

# Feeling Our Way Towards God

## Lecture 3: Can Love Be Commanded?

Study Guide

Eric Studt, SJ

### Video 8: Changing Emotional Landscapes

Can we change our Emotional Responses?

**Main Question:** Can we change how we emotionally respond to things?

- *Practically Speaking:*
  - If I'm afraid of the dark, is it possible to get rid of that fear so that I'm no longer afraid of the dark?
  - If I can't stand my Aunt Janice, is it possible for me to change that emotion so that I actually love my Aunt Janice?

**Answer to the Question: YES**, we can change how we emotionally respond to things. In these three videos we explore why this is the case and how we change our emotional responses.

**Opposing View** (The View I'm Arguing Against): **NO**, we can't control our emotions! We can't choose how we feel about things. So we can't change how we emotionally respond to things. All we can do is control the emotion.

- This view is quite common. But it's not really correct.
- Why do people think that we can't change how we emotionally respond to things or how we feel about things?
  - Emotions *seem* like they come over us.
    - We might feel anger towards a person like an uncontrollable fire: "I can't help it. He just makes me angry!!!"
      - Well, people don't make us angry. Anger is OUR response to things we don't like or find offensive.
    - We might feel like we're helplessly being swept off our feet by the winds of love: "You can't choose who you fall in love with"—a favourite line in romantic dramas.
      - Well, I'm not sure if this is true. We would consider it inappropriate if a physician or therapist fell in love with a patient. It's not just a matter of controlling how the doctor/therapist expresses her/his love. The doctor/therapist simply ought not to think about patients in those terms.
  - It's true that emotions can *seem* uncontrollable when we're in the middle of experiencing an emotion.
    - Once we're afraid/angry/in love, it's difficult to change that emotion in the moment.
- **HOWEVER**, over the long term we can shape how we emotionally respond to people and things.

- **Counterargument** against the person who says, “**I can’t help it. He just makes me angry!**”
  - In the moment that a person experiences anger, it can be difficult to get rid of the feeling.
  - Let’s suppose that the person makes me angry because he has terrible manners.
  - Later, I learn that that he only has bad manners when he’s nervous. And he’s nervous around me because he respects and likes me.
  - Knowing this last point might make it less likely that I will be angry with the person in the future.
- **Counterargument** against the person who says, “**You can’t choose who you fall in love with.**”
  - Falling in love is a powerful emotion! When it happens to us, we can seem helpless against it. But...
  - Falling in love requires:
    - a belief that the other person would be a good person to have a romantic relationship with.
    - a desire to have a romantic relationship with that person.
  - Beliefs and desires are things that we can shape over the longer term.
  - For this reason, it is possible to say: There are certain people we ought not to fall in love with because of
    - a difference in age,
    - professional boundaries,
    - other commitments.
      - demands of friendship (stealing your friend’s partner/spouse is wrong)
      - vows of chastity
      - familial obligations
- We weren’t born being afraid of guns, angry at inconsiderate drivers, grateful for unexpected acts of kindness, attracted to smart, successful people. These are emotions we learned.
- **Emotions are conditioned.**

Is Love an Emotion?

**Main Question:** Is love really an emotion?

- Some have divided love up into things like friendship, romantic love, and Christian charity. They might argue that friendship and romantic love are emotions, but Christian charity (that is, the love that Jesus commands) is not an emotion. Charity is a choice that we make to be kind to people regardless of how we feel.

**Answer to the Question: YES,** love is an emotion. It involves beliefs, desires, and feelings.

- **Counterargument** against those who say charity is not an emotion
  - It’s true that friendship, romantic love, and charity all entail different beliefs and desires.
  - **BUT**, there is something that links them. This something is what we discuss below.
    - All love involves:
      - affect: we are attracted to the object of our love
      - beliefs: we believe the object of love to be good, worthwhile...

- desires: we want to be with the object of love
- Love may involve choices, but love is something deeper than a choice. Love encourages us to act in certain ways. Love is not the action itself, but the impetus that leads to the action.
  - Anger is not shouting and swearing. Anger is what causes someone to shout and swear.
  - Love is not lending a helping hand. Love is what causes someone to lend a helping hand.

## Love as an Emotion

### Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

- “Love is something pertaining to the appetite...the name ‘love’ is given to the principle movement towards the end loved.” (ST I.II.26.1)
  - In other words, love is what moves us towards the thing we love.
- **Love has an attractive (positive) valence.**
  - So if we don’t feel attracted, we aren’t feeling love.
  - This is true of friendship, romantic love, and charity. Attraction is one of things that joins these kinds of love together.

## Changing Emotional Landscapes

**Main Question:** How do we change our emotional responses?

**Answer:** Since emotions are made up of affect (i.e., feelings) and thoughts, in order to change an emotional response, we have to change

- 1) our affect,
- 2) the thoughts involved with the emotion, or
- 3) both affect and thoughts.

### *Changing Affect*

- Some commonly used techniques for managing valence (i.e., feelings of attraction and aversion) and arousal (levels of energy and focus)
  - getting enough sleep,
  - regular exercise,
  - healthy diet,
  - exposure to natural light,
  - limiting use of alcohol and drugs,
  - mindfulness practices.
- *Practically speaking*, it’s hard to be a loving person if
  - we’re running on three hours of sleep,
  - our diet consists of potato chips,
  - we’re hung over,
  - we don’t have any energy,
  - we have difficulty focusing.
- Practicing healthy living does not automatically result in a person becoming more loving, but it’s an important first step.

### *Changing Thoughts*

- **Beliefs**

- Love entails a belief that the other person is
  - a good person,
  - desirable as a friend, partner, colleague...,
  - acceptable,
  - worthwhile...
- Remember: **“God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good.”** (Genesis 1:31)
  - So God sees every person as good, desirable, acceptable, worthwhile.
  - Do we?
- **Desires**
  - Love entails a desire to be with the other person
    - Aquinas calls this the unitive aspect of love
  - What “being with” means depends on the context
    - friendships: getting together regularly, texting/telephoning/emailing often...
    - sexual partnerships: living with the person, sharing a life together
    - professional relationships: working together
    - difficult cases
      - What if a person doesn’t want to be with me?
        - Maybe being with that person means wishing that person well from a distance
      - What if a person has caused me harm and it is unsafe for me to be with that person?
        - Physically “being with” is sometimes dangerous.
        - We must respect our own need for healing.
        - If we can’t find ways of physically being (or even in contact) with someone, we may have to be creative

### ***Practically Speaking...***

During lockdown, we were unable to physically be with many of those whom we love. How have you discovered/developed new ways of being with your loved ones during this time?

#### *Changing Neural Structures*

- Donald Hebb (1949)
  - Colloquial phrasing of Hebb’s Axiom: **Neurons that fire together, wire together.**
  - This is the basic idea behind neuroplasticity.
  - Our brains have billions of neurons. How does the brain decide which neurons to use in a given situation?
  - Hebb’s Axiom basically says that the brain somehow highlights certain neural circuits that are important or are used often.
- Psychologists have used Hebb’s Axiom to explain things like habits.
  - For example, for the past twenty years, the first thing I’ve done in the morning is to go downstairs and make a cup of coffee. I’m so used to this that I don’t even have to think about it. Maybe I have trained my brain to associate waking up with a need for arousal and with coffee as being the best source of arousal.

- Emotional responses can be difficult to change!
  - Love: I love my brother. I don't even have to think about it. My idea of my brothers is connected with all of his good qualities, with my idea of love, and with positive valence. So when I think about my brother or see him, I make all of the connections automatically. Maybe Hebb's Axiom explains why.
    - I wasn't born loving my brother. My parents trained me to make these connections. I trained myself. Perhaps my brother trained me by being kind to me. This training may have involved the "training" of neurons to "fire together."

## Conclusion

When Jesus says, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another," (John 13:34) he is asking us

- to be attracted to each other,
- to have certain beliefs about each other,
- to desire to be with each other.

This is a huge undertaking! Hopefully the next two videos will show why it is not an impossibility.

## Video 9: Love as Virtue

**Main Question:** If love requires attraction, how in the world can we manage to love everyone?

**Answer:** Love is a virtue. Virtues train our thoughts and affect to respond in the correct way.

I will develop this idea with six points:

### 1) Virtues as Habits

- Aristotle's definition of habits:

A habit is a disposition to be well disposed or adversely disposed towards oneself or towards something else. (Metaphysics V.20)

- *(Note: Aristotle does not talk about love as a virtue/habit, but Aquinas adopted and developed Aristotle's theory of virtues to include the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love.)*
- So habits make it so that we are almost automatically attracted towards some things and repelled by other things.
- Practically speaking...
  - Think about your own habits. They help you perform everyday activities without even thinking about them. For example, we don't have to think about

showering regularly. And when we do shower, I'm guessing that most of have a routine that determines the order in which we wash things, which kinds of soap we use, etc. We have actually trained ourselves to feel attracted to our showering routine. That's a habit. We have dozens of such habits.

- If our showering routine is broken, it can make us feel uncomfortable (aversion).

- How do we acquire habits?

## 2) Practice Makes Perfect

- In most instances, we acquire our habits by repeatedly practicing certain thoughts and actions.
- Aristotle compares acquiring habits to learning an instrument (Nicomachean Ethics II.1.4). At first it's hard work, but after a while it comes naturally.
  - Habits become like **"second nature."**
  - the same thing goes for sports, typing, cooking, etc.
    - Ex. When a person learns to ski, she doesn't start out on the most difficult slopes. She starts with the easiest slopes so she can learn how to position her weight, turn, stop... Then she progresses little by little to more difficult trails. Each level requires new skills. These skills should become automatic before progressing to the next level. Great skiers don't even have to think about the things that beginners have to keep in mind. They've become habit.

## 3) Habits Train Affect

- Aristotle believes that if you don't feel attracted to doing a virtuous act, then you don't have the virtue (Nicomachean Ethics II.1.4). You may disagree with him, but let's look at why he thinks this.
  - Aristotle says that the courageous (courage is a virtue) person is attracted to acting courageously when in danger and that the coward is averse to acting courageously when in danger.
  - So a person who did the courageous thing but hated doing it is not courageous.
- Why might this be the case?
  - Habit/virtues are not choices or actions; rather, they are one of the things that cause us to choose or to act in a certain way
    - so courage is not a choice/action, but a tendency to act courageously
    - love is not a choice/action, but a tendency to act lovingly
  - Attraction and repulsion make it easier for us to do some actions and avoid others. It's much easier to follow our feelings than to think through every decision.
  - The idea is that we have to attune our attractions and repulsions correctly.
    - Think about how parents often have to force children to eat their vegetables.
    - Hopefully, when these children are adults, they will actually like vegetables so it will be easier for them to maintain a healthy diet.
    - A healthy eater is not someone who occasionally eats well, but a person who is in the habit of eating well, a person who is attracted to healthy foods.
- If love is a virtue like courage, then the loving person is a person who enjoys being loving.
  - Thus, a person who finds being loving burdensome but does it anyway is not loving.
  - The emotion "love" precedes the action of being loving.

#### 4) Virtues and Upbringing

- Learning virtues and vices starts in childhood. Training children to be attracted to things that are good and to be repelled by things that are bad is part of parenting.
- We have to be careful, though. Not all of the habits our parents trained in us are good or conducive to the Christian life of an adult.
  - o Ex. My parents told me not to hang out with people who lied, stole, did drugs, listened to music with erotic or violent themes...
  - o My parents were probably right. Hanging out with these kinds of people might have meant my developing bad habits.
  - o But as an adult Christian, I have to often be close to such people and to love them very deeply.
  - o I had to unlearn some of the habits my parents taught me in order to develop as a loving adult.
- Some cultural values that we grew up in and are part of the fabric of our society are not conducive to love.
  - o Sexism
  - o Racism
  - o Classicism
  - o Ableism
  - o Homophobia
- These are big problems in our society today!
- In order to become more loving individuals, we have to root out habits of sexism, racism...

#### 5) Loving Universally

- Fromm, Erich. 1956. *The Art of Loving*.
  - o Fromm was a psychologist.
  - o I highly recommend this book!
- Fromm's definition of love:
  - o "Love is the active concern for the life and the growth of that which we love." (Fromm, 21)
  - o Notice his use of "active concern." Love is not just a thought or action, but a disposition of active concern towards those whom we love.
- Fromm on universal love
  - o "Love is not primarily a relationship to a specific person; it is an attitude, an orientation of character which determines the relatedness of a person to the world as a whole, not toward one 'object' of love." (Fromm, 36)
  - o In short, love is not a decision we make with each new relationship. It's not a light switch that we can turn on and off.
  - o Rather, for the loving person, love is the starting point in every new relationship. It's their comfort zone.
  - o This does not mean that loving people never do unloving actions. But when loving people do unloving actions, they do so against their inclination.
  - o *Note: Fromm does not call love a "virtue," but his ideas fit well with Aristotle's theory of virtues.*

#### 6) Learning from Expert Lovers

- So how do we learn to become more loving?
- One way is to learn from the experts:
  - o Jesus is the embodiment of God's love. His every action as recounted in the Gospels was an expression of God's love for humanity.
    - What would Jesus do?

- The Dalai Lama. People say that the Dalai Lama greets perfect strangers with the same genuine warmth and friendliness that we normally reserve for our closest friends.
  - He wasn't born doing this.
  - How did he learn to love?
- Nelson Mandela. During his decades in prison under a racist government, Mandela learned to love his oppressors. We can see this in the way he reached out to white South Africans after apartheid. This guy really didn't hold a grudge!
  - How did he manage to do that?
- Mother Theresa. In her love for the poor, she seems to have been drawing out of a limitless well of compassion and mercy.
  - What inspired her?
  - What gave her strength to continue her work?
- People in our everyday lives.
  - Are there people whom you know who have seemed to become expert lovers?
  - How did they learn to love?
  - What does their love look like practically speaking?
- What the experts teach us:
  - loving universally is possible
  - how to find inspiration
  - practical tips
  - how to keep going when we're discouraged

## **Video 10: Prayerfully Exercising Loving Habits**

In this video I present three different kinds of spiritual exercises for exercising loving habits.

### **Spiritual Exercises**

- Spiritual exercises are methods of prayer that develop emotional habits.
  - They train us to be attracted towards the things that are helpful in lives of faith and to be repelled by the things that are unhelpful.
- We can choose and adapt spiritual exercises according to our need and context.
  - Choose ones that work well for you.
  - At first, build on your strengths before seeking challenges.
  - Set aside a period of time. It could be 5 minutes to an hour. Whatever works well with your schedule and experience.
  - Develop a routine that works for you.
    - Set aside a specific amount of time. (I like to set a timer.)
    - Find a way of quieting down (paying attention to breath, noticing the body, reciting a mantra, singing a verse of a Taizé song...) and focusing on the subject of your prayer.
    - Find a way of ending your prayer.
      - St. Ignatius of Loyola recommends having a conversation with God or one of the saints and concluding with a prayer such as the Our Father.
- Repetition is essential.
  - Spiritual exercises are like physical exercise. It may take a while before we reap the benefits.

- Developing habits takes time, discipline, patience, and focus. Don't give up because you haven't perfected your loving habits after the first try.
- Discuss with a friend, mentor, spiritual director, or teacher.
  - Spiritual exercises can be challenging. We often come up against difficulties. Also, prayer can sometimes go in directions that are unhelpful for our spiritual growth.
  - Articulating what is happening in prayer to a loving, accepting, and wise person is essential. This might take several forms:
    - a friend who is also serious and knowledgeable about spiritual growth
    - a mentor who has experience with prayer and the spiritual tradition
    - a qualified spiritual director in a formal relationship with regular meetings
    - a faith-sharing group
  - Make sure you feel comfortable with this relationship.

## Love Poetry

One spiritual exercise that I've found helpful is meditating on love poetry.

- Find a poet whose vision of God's love is one that you would like to have.
- This is a way of meditating on God's passionate desire for us.
- We see this kind of imagery in the Song of Songs, the Prophet Hosea, and Jesus' own image of himself as the bridegroom.
- This spiritual exercise may not be for everyone.
- As an example, here is a poem by Hafiz, a Sufi poet.

In the morning  
When I began to wake,  
It happened again-

That feeling  
That You, Beloved,  
Had stood over me all night  
Keeping watch,

That feeling  
That as soon as I began to stir

You put Your lips on my forehead  
And lit a Holy Lamp  
Inside my heart.

*I Heard God Laughing: Poems of Hope and Joy*  
- Hafiz poems rendered by Daniel Ladinsky

- If you're interested in this way of praying, Ladinsky's book of Hafiz poems is a great resource! He has another book called *Love Poems from God*, which is a compilation from several different religious traditions.

## **Metta Meditation**

This is an ancient spiritual exercise from the Buddhist tradition. The version presented here is my own adaptation of the Dalai Lama's formulation in his book, *How to Expand Love: Widening the Circle of Loving Relationships*. My version incorporates my experience of Ignatian prayer and puts a strong emphasis on the use of the imagination.

Some things to keep in mind:

- In its full version, this meditation could take years to complete.
- However, there is nothing to stop us from regularly practicing the meditation in manageable pieces, say 10 minutes to an hour per day.
  - o I do think regularity is important, though.
- My impression is that this kind of prayer requires conversation with a knowledgeable friend or mentor.
- A strong sense of self-love is a prerequisite for this exercise. I include an additional Buddhist meditation on self-love below.

The meditation has three parts and each part has three subparts. In each part, the meditation builds on our strengths by starting with people we find it easy to love and working towards people we have difficulty loving.

### ***Part I***

#### **Friends**

- Imagine the person you love best in the world, perhaps your best friend. This person need not be currently living. Visually picture the person before you. Imagine the colour of her/his hair, eyes, skin. Notice the style of dress, height... Have a vivid image of the person in your mind.
- Imagine all the things you love about the person.
- Continue being imaginatively with the person until you feel your love for the person. Hold onto this feeling. Remember it. Etch it in your memory.
- This feeling of love is what we want to feel towards everyone.
- Then move on to other friends, as many friends/family members/mentors/heroes that you can think of. Meditate on these friends until you have the same feeling towards them that you have towards the person you love best in the world.

#### **Neutral People**

- These are people that we know, but towards whom we have feelings of neither aversion nor attraction. They're just part of the background of our lives.
  - o These might include:
    - the cashier at the grocery store
    - the teller at the bank
    - some of the people you don't know well at church
    - etc.
- Meditate on these people, one at a time, in the manner used above for friends.
- Don't invent character traits that the person doesn't have. This exercise involves loving people as they are, not for who they could be. This requires that we notice people we don't pay much attention to, that we search for things about them that really are lovable (a smile, an attitude...) This exercise fosters a new way of noticing people.

- Imagine scenarios in which these neutral people might be your best friends. (What if this person had been your brother/sister, mother/father, colleague at work...?)
- Continue until you feel for these neutral people what you feel for your best friends.

### **Enemies**

- Repeat the above with people who repel you (i.e., the people you just can't stand, people you don't like). Enemies come last. Meditate on these people until you feel towards them the love you feel towards your best friend.
- Again, we don't have to invent character traits. Even our enemies can have character traits that we can appreciate and admire.
- When we don't like people, oftentimes we focus our attention on the less pleasant side of the person's character. This exercise asks you to forget those parts and to focus on the good aspects.

### **Part II**

Repeat the entire exercise, but this time desiring the happiness of friends, neutral people, and enemies. As psychologist Erich Fromm says, "Love is the **active concern** for the life and the growth of that which we love" (Fromm, 21). This part asks you to develop this active concern.

### **Part III**

Repeat the entire exercise, but this time committing yourself to the happiness of friends, neutral people, and enemies. This means promising yourself that you will do everything in your power to make sure that these people are happy.

### **Supplementary Reflections on Self-Love**

Metta meditation relies on self-love. If we don't love ourselves, this will be a stumbling block in the exercise. Here are a couple of links to an article on meditating on self-love and to an audio file of a guided meditation on self-love. They're great!

<https://tricycle.org/magazine/john-makransky-love/>

[http://www.johnmakransky.org/downloads/audio/ATL\\_meditation\\_1-1.mp3](http://www.johnmakransky.org/downloads/audio/ATL_meditation_1-1.mp3)

### **Contemplation to Acquire Love**

This exercise comes from St. Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*. It focuses on our love for God. I stay close to Ignatius' original. The exercise starts with a couple of thoughts on love and preparation prayers. Then the exercises itself has four parts. The exercise concludes with a conversation with God. Finally, remember that Ignatius would have us use our imagination to see, hear, taste, smell, touch.

I would just emphasize two things:

- It's important to actually feel the gratitude that Ignatius talks about. It is this feeling that open up the path to love for God.

- Again, you can divide this exercise into manageable chunks and practice it regularly over the course of a week, months, or however long. Each time, think about beginning with the preparation prayers and ending with a conversation with God.

### **1) Introduction**

- Love ought to be expressed more in deeds than in words.
- Love requires two parties that give and receive.

### **2) Preparation Prayers**

- Imagine God lovingly gazing at you.
- Imagine the saints rooting for you in heaven. (You may wish to include your own personal saints such as parents, grandparents, or friends who have passed away.)
- The Grace: Ask God for knowledge of all the good things God has given you, so that being entirely grateful, you will be able to love God in everything.

### **3) First Part**

- Call to mind all that God has given to you, including your own being, life, intelligence. Imagine these things concretely.
- Continue until you feel genuine gratitude.
- Consider what gift you might offer to God in return.
- Feel the desire to give this gift.
- Pray: Take, Lord, receive, all my liberty, my memory, my thoughts, my entire will—all that I have and possess. You gave it all to me. To you, Lord, I return it. All is yours, Lord. Use it as you will. Give me your love and grace. This is enough for me.

### **4) Second Part**

- Consider that God dwells in all things, even in you.
- Continue until you feel genuine gratitude.
- Consider what gift you might offer to God in return.
- Pray: Take, Lord...

### **5) Third Part**

- Consider that God works through all things for your benefit.
- Repeat the above steps.

### **6) Fourth Part**

- Consider that all good things come from God and that there is plenty more where they came from.
- Repeat the above steps.

### **7) Conclusion**

- Speak with God about what's in your heart.
- Pray: Our Father...