

December 10, 2017
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TOO MUCH PIE Matthew 2:1-12

Last year Laurie and I had an epic fail when it came to Christmas gifts. Toby and Anna gave us exactly zero help when it came to ideas of gifts they would like. So we had to get creative. We came up with some gifts they never would have thought of. It turned out to be a clean sweep. Every single one of them was a bomb that had to be returned.

So this year I've had my antenna out, hoping I will come across some gifts that will enable us to redeem ourselves. I have seen some that are definitely unique. For instance, how about a real live flame thrower? Even the man who has everything wouldn't have one of those. But then I tried to imagine when they might use one and realized maybe it's not going to work. So I moved on to the modern nativity scene. Everybody needs one of these. It has Joseph and Mary taking a selfie with the baby and a shepherd posting a picture of the scene on Facebook. And instead of the 3 kings there are 3 delivery guys on Segways. Yeah, maybe that's not great either. Well how about a 16 foot tall inflatable Darth Vader with a candy cane striped light saber? Hmm, might not be for everybody. Well, here's the perfect gift. It's a Royal Toilet Throne. The only problem with that one is it costs almost \$12,000.

We're going to look at a well known passage from the book of Matthew that involves the giving of gifts. This passage speaks to an opportunity all of us have to give some of the most important gifts in all of life. Let's look at Matthew 2:1-12

THERE WAS AN ENEMY

This familiar part of Jesus' history tells us that Magi from the east showed up in Jerusalem inquiring as to the whereabouts of one who had been born to be the king of the Jews. They said they had seen a star which motivated them to come find him. Who are these guys and how did they end up in Jerusalem?

We should start with the fact that we don't know how many of them came searching for the infant Messiah. The traditional number is 3, but that was derived solely from the fact that Matthew tells us they brought 3 different gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh. But there is no indication each of them brought 1 gift. The traditional eastern number was 12 Magi. But the truth is, there could have been 2 of them or there could have been 20 or 30. What we do know was they would have

arrived in a caravan. The traditional picture of 3 guys in funny hats riding on camels is way off. They may well have worn funny hats and ridden on camels, but there was no way influential people like them would travel alone. They would have had servants and security people along with them in addition to animals carrying supplies.

They were from Persia, some 900 miles east of Jerusalem. Some think they were Babylonian, others believe they were Persian. Since Babylon was conquered by the Medo-Persians it's a bit difficult to parse out the exact origins of the Magi. But it appears they showed up in the Babylonian Empire, then later continued on in the Persian Empire. They were educated men who amalgamated studies of science, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, religion and astrology. This is why the old English translations referred to them as wise men.

It's interesting that these Gentile intellectuals showed up in Jerusalem looking for the child we know was Jesus. They said they came because they saw his star rising. There have been trainloads of theories about exactly what that star was. Some people think it was some sort of astrological conjunction of planets. Others think it was possibly a supernova or some other unusual cosmological event. Still others suggest it was a supernatural star, or something like the pillar of light that led Israel in the wilderness. There is also a theory that the star actually was a figure of speech for an angel.

It seems difficult to reconcile the idea of a conjunction of planets or some other astrological sign with the fact that verse 9 says the star led them to the place where the baby was and stopped over it. But here's the bottom line on all the discussion of the nature of the star. You can engage in all kinds of speculation about it, but at the end of the discussion you still won't know exactly what it was and how it worked. We don't know because Matthew doesn't give us that information. Neither does he suggest we waste a lot of time and energy speculating about it.

Whatever that cosmological sign was, the Magi knew it had to do with a king being born in Judah. Part of the reason for this is that they likely had some familiarity with Hebrew prophecies about Messiah. Especially they would have known Daniel's prophecies since Daniel lived in both Babylon and under Persian rule and he was kind of seen as one of the Magi. His prophecies at one point pinned down the approximate time when Messiah would come. Sources outside the Bible reveal that there was an awareness among other people groups that the Hebrews were expecting a Messiah to come around that time. Among others Suetonius, the Roman historian, alluded to this. How the Magi connected the star

to the coming of the Messiah, the Son of David who would rule forever, we do not know. Evidently God made it known to them in some way.

The arrival of a caravan of Magi would have created quite a stir in Jerusalem, especially when they began asking about the birth of a baby who would become the king of the Jews. Word of this soon got to King Herod. There are several men known as Herod in the Bible. This was the first of the bunch, one known as Herod the Great. He was appointed king over Judea by the Romans and ruled for 40 years, until shortly after the birth of Jesus.

Herod accomplished quite a few things, including a number of significant construction projects. Chiefly he was responsible for rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. He was a clever and at times very adept politician. One scholar called him an evil genius, and said he would commit any crime to protect his position and achieve his goals.

Unfortunately he was also a brutal and ruthless man. He ordered the execution of one of his wives and 2 of his own sons, among many others. The Jewish historian Josephus called him barbaric. One writer referred to him as “the malevolent maniac.” The legend is that Caesar Augustus said of Herod, “it is safer to be his pig than his son.”

Not once did Herod ever consider what is right nor did God and his will ever enter into his thoughts. He was about one thing, and one thing alone. He was all about Herod having power in this world, and everything else would be sacrificed to that end. He could not let anyone know his true reaction to the news of the birth of Messiah, so verse 7 tells us he secretly met with the Magi to find out when the child had been born. He had been told by the Jewish experts that the prophecies of Micah 5:2 said the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. He sent the Magi to that town and instructed them to return after they found the child so he could worship him too. This, of course, was a lie. He had no intention of worshiping anyone. His plan was to find the child and kill him. Unfortunately there have been and always will be people who will be militant and even violent in their opposition to Jesus, the baby the Magi came to see.

Every now and then I am surprised at the animosity some people exhibit toward Jesus and his people. But then I remember this is nothing new. Jesus faced it when he was a baby. Later he would face constant opposition from the religious establishment of Israel. In Mark 3:1-6 Jesus healed a man with a crippled hand, but he did it openly on the Sabbath. And he gave a scriptural justification for his act.

Verse 6 says, “Then the Pharisees when out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.” For healing someone they wanted to kill him!

In John 11 Jesus did the unimaginable. He raised Lazarus from his tomb after he had been dead for days. The response of Jesus’ foes was, according to John 11:53, “From that day on they plotted to take his life.” How is it possible that someone could respond to such magnificent and powerful an act by wanting to kill Jesus? Unfortunately, when you focus primarily on yourself and getting what you want rather than on doing what God tells us, there is no end of the evil that you can do. In John 15:18 Jesus warned his followers, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.”

The story of Herod reminds us that there always have been and always will be people who hate Jesus, and because of their thinking there is no limit to the horror they might well be willing to do.

THERE WERE SOME WHO WERE UNINTERESTED

When Herod heard about why the Magi were in town verse 3 says he summoned the “chief priests and teachers of the law.” Herod was familiar with the Jewish faith. He knew there were prophecies about a coming Messiah, so he consulted with the religious experts. They correctly told him that Micah 5:2 prophesies that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. So they knew where the baby was. We can be quite sure that they were also familiar with the prophecies of Daniel, which indicated they were in the right time frame for Messiah to come.

What were they doing about it? When a group of pagan Gentiles showed up in town inquiring about the birth of the Messiah, how did they respond? They did absolutely nothing. They didn’t go to Bethlehem to search for the baby. They didn’t get excited about the possibility that Messiah had arrived. They didn’t ask the Magi about what prompted them to come to Judea and wonder about what God was up to. They didn’t do a thing!

Why the Magi? Why would God bring Gentiles hundreds of miles across difficult terrain, people with pagan beliefs, to honor the Messiah when he came? And in Luke, why the shepherds? Of all people why would God bring shepherds in from the fields to honor the baby? Was it because shepherds were known to be such upstanding and learned biblical scholars? Hey if the shepherds were excited because they thought Messiah had arrived then surely everyone would get excited, right? Because everyone looked to shepherds for wisdom in such matters. Uh, no. In both instances God specifically brought those groups of people to worship Jesus.

He used angels to summon the shepherds, and he used some unknown events to summon the Magi from hundreds of miles away. How weird is that?

I remembered a dumb conversation I once had many years ago with a friend. I was in college at the time and was in a slump in regard to the dating aspect of my life. A couple of girls I was interested in had expressed their desire to have me as a friend and NOTHING MORE. I was bemoaning my sad condition with this friend and he shared with me some of his hard won wisdom on what I ought to do to have girls take more interest in me. The thing is, this guy wouldn't know a date with a girl if it jumped up and bit him in the face. I knew this guy for probably 5 years, and not once did he have a girl even a little bit interested in him. They flocked to him like surfers flock to a shark. His advice wasn't especially worth while. Neither would the ideas of shepherds or foreign astrologers be impressive to ancient Israelis.

So why those groups? In part it made a statement about what Jesus came to do. His work was for all people, including Gentiles and the least respected people like shepherds. But part of the reason was the religious experts weren't interested. They were so caught up in their theological system and in their desire to maintain their status quo that they missed the beginning of the most important event in human history. They should have known better, but they were blinded by their own personal pursuits.

Those people will still be around as well. They are convinced that what will make life full, what will bring them joy and peace, is success, money, fame, or power right here on earth. The whole God thing is fine, they figure, but it isn't what their life is about.

THERE WERE WORSHIPERS

Finally we come to the Magi. By the way, despite how they are usually depicted in manger scenes, they didn't arrive the night Jesus was born and worship him in a stable, surrounded by donkeys, sheep and camels. Notice that verse 11 says "on coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary." Joseph, Mary and the baby were no longer in a stable. They had moved into a house. Notice also that after ascertaining when the Magi had started their adventure Herod decided to kill all the boys in Bethlehem under the age of 2. That means that by the time the Magi actually arrived Jesus was likely somewhere between 12 and 24 months old.

When the Magi arrived verse 11 says they bowed down and worshiped Jesus. What an astounding event that must have been for Mary and Joseph. These educated and

influential men traveled hundreds of miles to see Jesus. The average caravan in ancient times traveled about 10 miles a day. To cover the 900 miles they traveled at that rate would have taken 90 days. And they were going to have to make the same 3 month trip home, meaning this trip ate up half of a year of their lives, just to see Jesus. And when they got there these men bowed down before a baby and worshiped him! These men were advisors to kings in their homeland, some of the most important people in their country. And they bowed down before this baby. Herod was trying to kill him, the religious leaders were ignoring him, but they worshiped him.

We don't know how much they understood. They clearly knew that this baby in some sense was divine. We can be confident they did not know that he was fully God in the flesh, or that he had come to die for the sins of all humans. But they most definitely understood that he had some special connection to God, and that in him God was doing some great work in human history. Yes, he was born to be a king, but they knew that he was more than just another human king.

Someone might say that it was common in those days for representatives of one king to show great honor and even bow before a king of another nation. But do you think it reasonable that the Magi would travel that long and far just to show honor to a king of the Jewish people? At that point the Jewish people were not especially significant in anybody's view. They were just another third rate people group that had been conquered by the Babylonians, then the Persians, then the Greeks, then the Romans. It had been 600 years since they were an independent, self-determining nation that was a player on the world stage. The king of the Jews was nobody. The Magi weren't bowing down before the baby because a future king of the Jews was such a big deal, but because they knew that the baby had some divine connection. You might say they knew he was super human in the literal sense of that term, meaning, more than merely human.

Their response was the correct, reasonable response to the child, for that child was God breaking in to human history. The right, reasonable response to the Messiah is to worship. A question this begs is why is worship so important?

The most basic and important answer to that question is that we don't have any choice about worshiping. The late pastor and author Ray Stedman said, "Everyone worships. Everybody! Everywhere! Worship is the fundamental drive of life. Atheists worship, Infidels worship. Skeptics worship...Worship underlies every action and attitude we manifest."

We all worship. We will worship someone or something. We have no choice in the matter. The word “worship” derives from old English “worth-ship.” It means to ascribe worth or value to someone or something. We all ascribe ultimate worth to something. When we ascribe supreme value to something and we will pay anything for it since it is more valuable than anything else.

We may not consciously identify it, but all of us ascribe supreme value to someone or something, and as a result serve it. In the case of Herod, he ascribed ultimate worth to him being in power, and that is what he served. The default setting ultimately for human beings is to ascribe that supreme value to self. In short we worship self. All that we do is ultimately driven by serving self.

All right, so we’re all going to worship. Why is it important that we worship Jesus? We start with the simple truth that we should do so because it is right. He is the Lord of all, deserving of all praise and devotion. He deserves it because he is good and gracious and holy and loving. But there is another aspect of why worshiping God is so hugely important. If we assign ultimate value to anything else, it is a lie, and because worship underlies everything we do, our whole lives will be based on a lie. The result of that is inevitably devastating.

Let’s imagine that when it comes to eating food I decide to worship pleasure as the ultimate good. The thing that determines what and how I eat will be pleasure. What gives me delight when I eat it? That is what I will serve. What gives me the most pleasure is Laurie’s apple pie, doughnuts, the yummy, doughy cinnamon rolls she makes and other such delights. When I serve pleasure as the ultimate good in eating in the end it will eventually have a negative effect on me. I will not get the nutrition I need, but I will become large. I saw a demonstration of this at Thanksgiving. Toby loves our Thanksgiving food as much as I do. Serving pleasure as the ultimate good, he ate more than he needed to eat. I have the same problem. There is always a point on Thanksgiving when I eat not because I am hungry, but because it tastes so good. Toby took it to the extreme. After dinner we had dessert. We had pies. There were 3 kinds, apple, pumpkin and chocolate. They all looked so good to him. Serving pleasure as the ultimate good he opted to have a piece of each one. About 20 minutes later he was lying on the couch groaning in pain. He went on to have a miserable night. He chose the wrong thing to ascribe ultimate value to in eating, with the result that he had a miserable night.

When we ascribe ultimate value to something that is a lie we are not just going to have a miserable night, we are going to destroy our lives. Ray Stedman also said that when we lose worship or worship the wrong thing, “life becomes dull, drab,

cheerless.” It loses meaning and becomes hopeless, leading to despair and emptiness. But when we worship the true good, the true God, life becomes vital, real...It is felt to be eminently worthwhile.

APPLICATION

So what does it mean to worship Jesus? How are we to do that? The Magi show us. **THEY SOUGHT HIM JOYFULLY**

Notice that verse 10 says when the Magi saw the star leading them to the house where Jesus was living with his parents “they were overjoyed.” Matthew’s original text was considerably more emphatic than that. It literally says “they rejoiced with extraordinarily great joy.” They didn’t just rejoice, they rejoiced with joy. They didn’t just rejoice with joy, they rejoiced with great joy. They didn’t just rejoice with great joy, they rejoiced with extraordinarily great joy.

I think it is safe to say they were really, really happy about finding Jesus and having the chance to worship him. This, of course, is typical of most of us today. It is exactly how we all are on Sunday mornings. We wake up and say, “It’s Sunday. I get to go to church and worship Jesus today. I am happy with extraordinarily great happiness and cannot wait!” Um, maybe not.

We usually are happy and rejoice greatly when something good happens to us. I get that the Magi had found what they were looking for and were happy because this part of their journey was over. But what did this all get them? They were going to worship Jesus, get back on their camels and travel for months to get back home where no one knew anything about Jesus. As far as I can tell they weren’t going to receive any reward at all for what they did. They’d just fade into history.

Somehow they knew that this little child was worthy of worship. They knew he was the most valuable being in existence, and they were excited that they had the opportunity to see him and worship him. Most of the time we don’t think of worship as a thing of unbounded joy. We may even see it as a duty we kind of trudge our way through, a sort of burden we have to put up with. But the consistent message of the Bible is it ought to be joyful.

Psalm 47:1 says, “Clap your hands, all you nations; shout to God with cries of joy.” As a grandparent I am being introduced to a new world of television shows. Little Ella has some that are her favorites, especially Mickey’s Roadster Racers and Sofia the First on the Disney Junior channel. Not long ago we were at her house baby sitting her and her sister and we turned the television on. Mickey’s

Roadster Racers came on and Ella started excitedly hopping up and down and clapping her hands.

Sometimes we politely clap our hands for someone who has given a speech or been given some award. Psalm 47:1 isn't about that kind of clapping. It's about the kind of clapping Ella did, the kind where we can hardly contain our joy and we are jumping up and down and clapping in glee. Psalm 100:1-2 says, "Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs."

Why do we not worship him with gladness and joy more frequently? Part of the reason is we see it as something we "have to do." It is a chore, a duty, and we approach it as such. I'm pretty sure the Magi weren't saying, "Could we just get this over with and go home? I've been on the road for months and I'm tired of this. Let's just punch this ticket and get going."

The biggest reason we aren't jumping for joy when it comes to worship is we just don't value God very much. We value other things way more highly. If we believe that God is really worth more than anything else in life, then we will worship him the way Ella greets her television shows. We are getting to honor the best person, the most wonderful thing in our lives!

Back in July our daughter in law Anna gave birth to Cara, our second grandchild. Laurie and I anxiously awaited the invitation from Anna and Toby to come welcome Cara into the world. When they invited us to come meet her we didn't say, "We're kind of busy. Could we schedule a visit when it's more convenient for us? We didn't say, "Fine, we'll be there in a bit" and then grudgingly drag ourselves to the hospital. We didn't have the attitude, "Let's say hello to the little baby and get out of there as quickly as possible." Wild horses couldn't have kept us away. And we rejoiced with extraordinarily great joy. That's because we see such immeasurable worth in that little baby.

Why don't we value God more greatly? It's usually because of one of two errors in our thinking. One is we see him as rather frowning, disapproving, condemning and demanding. He's the big authority up there who sees our failings and is fed up with us. He primarily issues rules that hem us in, rules we have trouble following, so he's quick to slap our wrists, or worse. May I point out that is not someone who goes to the extreme of the cross to have us as his children. That is not someone who says, "Nothing you ever do could separate you from me and my love for you.

Nothing.” When we see God as he is, we will be like the little child who loves being with Daddy, and hates being away from him.

The second error is that we see God as a good thing, but not especially relevant or important. We are convinced that what we really want is to feel better, look better, be richer, be more successful, have more fun. That’s what will make life full. Yes, what I really need is to get to snowboard on that perfect snow, to ride on those flawless waves, to see that play on Broadway, you fill in the blank. There is a simple bottom line question we need to be clear about. Where did life come from? Did that fun experience, that amount of money, that position, create life? Obviously not. It can’t. And it never will. Only God can. Which means being connected to him and drawing from him is the source of real life that lasts. Everything else will promise but fail to deliver. When we grasp that what truly gives life is God, we will value him above all else, and we will rejoice in him. We will clap our hands and shout for joy to him.

If you read the story of Jesus and pay attention, you’re going to love this guy. He’s amazing. He’s courageous, he’s bold, he’s tender with broken people, he’s wise, he’s witty and hilarious, he’s good, he’s downright magnetic. And he is going to suffer unimaginably for you and die to rescue you. He did way more than just fall on a grenade so you could live and live to the fullest. I hope you will love him, value him. I’d like you to view worshiping him the way you would approach opening that special present at Christmas. It’s not a chore to unwrap it. You tear into it with enthusiasm because you know inside is some wonderful gift that is given to you by someone who loves and adores you.

THEY BOWED BEFORE HIM

Verse 11 says an amazing thing. When the Magi saw the child they had come to find they bowed down and worshiped him. When Cara was born and we got to meet her for the first time we were truly happy. But we didn’t bow down before her. What does it mean when you bow down like those guys did? It means you are saying that person is of utmost value, that person is deserving of reverence and that you are going to serve and obey that person. You acknowledge that person’s authority over you.

When we worship God we bow down before him. In our church culture today we have a tendency to narrowly define worship. We say, “Oh I love the worship at that church.” Worship is way broader than what we do when we gather in a church service. That certainly is part of it, but it is not the biggest part of it. The biggest part of it is bowing down before God each and every day. It is acknowledging his

authority over us. It is obeying and serving him in our decisions, actions and attitudes. Worship involves every single thing we are and do.

A couple of months ago on Saturday night Toby and I started texting each other about a football game that was going on. I began to realize Laurie was getting irritated because she wanted to go to sleep. I had to choose to love her and told Toby I was going to call it a night. In a sense I bowed before her. Loving her was more important than even discussing football.

Real worship, real reverence, is going to come out not just in those moments in a church service when we think God is watching, but in our everyday lives. It will come out in obedience to God in our priorities, in the way we treat other people, the way we love our spouses and our children, in the way we use the resources, the time, the abilities and the possessions that God has given us.

THEY GAVE HIM PRECIOUS GIFTS

The other thing we see is that the Magi worshiped Jesus by giving him gifts. They gave him gold, frankincense and myrrh. It is common to hear preachers wax eloquent on the symbolism and meaning of these gifts, how they're about Jesus being the king or how myrrh, used for embalming predicts his death. But I don't think that's the point at all. I believe the point of telling us about these gifts is that they were all very expensive. It would be kind of like saying they brought him platinum, Chanel No. 5 and a top of the line Mercedes.

They acknowledged his great value by giving him gifts that were costly, that were a sacrifice for them to give. So this gives preachers an opportunity to tell you that if you are truly going to worship Jesus then you will give him money in amounts sufficient that they are a real sacrifice. You need to give large sums of money. You knew that was coming, right? They're always chumming for more money at churches. Look, God does want you to give, but this is not an opportunity for the church to hit you up for more money. It's way deeper and more important than that.

Okay, what does Jesus want us to give? To answer that I'm going to tell you a story. This is a story I plan to sell to the Hallmark Channel because it is from the script they use for many of their Christmas movies. The central character is, of course, an attractive young woman who lives in New York City where she has a demanding high pressure job as a buyer in the fashion industry. She has a serious boyfriend, a nice guy who is a rising star in a high powered law firm. At Christmas after much cajoling from her parents she takes some time off and returns to her

small home town in the upper Midwest where there always seems to be snow falling and the town's whole life revolves around Christmas. She's there to spend time with her parents, but in the course of events she has an unfortunate encounter with a young man who turns out to be the town veterinarian. Over the following days they bump into each other on several occasions and typically clash, but as time goes on an undeniable chemistry starts to develop between them. But both of them try to deny it because, after all, she is in a serious relationship with another man and he feels both that he should respect that and that he could offer nothing to the big city girl. Meanwhile things with her boyfriend could be better. He works ungodly hours, and every time they try to talk he has to end the conversation to take an important call from work. The plan was for him to join her in Small Town, but his trip gets postponed repeatedly because of a huge and important case he must attend to. It eventually becomes obvious that the veterinarian loves her, but can offer her little. He has no money because he is so good hearted he often treats people's animals even though the people can't afford to pay him. And she clearly has feelings for him, as conflicted as that makes her. Finally the big climax comes. The boyfriend bombs into town, squeezing in a visit that can only last 12 hours before he must head back to New York to work. He offers her a ring with a rock on it the size of Gibraltar, and tells her that her Christmas present from him is a brand new Tesla automobile. What does the young woman choose, the big city boyfriend with all the money and the glitz and the expensive gifts? Or the small town vet in his ancient pickup truck and his faded jeans and flannel shirt? She accepts the ring, because that has been the plan and it allows her to continue her successful life in the big city. We, of course, are yelling at her, "Don't do that! Are you crazy?" The local vet is gracious and congratulates her because he only wants what is best for her, but we can tell he is dying inside. She heads for the airport with Mr. Big Lawyer to return to New York. It all seems so wrong. But in the final scene she surprises the good hearted veterinarian by walking into his humble office when he thought she was on a plane heading east. And, she has no ring on her finger. She chooses the vet in the end because she knows she truly has his heart. The other guy might care about her, but his career and his success would always be first in his heart, and she has known it all along. What she wants more than any gift the wealthy man could give her, is the heart of a man who loves her.

What do you think? Is it Hallmark ready? I think we have to revoke Myatt's man card because he obviously has been watching Hallmark movies. Here's the point: you and I don't have any gifts that God needs. He truly is the Man Who Has Everything. But what he wants, is our hearts. Jesus said the greatest commandment is that we love God with all our heart, soul and strength. That we give him our heart, that he is first in our heart before everything else.

But how do we express that? Hebrews 13:15-16 says, “let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.” So we can express our worship, our love for God by offering up praise to him, and by loving and serving other people. That last idea can really help you this Christmas. As you are prowling the mall in a desperate search for that one gift for your loved one, think of it as a way to express love to God, to worship him, for as you love this person and give gifts to him or her you are loving God too.