ESSAY · OCTOBER 2, 2014

What Do I Have to Do to Earn God’s Love?

Written by Bill Perkins

Shortly after getting married, I got into the habit of writing a note to my wife every morning. They usually weren't long, no more than a few sentences. But I enjoyed writing them and I knew she liked reading them, so every day I would give her a note.

It's the same reason I surprise her with flowers every once in a while. Really, it’s the same reason I do anything for her—because I love her.

I have to be honest, though. I wasn't perfect. There were mornings I forgot to write a note. And though I felt bad about it, I never once questioned whether my wife would still love me. It’s a ridiculous proposition—her love isn’t dependent upon me doing anything for her.

Yet strangely, this is often how we treat our relationship with God.

Service is the natural consequence of love.

We serve who—and what—we love. It’s a principle of life, something true regardless of whether we accept it. The risk is obvious. If we love work or money or attention or a substance, it will dominate our life and everything else will follow.

But there’s a reward. Just look at how you treat those closest to you. Maybe you don’t write daily love letters, but you may clean the house, or give gifts, or affirm verbally, or spend time together.

Regardless of how we do it, we serve those we love.

This principle also applies in our relationship with God. Because we love God, we serve him. We care for those created in his image. We volunteer at church or with a ministry. We sacrifice time and money for his purposes. We meditate on his words. We pray to him. We follow his commands. We're obedient to his will.

Perhaps you see the temptation.

We don’t—and cannot—earn God’s love.

The moment we begin serving God, there’s a tendency to think we’re earning his love. No one taught us to think this way. It’s just how the world operates. The law of karma—what goes around comes around; you get what you deserve.

Plus, most of us are fundamentally uncomfortable accepting so much for nothing.

The problem is, once we're responsible for earning God's love, then God's love is no longer fixed. It's dependent upon us—and how we act.

Maybe that's good, if we're having a perfect day. Otherwise it's terrifying. God not only feels erratically distant, but we're left swinging from overjoyed relief to despair, shame, and self-loathing.

God's love is without limit, boundless and overflowing.

But, of course, we cannot earn God's love. It's not reciprocal. It gives and gives and gives. And still, it gives. Regardless of our response or complicity. Despite our mistakes or lapses.

Our acts of service—our obedience, our giving, our purity, our sacrifice, our works—do *nothing* to influence God's love, one way or the other.

Ask any parent. Their love is not conditional. It does not vary. It's stable and secure. None of a child's deeds, good or bad, changes that reality.

It's the same with our heavenly father.

So stop trying to earn God's love. You can't, because you already have it. Now let it wash over you. And don't worry—service will follow.

Thomas Wells writes about living intentionally.