hearing Pastor Amy’s sermon series titled “Dare You To Love”, I’ve been overwhelmed by this thought – “What does it really look like to love God?” I tell God I love Him in my prayers, but is that enough? There’s got to be more to it than that. And, more importantly, are we showing Him the love he truly deserves?

So, what does loving God really look like?

First, Loving God begins with a decision. Fact is we cannot truly LOVE God until we KNOW Him and that KNOWLEDGE begins with His Word. When we come to know God and we begin to understand his word, something miraculous happens. We become transformed, dramatically changed forever. When we accept God’s gift of eternal life through Christ, He gives us His Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God then dwells within us and begins to produce the traits of God, the first of which is love. God Himself enables us to love Him as He deserves to be loved. Today’s scripture reading says: Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

Now, I’m not going to ask people to come forward, to stand where you are or raise your hands if you want to accept Jesus in your heart today, but I do want to say this – I can’t assume that everyone sitting in this sanctuary has already made this decision. There may be someone here who is still seeking. If you haven’t made this decision, if you haven’t accepted Christ into your heart, if you haven’t accepted God’s gift of eternal life through His Son, I would encourage you to talk to someone. Talk to someone you trust and begin that journey of acceptance. There is no greater decision you can make in this life.

Loving God begins with a decision and it leads to a transformed life filled with great joy.

Secondly, to love God is to worship and praise Him. Jesus stated as He was being tempted in the wilderness, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only'”.

Hebrews 12:28 says “therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe”

The Psalms are full of expressions of praise. Psalm 67 says . . .

May the peoples praise you, God; may all the peoples praise you.

May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you rule the peoples with equity and guide the nations of the earth.
May the peoples praise you, God; may all the peoples praise you.

Can worship and praise happen outside of the church? Absolutely – if we love God, we should worship & praise Him in all aspects of our lives. Many of you know that I enjoy fishing. When I am on my boat, I will often take a moment to praise God and thank Him for the beauty of the day, the awesomeness of his creation, and the love that He has shown me through His son. I will often listen to Christian music while on my boat and turn the experience into a time of worship.

However, with that said, I can’t think of any better way to worship and praise our loving God then to come together as a community of believers, singing songs together, lifting up our prayers and hearing the teaching of Christ and sharing the love of God.

Thirdly, to love God is to put Him first. It’s not just a commandment, it should be a life style. It should be an undivided love. God should be our first priority. If we love God with *all* our hearts, souls, minds, and strength, then we won’t allow other things to crowd in.

Wow, I made that sound easy, didn’t I? But, as we strive to put Him first, we need to overcome a few obstacles:

One obstacle to loving God and putting Him first is love of this world’s sinful ways. Jesus made it clear, we cannot serve two masters, and neither can we love God and the world at the same time. 1 John 2:15 says “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them”. For those who believe, we continually need to be reminded of this, especially when we begin to lose focus on what really matters.

I worry about our young people today. Statistics show that Millenials, ages 18 – 35, are leaving the church in droves. It just seems to me that there are more obstacles for them to overcome and I wonder; are we really doing our part to help them overcome these obstacles? The internet and social media has been given much credit for this change, but I think we have to ask ourselves, “how affective have we been at engaging with this generation and sharing with them the love of God?” When they see us, do they know what that love looks like?

Which brings me to another obstacle to loving God, our minds. Our minds continually set themselves up against the knowledge of God and challenge the faith that has made its home within our spirit. Doubt, anger, misunderstanding, and false doctrine can all rob us of life’s highest pleasure, intimacy with God. It saddens me to see people come and go from the church because they are allowing these obstacles to keep them from having an intimate relationship with God.

However, these obstacles can be overcome – through repentance and a determination to seek God above all else. In order to truly love God, we must stop insisting that God explain Himself to our satisfaction. We have to let go of our pride and our right to approve of His ways and allow Him to be God in our lives. When we humbly recognize that He alone is worthy of our love and worship, we can abandon ourselves to loving Him for who He is.

There’s a series on YouTube called “I am Second” – where athletes, actors or musicians sit in front of the camera and share how God is first in their life. They describe the obstacles and challenges they had to overcome and how their lives have changed when God became first and they became second. Some very powerful stories, some I’ve share with the Youth in helping them understand the impact of putting God first will have on their life.

Finally, to love God is to obey Him. Jesus tells us, “If you love me you will obey what I command”. However, this is not a matter of merely following rules and registering good deeds. It is about having God’s love written indelibly on our hearts. And, it is natural for us to want to please those we love.

(Story of getting home after curfew where my brother and I weren’t punished, but was shown “Grace” by our father.)

At that moment, we realized how much our father loved us. And something changed. We no longer wanted to disappoint our father and we tried our best to live up to his expectations. Yes, we failed, but our desire to please him was and still is strong to this day.

When we love God, we want to please Him and obey His commands eagerly. This is manifested in understanding and following His command to “love one another”. When we chose to love those around us, even our enemies, we show God how much we love Him. The grace of God should reflect in the way we treat others, in what we say to them, in the way we serve them, and in our desire not to judge, but to love.

God loves you, unconditionally. So, let us return that love by first accepting His gift of eternal life through His son, Jesus Christ; by worshiping and praising Him in all areas of our life; by putting Him first and striving to overcome any obstacles that keep us from His love; and by obeying His commands, desiring to please Him and loving one another.

Let us pray – Lord, thank you for loving us, loving us so much that you gave us your Son, who was willing to die on the cross so that we may be saved and have eternal life. Lord, we praise you for all you have done in our lives and we ask that you help us to overcome any obstacles that may be keeping us from loving you as you deserved to be loved. Help us to follow your commandments and the teachings of your Son. And, Lord, help us to love others and serve those around us for your glory. It is through your son, Jesus Christ, that I pray. Amen.