



If you were God, how would you show love?

I've been asking people this question all week. Someone said, "My love language is physical touch, so I'd give everyone hugs." Someone listening to this conversation said, "I like gifts so I'd give lots of gifts to everyone." Someone else said, "I'd save everyone."

The question is an empowering one because we assume the position of God. And the question is a warm fuzzy one because it deals with love during a season filled with love and laughter. It's a fun question.

But I'd like you to consider this question from a broader perspective. Try to strip away everything you know about God and the universe. You don't hear a pastor say that very often. But just for a moment, try to bring a completely blank slate to this question. If you were God, how would you show love?

Maybe you'd create nothing. Maybe you'd create an entire existence like Wonka's Chocolate Factory. Maybe you'd create intelligent beings who communicated telepathically, rolled on wheels instead of legs and feet and flew. Maybe you'd create an existence where deception and cunning and cruelty were virtues. You can do anything you want. It's your choice; you are in charge. If you were God, how would you show love?

Some of you are thinking, "This is too big of a question, Shawn. I just want to finish shopping, wrapping, cleaning and cooking! Don't ask me such big questions right now."

Maybe you would create a beautiful world like the one we live in, filled with the splendor of the stars and the vibrant colors of the oceans and the beauty and majesty of the mountains and trees. And maybe you'd designate one part of your creation as very special. So special that it was made in your image and was given authority over the world. That would be an interesting design.

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for

food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so.

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day (Genesis 1:27–31).

What a marvelous creation God made. A creation where you and I have been designed unique and special, all because he wanted to show his love. Maybe you'd create something similar. Maybe you'd create something different. The details of the creation aren't so important. What's important is the motive—God was showing his love.

Let's just assume for a moment that we'd all create a universe like the one God created. What would you do next? Would you sit back and watch your universe run or would you mix it up in your creation? It's interesting that video games are designed with a similar question in mind. Take for example a game where you can design a virtual world and let that world run its course. I asked my son about a game like this and he said he couldn't think of one. In fact, he said, "That's a boring game. Everyone would delete the app." Instead, an exciting and rewarding game would involve designing a virtual world and then mixing it up in the very world you created.

We see this same practice with God and his creation. After he created his universe, he actively engaged the most special part of his creation in a personal relationship. God wanted to mix it up in his creation. The Bible, from the very beginning of Genesis, tells us that God spoke to humanity and engaged them in relationship. Think of the honor and privilege God extended.

The last component I'd like you to consider in your creation is this. Since you invested so much love in the design, you might want to establish some guiding principles, like rules, for your created world to protect and show people how to fully experience and maximize life. Maybe you'd call them "Thrive principles." Maybe you'd call them "Don't touch" or "Best Operating Procedures." Maybe you'd call them the "10 Commandments." Regardless of the name, unless you'd want chaos and anarchy you would need to infuse your values and beliefs into some kind of rules. That's what God did.

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die" (Genesis 2:15–17).

In verse 17 we have the first "Don't touch" principle found in the Bible. Why, as a loving God setting up a universe, would you set it up with the option of breaking your rules? Would you do that, as God, showing love? This topic is universal and timeless. Scholars, philosophers and theologians have pondered this topic for as long as we have record of human thoughts. Which is more loving? Giving people the freedom to love you or forcing people to love you?

Giving them the freedom to love you seems more loving. The problem with this option is that you also give them the freedom to reject you. On the other hand, if you remove choice the result really isn't love because you've removed the engagement of the will. It's safe but there's no choice.

C.S. Lewis said: "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable."

What would you do? How would you show love? As you know, God determined that the loving choice was to give humanity the freedom to love him and the potential to reject him. In Genesis 3, the Bible says that after all God had done on their behalf, Adam and Eve chose to disobey God with the freedom they were given. Imagine his heartbreak. Imagine his disappointment. Imagine his anger. Have you ever fully given your love to someone and received rejection? If so, take what you're feeling and multiply it in order to understand what God felt. What does love do then?

When the most important part of your creation rejects you, what do you do? When people start ruining it all, what do you do? When they start hurting themselves and each other, what do you do? What does love do then?

We can relate to creating something and then dealing with people messing it up, can't we? Some of you have created a business and you have dealt with people unjustly suing you, stealing from you and messing up the company you've poured your heart into. Most of you are parents. You created kids and you have dealt with those children disobeying you, violating your family rules and messing up your great designs for the family. Some of you are coaches. Some of you are teachers. Some of you manage

a team. In some way, all of us can relate to having authority over something that we either created or helped create and seen the negatives of rebellion and misconduct.

How have you responded when that's happened to you? Perhaps you punished them. Perhaps you have lashed out to hurt people because you've been so hurt. Perhaps you raised your voice and screamed in your angry. Perhaps you suffered silently. Perhaps you cut them off relationally. Perhaps you gossiped. Perhaps you did all of these! I know I have.

We can relate, if even in a small way, to how God might have felt because we all know the sting of rejection. We all know what it's like to be mistreated. Again, take that feeling of yours and multiply it in order to understand what God felt.

If you were God, how would you show love to people who completely ruined your perfect loving creation? Remember at the beginning of the sermon I said that some people said they'd give everyone a hug, or give everyone presents or save everyone if they were God? These are nice sentiments but they ignore the relational wall that's been built between God and humanity. Evil acts build walls. Rebellious acts break relationships. A wall is constructed from bricks of our rebellion and can only be taken down with the power of forgiveness. Is it conceivable that, if you were God, you would forgive? After making a perfect creation, engaging in loving relationship, humanity rebelled against their creator. We rebelled against God. Would you be willing to pay the price that forgiveness would cost?

Tim Keller wrote: "From the earliest parts of the Bible, it was understood that God could not forgive without sacrifice. No one who is seriously wronged can 'just forgive' the perpetrator ... when you forgive, that means you absorb the loss and the debt."

Someone must absorb the cost. Either the guilty person who did the wrong act—that's justice. Or someone else can absorb the cost—that's forgiveness. Which is what makes Christmas so amazing. When Jesus Christ came to earth, God clothed himself in the flesh, not to judge us or punish us but to forgive us; to absorb the cost of our rebellion.

Consider what the angels say about the birth of Jesus in Luke 2.

"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:10–12).

We were the ones who messed it all up, described in Romans as the enemies of God. But when God saw the rebellion of mankind and the plight of humanity, caused by our own choices and rebellion, he determined that he would fix it. He would restore the relationship. He would absorb the cost. He would demonstrate perfect love. It's profound. It's shocking.

I've been asking, "If you were God, how would you show love" because I was hoping that this approach would bring fresh perspective on God's love. In fact, I've been praying for all of you all week that God's love be fresh and powerful to you today.

Look at how God showed love. In 1 John 4:9-10 the Word of God says.

"This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loves us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:9-10).

I have a new question for each of you and it's my last. How will you respond to God's gift of love? Since it's Christmas, let's think of this like a present. God is offering us a great Christmas present. If you want it you put a hand out in front of you with your palm up and I'll hand it to you. Ready? God sent his one and only Son into the world that you might live through him

For some, you might feel like a spiritual investigator. You are gathering facts and experiences hoping to discover the truth. If you want God's love today, all you need is need. All you need is nothing. Everyone wants to bring something to God and say, "Look what I've got." Or "look at what I've suffered through." But

God only wants us to look to him, to admit our rebellion and accept the loving forgiveness he offers.

God will not robotically take over your will and force you to love him. Nor is he passively hoping that you find him on your own. God has acted intentionally, publicly and powerfully in love, hoping that you would be so deeply persuaded that you'd take a step of faith and surrender your life to him. Let me encourage you to do that today.

For those who have already surrendered their life to Jesus, there is deep gratitude that springs from our hearts. How do we respond to God' gift of love? By giving God a heart of devotion and a life of obedience. If you are holding anything back from God, trying to control something on your own, that's not a heart of devotion.

Are you behaving in a disobedient manner and you know it's wrong, yet you keep doing it? That's not a life of obedience.

I would encourage you to accept God's gift of love with a fresh perspective and the delight of a child this Christmas season.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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