**WHEN LOVE BECOMES IDOLATRY** Dr. Doug Koskela October 26, 2020

In Marilynne Robinson’s Pulitzer Prize–winning novel [*Gilead*](https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/031242440X/ref%3Das_li_tl?camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=031242440X&ie=UTF8&linkCode=as2&linkId=0e21ee5abc63672394ddf7ef1ad27483&tag=spiritandtr0d-20), the narrator John Ames recalls the relationship between his long-deceased older brother Edward and their father. The father had served as pastor of the church that John now serves. Edward had been a brilliant young boy, the apple of their father’s eye. Funded by a collection taken up from the congregation, whose members assumed he would follow his father into the ministry, Edward went off to college and then to graduate school. But when he returned to their hometown of Gilead, Iowa, after many years, Edward had lost his Christian faith. Edward eventually outgrew the youthful arrogance with which he had broadcast his newfound iconoclasm. But he remained an atheist for the rest of his life. Their father’s initial hurt and anger eventually gave way to doubt, and his own faith began to crumble. Eventually he left the ministry, and in his later years he tried to convince John to join him and Edward in embracing what they felt was a wider world. Undaunted, John stood firm in his faith and his ministry. He speculates that his father’s affection for Edward had something to do with his change of heart. “All that time,” he writes, “I think he was just finding his way to Edward.”

The elder Reverend Ames was neither the first nor the last person to follow a beloved child away from Christian faith. As parents come to understand very quickly, the strength of the bonds of affection we feel for our kids is both beautiful and frightening. Of the many candidates for idolatry in contemporary culture, this is perhaps the most subtle and perilous. The intense love that we feel for our families is, of course, both good and appropriate. But like any created good, loved ones can become idols if our affection for them displaces a primary love for God. When we try to make any creature the source of our deepest fulfillment, two results are inevitable: our deepest need remains unmet, and we lose our ability to love that creature as we should.

One writer who recognized this particularly well was C. S. Lewis. Lewis expressed the point with characteristic clarity in one of his letters: “When I have learnt to love God better than my earthly dearest, I shall love my earthly dearest better than I do now. In so far as I learn to love my earthly dearest at the expense of God and *instead* of God, I shall be moving towards the state in which I shall not love my earthly dearest at all. When first things are put first, second things are not suppressed but increased” (“To Mrs. Johnson,” [*The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*](https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B000SEGDFY/ref%3Das_li_tl?camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=B000SEGDFY&ie=UTF8&linkCode=as2&linkId=9b9e006ec66b88d263ab26bb18fd9be6&tag=spiritandtr0d-20), November 8, 1952). Lewis’s language here prompts a natural question. Is he suggesting that love for God competes with love for people, such that intensifying our love for one diminishes our love for the other? Two things must be said in response, and both are important to taking in Lewis’s point. First, placing our love for another person in a primary position in our souls does indeed undermine our proper love of God. The tendency to divert our deepest inclination to love God toward a created object—to our great peril—is as old as sin itself. But second, the converse is not true: precisely because of who God is, loving Him first and foremost does not diminish our love for created goods. On the contrary, it increases those loves and properly orders them.

We see these dynamics of love illustrated in two characters in another of Lewis’s works, the novel [*The Great Divorce*](https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0060652950/ref%3Das_li_tl?camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0060652950&ie=UTF8&linkCode=as2&linkId=05b89d6f27ec991124e2774c88e63fbb&tag=spiritandtr0d-20). The first character is a mother named Pam, whose intense natural affection for her son eventually turned to a form of misplaced selfishness. Now in the afterlife, she appeals to the spirit of her brother to allow her to see the spirit of her son. In the course of that conversation, Pam makes it clear that she wants an immediate reunion with her son because she believes it will fill what is missing in her. Her brother explains what has gone wrong: natural feelings “are all holy when God’s hand is on the rein. They all go bad when they set up on their own and make themselves into false gods.” Indignant, Pam changes her appeal to a demand to see her son, even if it means removing him from the joy he is experiencing in heaven. And here we can see clearly that what she calls love is in fact no such thing. St. Thomas Aquinas offered perhaps the most succinct and helpful definition that we have of love: to will the good of the other (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II.26.4). Yet Pam’s willingness to take her son out of eternal bliss so that she can be with him shows that her desire is not for her son’s ultimate good.

By contrast, the character Sarah Smith—another spirit in heaven—models the proper ordering of loves. She admits to the ghost of her husband Frank that her affection for him during their earthly life had been a pale imitation of true love. “What we called love down there,” she explains, “was mostly the craving to be loved. In the main I loved you for my own sake: because I needed you.” But in heaven, she continues, her love for Frank is not marked by the need for fulfillment. A need for any creature on its own is unthinkable, because she is now in the fullness of God’s love. “‘What needs could I have,’ she said, ‘now that I have all? I am full now, not empty. I am in Love Himself, not lonely. Strong, not weak.’” Free of the need to find fulfillment in Frank, she is now free to love him truly for the first time.

The contrast between these characters points us to the reason why love for God is different from any other love. As creatures of God, our deepest hunger is for Him. As John Wesley put it, the human soul is “athirst for God, the living God” (“Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, Second Discourse”). Yet the entire story of human idolatry in all its forms is one of attempting to fill that desire with other loves. Misreading that deepest hunger for God, we attach ourselves to creaturely goods in the attempt to satisfy it. And the outcome is always the same: the deepest need goes unmet. Even our love for a genuine good becomes unhealthy when it displaces a primary love for God. But this tendency toward unfulfilling loves is upended when we turn to the God we were created to love. In his classic spiritual autobiography [*Confessions*](https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0199537828/ref%3Das_li_tl?camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0199537828&ie=UTF8&linkCode=as2&linkId=550073c0530032efdc35138048447a40&tag=spiritandtr0d-20), St. Augustine of Hippo stated this memorably in the form of a prayer: “You [God] have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” In fact, Wesley paraphrases this very line later in that same discourse on the Sermon on the Mount.

Once we have made that turn to find our rest in God, then, does our love for others disappear? By no means! On the contrary, having that deepest hunger filled frees us to love truly. Just as Sarah Smith eventually found, the love of God so satisfies our core longing that we do not need to seek that satisfaction in other people. The conflict between the need we feel and what is good for the other is solved. We are thus free to truly love others by seeking their good rather than our own fulfillment. Granted, this runs against the grain of a great deal of popular thinking about love, particularly romantic love. The idea that another human being can ultimately complete us runs, at least implicitly, through a great deal of contemporary culture. But this hope will not only inevitably be disappointed, it will also place a weight on that relationship that it was not meant to bear.

The 14th-century mystic St. Catherine of Siena recognized these dynamics clearly. She used the image of God’s love for us as a fountain of water. Only by remaining in the source of that love, through attentiveness to and love of God, are we able to share that love rightly with our neighbors. “If a man carry away the vessel which he has filled at the fountain and then drink of it, the vessel becomes empty, but if he keep his vessel standing in the fountain, while he drinks, it always remains full. So the love of neighbor, whether spiritual or temporal, should be drunk in Me, without any self-regarding considerations” (Catherine of Siena, [*The Dialogue*](https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0809122332/ref%3Das_li_tl?camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0809122332&ie=UTF8&linkCode=as2&linkId=8fabcfb8c44743bf6b116edb286604ea&tag=spiritandtr0d-20)). However, when love for another is driven by self-interest, that relationship inevitably becomes unhealthy. Catherine went on to identify the signs that this has occurred, framed as the voice of God speaking to her:

Do you know how the imperfection of spiritual love for the creature is shown? It is shown when the lover feels pain if it appear to him that the object of his love does not satisfy or return his love, or when he sees the beloved one’s conversation turned aside from him, or himself deprived of consolation, or another loved more than he. In these and in many other ways can it be seen that his neighborly love is still imperfect, and that, though his love was originally drawn from Me, the Fountain of all love, he took the vessel out of the water, in order to drink from it. It is because his love for Me is still imperfect, that his neighborly love is so weak, and because the root of self-love has not been properly dug out.

Catherine’s description of disordered love rings true through the centuries. Yet with this diagnosis comes the prescription: the perfect love of God roots out the self-interested distortion of love.

Where else could we conclude this discussion but with one of the greatest of Charles Wesley’s hymns, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”? This hymn concentrates our attention on the perfect love of God as expressed in the missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit for our redemption. The plea for Jesus to visit us with salvation is rooted in his identity as “pure, unbounded love.” The invocation of the loving Spirit to enter every troubled breast, to take away our bent to sinning, is ordered to a specific end: to “set our hearts at liberty.” Such freedom comes by fulfilling the purpose for which we were created, to pray and praise God without ceasing, to “glory in” His perfect love. A soul set free by such a complete love has no need to look elsewhere for something or someone to complete it. And just for that reason, that soul can now truly will the good of—that is, truly love—its earthly dearest. The intense affection for a loved one, driven by need, is now healed and transformed. In its place arises living water from the fountain of divine love.

*Dr. Doug Koskela is Professor of Theology at Seattle Pacific University in Seattle, Washington. He is an ordained Elder in the Reach Conference of the Free Methodist Church.*