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“Ordering Up Love”
August 3, 2017

We love all kinds of things, don't we? We love our children. We love ice cream. We love pretty beaches on a sunny day. We love hanging out with friends in the backyard. We love the smell of Christmas cookies in the kitchen. We love it when we close a deal or finish a big project, and get a sizable bonus. We love it when someone gives us an unexpected gift. And we love to give them too. We love dogs, a good book, a cup of hot coffee in the morning, and we love to be in love and to make love. The list could go on and on. We love lots of things. We do not all love the same things, but I dare say that no one loves just one thing. And loving a variety of things is better than the alternative. You know people who seem to hate nearly everything. They aren't very fun to be around.

But although it may be just fine to love much of what we love. Something strange happens when what we love is loved too much or loved out of order. Picture an elderly woman holding a cat. You can tell she finds companionship with the furry creature. All is well and good. But then picture the same woman with thirty cats that have taken over her home. The scene no longer seems endearing, but sad. Or consider a toddler tasting chocolate for the first time. A little twinkle is in his eye. We keep pictures like that on our phone for everyone to see. But in contrast consider a 12-year-old boy, clearly overweight, with chocolate all over his face, looking hungover because he ate so many candy bars. The picture is likely not one we show with pride. His love of chocolate has gone overboard. There is no problem with loving cats and chocolate, but love them too much or perhaps inordinately more than other things, and all goes haywire.

Over 1,600 years ago, a man with a rather dubious past of chasing women (including a 10-year old heiress) came to his senses. His name was Augustine. He lived in what today is northeast Algeria. When I say he came to his senses, I mean this: he came to order up love more properly. Take a look with me at his words:

But living a just and holy life requires one to be capable of an objective and impartial evaluation of things: to love things, that

is to say, in the right order, so that you do not love what is not to be loved, or fail to love what is to be loved, or have a greater love for what should be loved less, or an equal love for things that should be loved less or more, or a lesser or greater love for things that should be loved equally.¹

Now, that is quite a lot said in a little space. So perhaps we can break it down into bite size pieces. First, Augustine says that if we want to live a truly good life (one which he says is holy and just), we must make sure not to love what ought not to be loved. You might wonder at first what it is that ought not to be loved, but with a little thinking you probably can think of a few things. I tend to think it's not good to love taking another man's wife or another woman's husband. I also think it a bit shaky to love gratuitous evil or the exploitation of others. Those, in my opinion, are just not things we ought to love. Think of Michael Vick, the NFL football player who loved seeing dogs fight to their death. That, I think, is something Augustine would say we should not love.

But Augustine does not stop there, he goes on to say that if we are to get things right in life we must also not fail to love what ought to be loved. This phrase might be a little easier to consider. We ought to love our children, shouldn't we? We ought to love when we see someone break the shackles of slavery or an innocent person saved from imminent death. We should also love a beautiful sunset or when we are kindly remembered by an old friend. If we don't love these things, most would say that something is not quite right.

In many instances, you and I are pretty good at not loving what we shouldn't love and loving what we should love. Where we get messed up is not loving things in the right order. And that's where Augustine goes next. He says we are not to have a greater love for what should be loved less. He is not saying certain things shouldn't be loved at all, only that we should not love them more than is proper. That is what we saw in the images I painted earlier. It is fine to love chocolate. It's not so fine to love it so much we gorge ourselves until we are sick. It's fine to love a cat. It's not so fine to have a life overrun by cats. Most of us have things like this—things we love too much. Maybe it's a tidy house; maybe it's shoes. I don't know what it is for you, but you probably know and likely so do those who are closest to you.

But this is not the only way we can mis-order our loves. Augustine also says we must be careful not to have an equal love for things that should be loved less or more. Let's suppose you love the Houston Astros. You love them so much you check up on the latest news all throughout the day. You do a little work, then you do a little checking in on the Astros. Your love for work and the Astros, you might say, is equal. The result in the end is that your work output suffers, and the people around you are impacted by it. The higher ups notice, and the next round of layoffs includes you. In that instance, your equal love for things that should have been loved more or less comes back to haunt you. Or perhaps this example is a bit closer to home: You love your siblings. You also love your spouse. The problem is you love them equally. A little time with your spouse, a little time with you siblings. I don't know too many marriages that do well in that scenario. Spouses are meant to be loved more than siblings. Doing otherwise inevitably creates problems.

Finally, Augustine warns us against loving things greater or lesser when they should be loved equally. You might wonder what kinds of things should be loved equally? Our own children fit this category. Love one child lesser or greater than the others, and it doesn't work out too well in family dynamics. Most would agree too that we ought to love people of different genders or ethnicities equally as well.

Sometimes, we think that humanity has come such a long way. And, no doubt, it has in many ways. But then we look back to the words of Augustine and we see that perhaps we are in the same place as we have always been. We love, but we don't always love the right things. And often we get our loves out of order. So what is the solution?

Long ago, a man approached Jesus. He wanted to know the greatest command in all of Scripture. He was, you might say, asking a question about ordering loves. He wanted to know which command he should love the most, the one that should get his most attention.

Jesus did not hesitate to answer. He said this: the greatest command is to love your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your strength and all your soul. In essence, Jesus said if you don't love God first, all the other loves are apt to get out of order. Think of it this way: if

God is the maker of all things, the maker of the world we live in and the people who inhabit it, he might know a thing or two about the order things ought to be loved. If we love him first and follow his way, we set ourselves up with the best chance at ordering all our other loves properly. We begin to love things in the order God designed them to be loved, and our world where once out of whack finds its footing again.

Bob Buford, a cable-tv pioneer and social entrepreneur, details a conversation with Michael Kami. You can find it in his book *Halftime*.² Buford is a Christian, and he recognized the personal coaching talents of Kami. Kami had no belief in God but was skilled in helping people live out their priorities. The pair sat down and Kami sought to discern just what Buford's priorities were. Finally, he said, "Bob, from what you are telling me your two greatest priorities are making money and Jesus Christ. I can help you live out your priorities, but you must tell me first what's in the box. What's of greatest importance to you?"

How perceptive of Kami, wouldn't you say? Life can't be lived with any great success until we decide what's in the box? Until we decide what's most important, we are not going to have any success in ordering up the rest. So, the question I might end with today is: What is in your box? Do you know? Have you ordered up your loves? And have you ordered them properly?

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¹ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 1.27-28

² Bob Buford, *Halftime: Moving from Success to Significance* (Zondervan, 2008), 82-89.