

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question:

"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." Matthew 22:34-40 NIV

Loving God with all we can offer (▲), and loving others the way we love ourselves (▶), summarizes all of scripture according to Christ. This, then, was and is the running belief statement for the Son of God, through which He passed all his ministry, thought and speech about the Kingdom. What follows are significant theological subjects which, when understood through the same, tandem filters of love of God and love of others, shape what we believe and how we seek to live as a community of Christ followers. The Biblical references provided by no means exhaustively prove any point or settle any discussions. They are provided simply for the reader to further investigate a sample of the specific Biblical instances that shape the overall values listed below.

LOVE GOD, LOVE PEOPLE

▲GOD

GOD is an English word. It can be a title given to any number of things a human submits him or herself to. But the Scriptures insist from cover to cover that there is but one true God, one true Master and Lord whose name is "I am" and who is over and above all other gods, systems and ideas. Unlike the countless number of divine hierarchies and moody, impersonal deities that have been conjured up and chiseled out through time, the God of the Bible - the great, creative, Holy Spirit - is celebrated as the only and Ultimate Reality. The intimately present, patient, compassionate and grace-filled Father of all that is. Our God is one of exodus and rebirth. The God of justice and mercy. The God of love, who *is* love. And it's this God that invites us all, with flawless impartiality, to disbelieve the mythical images of the old, bearded man in the sky, and to be embraced by his ever moving, life-giving Spirit that blows like a quiet wind through our every moment.

Genesis 1:1, 1:26-27, Isaiah 46, 1 John 4:8-9, John 3:8, John 4:24; Deut 7:9; Psalm 103; John 14:8-10; John 10:25-30; Psalm 116:5; Genesis 15:1; Ephesians 2:4-5; Psalm 86:15; Deut 6:4-8; Psalm 18; Heb 12:29; Isaiah 44:6-8; Zephaniah 3:17; Job 38; Psalm 144:2; Micah 6:8; 1 John 4:16; Isaiah 61:1-2; Psalm 47; Psalm 146:7-10; Psalm 18:2; Psalm 93; Psalm 27:1; Isaiah 42:8

▶ PEOPLE

PEOPLE are made in the image of the one true God of the universe. In fact, they are made uniquely in the image of their Creator. Animals, important as they are and though made from the same elements, do not carry the image, or the essential nature, of their Creator. Every human carries a unique worth because people collectively bear the character qualities of our God. So, before a person completes a single task, before their first feat is achieved, their first moral decision is made, their first temptation is resisted; that person has immeasurable worth. Before a person earns a dime, a degree or any position or award, they already have value beyond society's most generous estimates. But, even more significantly, this value is not diminished when tasks remain incomplete, temptations are surrendered to, earnings are absent and overall behaviors seem to bring more darkness than light. God treasuring people isn't based on what they have or have not accomplished or gotten right. What parent could be respected for only loving her child based on the child's utility or performance? Our Father, our good and perfect *dad* of the heavens, commands what seems unnatural for those of us who see people as having value based on their production-value. And that command is this: love one another. Regardless of a person's background, ability to reciprocate that love or how they rate on any scale we apply, the Father of all of us commands that we love His children. Our siblings. All of them. They're always worth it.

Genesis 1:26-27, 2:7; Matthew 5:43-48, 7:12; Romans 5:6-8; 1 John 7-12; Psalm 139:1-16; Ephesians 2:8-10; Philippians 2:1-5; I John 4:7-8; John 13:35; Ephesians 3:6; Romans 8:17; Ephesians 2:12-19; Ephesians 5:1; Jeremiah 1:5; Psalm 8; Matthew 6:26

THE TRINITY

▶ THE TRINITY is a limited human mind's way of explaining to itself the unlimited mystery of God. God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. From the very beginning of the Bible, God is explained as strictly one, and yet mysteriously several. The Hebrew word translated God is "Elohim"; a *plural* term used to refer to a single God. He is a corporate oneness. A unified and composite singularity. Belief in the Trinity isn't supposed to be an intellectual qualification for faith. It's meant to be a comparatively simplistic way of assisting our small minds in grasping the incomprehensibly manifold oneness of our Creator. We are taught by the mystery of Trinity that within God himself, there is shared love, unity and harmony. At the same time, there is universal and exclusive reign by One. We affirm that God is simultaneously Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and yet fully anticipate discovering that God is far more than our comprehension of any one of those three titles.

▶ To be made in the image of a Trinity isn't possible for just one person. This *Corporate-Oneness-God* made humans *in His image*. How can one man or woman look like a Trinity? Contrary to westernized, individualistic thought, this isn't about "me" getting right with "Him" as much as it's about us all becoming the unified body of the Son, loved and forgiven by the Father while guided and permeated by the Spirit. More directly, this is

about human beings, learning from their Creator, how to be the whole and beautiful human beings they were intended to be from the beginning. Pursuing Christ isn't a bunch of disconnected people on isolated spiritual quests looking primarily for personal fulfillment. It's vastly more. All that we do, as reinforced by the insistent theme of the scriptures, is done in community, in mutual submission and in the confident embrace of our God-given wiring: we were made in the image of Love to love. We were made to behave in an always-outwardly-pouring, others-centered oneness just as our Creator, The "Trinity", does and is. Our community seeks to submit itself to the unity of the Holy Spirit, holding His value of oneness in the highest regard. As a result, all that we do as a community will be done with deferred preference, harmony and love between similar and dissimilar people and views in mind.

Matthew 28:19; John 10:25-30; John 17; Matthew 3:16-17; 1 John 5:6-11; Acts 2:32-33; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Ephesians 2:18; 1 John 5:20; Genesis 1:26; Genesis 3:22; Hebrews 1:1-4; John 14:25-26; Acts 16:6-10; John 16:13-14; Jude 20-21

JESUS

▲ JESUS is what the invisible Father of the Universe looks like when He sits across the table from you. The Christ reveals the heart, character and will of the eternal Creator. Jesus is Yahweh, Elohim, The Great I Am, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in flesh, or in-*carn*-ated. Jesus shows us the Unseen, because what was meant to be an intimate connection between Creator and created was obscured by sin; our rebellious choice(s) for lost closeness with Him. Human rebellion broke our communion with a perfect God. Our distrust in our Father, our rejection of His rule and our self-obsession in the midst of His self-sacrificial love marred the beauty He intended for our lives. And no amount of sincere wishing or working on our part can make this cosmic fracture go away. So God did what only God could do; stepped into the void as Jesus, the God-man, the divine intersection of Maker and made to reestablish us to Himself, reconciling all things. More than an inspiring sage, Jesus is the human manifestation of God's self-emptying perfection given for all to live with Him forever. He's the long-awaited Messiah and Savior, who insists that He is the way, the truth and the life. In this, Jesus claims exclusivity, but not out of a desire to make a competitive claim among other religions. Our loving Savior observes that every other attempt to approach God is ultimately another misguided path away from Him. Followers of Jesus are doing more than appreciating a winning argument or agreeing with a wise teacher. They are seeking to enjoy communion, through His mystical mediation, with the God of the Universe. At the beginning, middle and end of all we endeavor to do and discuss and uphold is the person of Jesus Christ, or we will not give it any attention at all.

▶ You cannot truly worship Jesus with hate, disgust or apathy toward other human beings. You cannot be fully in submission to the all-encompassing love of Christ while withholding love from any person or group, regardless of what they deserve, do, don't do, are, or are not. To love Christ, to trust and follow Him, demands that you strive to give the same love and grace we freely receive from Him, to others. Jesus presents to us the scandalous realization that the Lord of the Universe not only celebrates the good

and the moral, but also stoops to wash a sinners feet, touch the untouchable, befriend the criminal and the misbehaving and shatters our notion that only those who have it all together can be loved. All are welcome to Jesus, therefore all are welcome to Jesus' followers. Only those who naively seek to protect Jesus from the impurities of reality will find themselves at odds with this invitation. As we venture out a few steps into our neighborhoods, or many steps around the globe, we do so with and for the Name of Jesus Christ, the Savior, Lover and King of all humanity.

John 1:1-18; John 10:10; 1 Tim 2:5; Genesis 3:14-15; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 13:8; Hebrews 1:1-4; Philippians 2:5-11; John 10:25-30; Isaiah 9:6-7; I Corinthians 12:27; Acts 2:36; Galatians 3:26-29; Colossians 1:11-23; Colossians 2:9; Isaiah 53:1-10; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 1-2; John 14:1-16; John 15; John 18:1-6

CHURCH

▲ CHURCH can be a word that brings up warm thoughts of childhood, certain architecture, good vibes, emotional baggage and even positions of belief and politics. But for God, according to the scriptures, it brings a swell of love like a dad gets when he looks at his children, or a wave of pride much like a groom gets when he sees his bride. God loves all people, but the church represents those who in some measure have responded to that love in their pursuit of Jesus Christ. The church gets to be the church not because of what she has accomplished, but because of to Whom she willingly belongs. Anyone may comprise His church, as anyone can call on and carry His name. Anyone can immerse themselves into His blessed community to carry out His blessed revolution. And when she is wholly surrendered to the heart of her God, no one, and nothing, can prevail against her. The church isn't in the business of saving or judging or trying to position herself for clout or power. In fact, the church isn't a business at all. She is a group of Kingdom seeking, changed change-agents. A bride seeking the heart of her groom. A child turned toward his father. A body mobilized in response to its Mind. The church is a people who live in celebration of the fact that access has been granted solely on the merits of Christ, to the throne of the great King and to the depths of His grace.

▶ CHURCH wasn't ever meant to bring to mind a building, a weekend time-slot, a political view or even a list of belief statements to which we adhere. It was supposed to call to mind a people and a way. Church should be synonymous with a raw, authentic and compelling people, and their well-imitated, well-exalted Savior. The church is not merely a force for policing ethics in the world, nor is it an escape-hatch from reality. She was meant and inspired to help a broken humanity begin to entertain that maybe God isn't totally invisible after all. That just maybe, in the midst of darkness, hopelessness and the errant belief (one that some parts of religion so often reinforce) that at the center of the universe there is nothing but enraged condemnation; there is instead the warm, loving embrace of a father, a mother, brothers, sisters and friends. Being part of this church means you somehow accept the challenge to think and act and love deeply. That

you wish to link arms with others to put God on display in our lives, and that you refuse to let your humanity be an excuse any longer for selfish foolishness. Instead, with others on the journey, we hand our humanity over incrementally to its Creator in trust and worship, as well as to others in self-sacrificial love.

Romans 9:25-26; Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 3:9; 1 Corinthians 12:12-26; Ephesians 4:15-16; Hebrews 12:22-23; I Peter 2:4-5; Colossians 1:17-20; Matthew 5:13-16; Matthew 16:13-18; Colossians 3:14-16; I Peter 2:9; Ephesians 4:4-6; Ephesians 2:19-22; Romans 12:9-21; Revelation 21:1-5

THE GOSPEL

▲ The Gospel, or Good News, is a message of hope and goodness to run to, versus a proposal about avoiding consequences. It's about access. The Good News, according to Jesus, is that what was closed because of our actions has now been swung open because of His. Jesus' gospel proclamation was that the Kingdom of God, His reign and realized authority, was now a livable reality because of His life, death and resurrection. Following rules could not grant us entrance into the presence of God. Self-evaluating via biased comparison, or erroneously appraising our own good-to-bad ratio on a sliding scale would never give us the right to approach our perfect God. Nothing on our end could account for the chasm our rebellious lives had dug. That's why the news is good; what was impossible on *our* merits is now possible on *His*. We are forgiven. The deep ache of every human being to commune with his or her Creator is now answered alone in the divine arbitrator, Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

▶ Sharing the Gospel, or evangelism, is the demonstration of one's transformed life more than it is some pitched product or transfer of information. It's an invitation to live a new and radically different way that only bears weight when the invitee observes the way being lived by the inviter. It's not the tired, fear-based ultimatums about postmortem reality, but an offer to live in trust of the Giver of life now, in every sense and category of life, forever. This good news is for our marriages, our parenting and role as children, our perception of our pasts and futures, our addictions, our careers, our daily and weekly rhythms, our unforgiving hearts, our greed, our preoccupations with trivial desires, our possessions and our lack, and for every interaction we will ever have. The way of Jesus and His limitless resources for our very real, moment-to-moment life is rooted in the very good news that God is here, and He wants to guide us as we live our lives together under His loving rule. Therefore, we may either take heart or be alarmed by the fact that our lives are always evangelizing - always sharing what we think is the best news in the Universe, regardless of what we say.

Matthew 28:16-20; Romans 10:9-15; I Peter 2:12; Matthew 6:33; Acts 13:32-34; Luke 2:25-32; Proverbs 15:30-33; Isaiah 61; Romans 1:2-5; Mark 1:14-15; Matthew 4:23; 1 Timothy 2:5; I Corinthians 15:3-6; Romans 8:1-2; Romans 1:16-17; Acts 10:36; Romans 5; 1 Corinthians 5:17-21; Romans 7:21-25

BAPTISM

▲ BAPTISM reflects a documentable step in one's surrender to God. It's not a final step in a well-navigated process that positions a person to earn it. It's often an early step, one that represents a budding faith. It's a mysterious action taken by both created and Creator that signifies a whole new chapter of life being lived in confidence of Christ and His way. The water itself does not save, nor does any other action taken or level of understanding on our part. Yet somehow, when someone plunges his or her whole self into the waters of baptism, it makes the mysteriousness of a growing, internal faith seem suddenly measurable to the individual. The intangible sense of a new trust and submission to God finds substance in being submerged into the water. What was hard to describe or make seem reasonable can now be firmly pointed to on a calendar as the day the pursuit of God multiplied and life shifted. And it's the faith that brings one to this day that God enthusiastically rewards with the gift of His spirit, and life in His Kingdom of grace, forgiveness and transformative love.

➤ Baptism's beauty isn't restricted to an individual's surrender to God, as it is also his or her immersion into the community. Our faith is to be lived out in mutual submission and love, and in the waters of baptism we are dually thrust into deep waters with God, as well as with our brothers and sisters with whom we will be sharing the journey. God gives His spirit communally. Collectively, we are His temple. Collectively, He dwells within us. Though no one man or woman lacks access to God's presence in Christ, no one man or woman serves as an individual possessor of God's presence. He dwells in our unity. All He wants for us is summarized in love of Him and one another. Therefore our faith is communal, and every expression of it, such as with baptism, upholds this beautiful truth. Baptism not only signifies the beginning of a new level of closeness with the Creator, but a new, inspired level of closeness with those we journey with - a level not possible without the Creator of love and community present within it. As one is immersed into God, he is immersed simultaneously into the community. We believe one person's baptism is a step we take together. It's a step connected to the promise of God's communally carried Spirit, to the realized cleansing of forgiveness and to the transformation Christ makes available in turning back to Him.

Acts 2:38-39; Acts 19:4; Ephesians 4:5-6; Acts 8:26-40; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Mark 1:9-13; Romans 6:4-10; Colossians 2:12; Galatians 3:27; I Peter 3:21; Matthew 28:18-20

THE BIBLE

▲ The Bible is a collection of both inspired and inspiring stories, prayers, commands, proverbs and songs that, together, help us hear the very voice of God. These Holy Scriptures provide guidance for the humble. They serve as the chief source of wisdom about our God and the life He desires for the searching. The Spirit of God channels encouragement and challenge, relief and disruption, comfort and discipline all through the same book. Though the Bible isn't a static how-to manual, it provides a baseline for a life of faith that no personal experience of God and His way will contradict. It helps us

appreciate our life lived in the seeming mundane of the day-to-day, as well as reminds us throughout its pages that there is a grand narrative of which we are forever part. It tells us plainly what has gone wrong in the human heart. It whispers enigmas to us about things too important to grasp in a cursory read. The text seems at once to be entirely self-sufficient in what it holds for us, while yet requiring at least a basic understanding of the numerous socio-economical, literary, cultural, linguistic, traditional, political and religious contexts from which it was written. It comes to us through many centuries of pondering and prayer, study and discovery. The Bible carries within itself an inanimate humility, in that it never points to itself as the goal of human faith. Its power to inspire through the ages is rooted in its dutiful pointing away from itself to He whom inspired it. We come to the text because we desire deeply to run to the One behind it.

▶ The Bible, for most of its history, was a communally experienced collection of writings. Read mostly in groups, or by one to a group, the text reinforces over and over that the faith described within it is to be exercised by brothers and sisters in harmonious action. More than a mere rule book for use in highlighting other's deficits, or a to-do list for one to accomplish prior to dying, the Bible is a sacred, overarching narrative that invites both the scholar and the uninitiated to pour through and discover together the very heart of God. It's meant to provide diligent studiers immediately rewarding insights, as well as new questions to discuss with fellow followers over the course of a couple dozen lunches. This book is studied by individuals successfully every day, yet is best read aloud, together. But the true value of the scriptures is found in *doing* what is written. That friends would discuss, meditate and then begin to live is how those who trust God best honor the Holy Bible. Total comprehension is not mandated or required to begin to live our role in the story. Therefore, as a community, we will seek to be animated by the message of the scriptures as much as we seek to be informed by it. This is what God is waiting to see in Bible-believing followers of Christ. This is what the world is waiting to see in Bible-believing followers of Christ.

Matthew 22:34-40; Psalm 119:1-11; Psalm 119:105; 2 Tim 3:16-17; John 21:25; 2 Peter 1:12-21; Hebrews 4:12; John 1; John 5:38

COMMUNION

▲ Communion, the eating and drinking of the bread and the cup, is an ancient celebration of Christ's gift to sinful, broken humanity; Himself. As Christ stepped on our behalf into the void we had created, dying a criminal's death, a cosmic reconciliation between Maker and made was realized. Forgiveness of debt, emancipation of slaves, rescue of the lost and covering for shame; this and more Jesus provided in His substitutionary death on a Roman Crucifix. The bread calls to mind His body, which absorbed evil for us, His friends. The cup of grape juice or wine, the result of crushing, reminds us who drink that a new covenant of forgiveness and redemption was offered when His blood was spilled. No longer strictly a reminder of the Passover of the Jews and subsequent Exodus of Israel, the bread and cup now remind us that Jesus' death and resurrection finalize our freedom from sin and death, forever. Communion is a time

of offering to Christ the thanks, the awe and the reflection He is due for cancelling in Himself that which could have never been otherwise paid.

➤ Communion in the scriptures is always seen as having taken place in the context of a larger, group meal, rather than strictly within the confines of a solemn, individual experience. This does not negate quiet, personal reflection. It does, however, reopen communion for us as a time between unified friends to share and celebrate how salvation is playing itself out in our families, careers, thoughts, hopes and fears. The elements represent the body and blood of a universally accessible Christ, and therefore are both administered and consumed, irrespective of status, position, gender or maturity among those who surrender to Him. Eating this meal of remembrance with those that have hurt, or have been hurt, mends relational fractures. It reminds the heart backward so that it can properly hope forward. This simple act of worship refocuses the heart away from self, away from personally experienced disappointments or ego inflating successes, and back on to the origin of life, of love and of interpersonal peace; the crucified Jesus.

1 Corinthians 11:17-34; Matthew 26:26-29; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17; Luke 22:14-20; Acts 2:42-47; John 6:53-54; John 11; Acts 27:35; Mark 14:22-25

SPIRITUAL GIFTS

▲ Spiritual gifts are exactly that. Gifts. They come from our Father, because He wants to give them. They are not rewards due us for work we have completed, or a deposit made by Him for something we have to later settle. God gives gifts for us to have to use for purposes more beautiful than we can imagine. When we surrender ourselves to Him, His Kingdom and His way, He gives us what we need to work out the role we accept. Some gifts are new found abilities. Some gifts are newfound uses for old abilities. Some gifts seem like a spectacle compared to other gifts and their seeming blandness. Some gifts only work in concert with others, while others seem to position one person to bless a group. Regardless of the assumed value we give what He's given, our God has responded to each of our expressions of faith with spiritual gifts that elevate what He has already made to be even more remarkable replications of Christ.

➤ Spiritual gifts are given to be further given. God does not seem to be on record as giving one a gift that's not intended to be used for the benefit of another. His Kingdom is an others-first realm, and therefore His gifts are not likely to terminate in just one person. The gift of leadership blesses those led. Teaching blesses students. The gift of prophecy ultimately blesses those who are called back into God's ways. The gift of languages or tongues connects through cross-cultural communication. The gift of resources or resource generation is to fund and fuel the work of bringing light into darkness. The gift of compassion hears and sees needs that others miss. These gifts and many more are ways that our gracious God pours down on us that we might hand over to our neighbor.

Finding out what God has gifted us to do is a process of coming to understand all the good and bad of our past experiences, our passions, our unique wiring and how those things intersect with God's Spirit in every part of the world. They are not meant to create ranks or hierarchies. They are not for use in inflating the ego or creating some spiritual resume that makes one person more marketable to the purposes of God than another. Spiritual gifts are the evidence that God is at work to unify what's fractured and restore oneness in all He's made.

1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4:11-16; Romans 12:3-8; 1 Peter 4:10; Colossians 3:17; 1 Corinthians 14:1-25; 1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6