

PASTORAL REFLECTIONS ON ST. AUGUSTINE'S *ORDO AMORIS*

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ABSTRACT: In this practical reflection on the *Ordo Amoris* as outlined by St. Augustine, I will endeavor to frame our understanding of genuine Christian love in contemporary pastoral and Christian context. By reflecting on the general theme of Augustine *ordo* as having interacting spheres whereby the Christian has shifting (but real) priorities towards God, self, and others, this reflection will highlight the necessity of covenant relational community as a critical component of our godly Image Bearing. To love others is to reflect God; to love God is to acknowledge his sovereignty. To be neglectful in our loves (regardless of which category we are neglecting) is to reject God and to deny his commandments to us.

KEY WORDS: Augustine, Love, *Ordo Amoris*, Pastoral Application, Covenant

Pastoral Reflections on St. Augustine's *ordo Amoris*

It was encouraging to see Christians discuss the *Ordo Amoris* (ordered loves) for at least a news cycle (AP News 2024). It was a noticeable news cycle because it brought the Vice President of the United States, who is a Roman Catholic, into apparent conflict with the head of the Roman Catholic Church (National Catholic Register 2024; Francis 2025). It is also interesting that neither John frame nor Michael Horton directly address the *ordo amoris* in their systematic theologies, suggesting that the idea is perhaps less common within strands of Protestant dogmatics than other traditions (Frame 2013; Horton 2011). One Christian response to the current political fracas emphasized that Christians are called to prioritize the weak, vulnerable, and helpless. Another Christian response emphasized that we should love other Christians we do not know in another country over our own grandmother who is not a believer. I am hoping to offer a correction to both answers that oversimplify the Christian call to order our loves. The correction will follow Augustine's instructions for ordering loves

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by loving God supremely in himself and then loving everyone and everything else for his sake (Augustine 2008)

Augustine's teaching on the two great commandments of Christ unite our love for God with all our being and our love for neighbor as ourselves. According to Augustine, the wise and virtuous life has loves properly ordered, which means our love for God must be our supreme love that obliges every aspect of our lives and controls all other loves (Augustine 2004: 15.22). We love God for his own sake, and then we love everyone and everything for God's sake (Augustine 2004: 1.27.28). Augustine's key argument is that we love others best when we love them for God's sake, according to His design and His commands, because this aligns our love according to the truth of what He designs and declares. This is demonstrated in Aquinas' exposition of the *ordo amoris*, where he states that 'God ought to be loved chiefly and before all out of charity: for He is loved as the cause of happiness, whereas our neighbor is loved as receiving together with us a share of happiness from Him' (Aquinas 1920: II-II, Q.26, A.2, resp). Because God is the *source* of love and charity, and our ability to express love towards others, our chiefest expression of a rightly-ordered love must be determined and governed by our love for God first and foremost.

The Need for Ordered Love

The importance of ordered loves can be seen in the different commands regarding love. First: 'love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all mind and with all your strength' (Mark 12:30). The object of this love and qualification makes it clear this is meant to be the supreme love and most important love that we commit to with everything we are and have (Aquinas 1920: II-II Q.26). Second: 'love your neighbor as yourself' (Mark 12:31). This love command assumes a self-love and the command calls all humans to love other humans with an equal love because we are the same under God (cf. Ryle 1994: 262). The command to love our enemies repeats the measure, 'as yourself', because the emphasis is that they are first our neighbors. Third: 'love one another as Christ has loved you' (John 13:34). This is a new commandment in the new covenant and must be a higher love than neighbor based on the qualification. This command has also been given an immediate context: Jesus, their rabbi, the Lord, had just condescended to wash their filthy feet (John 13:1-12). It seems certain that Christ loves me more than I love myself because he loves me with a divine love. Indeed, Carson notes that the newness of this command is not so much in its expression of demanding that the community of faith 'love one another' (consider, for example, Deuteronomy 6:5), but that Jesus is expecting the messianic community to 'reflect the relationship of love that exists between the Father and the Son' (Carson 1991: 485). In fact, Carson makes the point that being 'theologically orthodox' but living 'without principal obedience to this characteris-

tic command of the new covenant is merely so much humbug' (Carson 1991: 485; cf. Tertullian *Apology* 39: 'See, they [pagans] say, how they love one another...how they are ready even to die for one another.'). This order of greater love is also seen in Paul's command in Galatians 6:10 that we are to do good to everyone, especially to the household of God. The last love command is not to love the things of this world, which are the things God has prohibited or what we take and abuse as his good gifts for our own sinful purposes.

In order to think about these commands and how we order our loves, Augustine summarizes that there are four things we love: what is above us, what we are, what is close to us, and what is below us (Augustine 2008: 1.45). The love above us is the love we have for God or the higher purpose we seek. The second love is our love for self, which is a natural love. The third is what we could call neighbor love or love for whoever we see as equals. The last love is for everything else created on earth that was given to man to steward and enjoy.

Augustine observes that Scripture does not command us to love ourselves or to love the things below us because these both happen naturally (Augustine 2008: 1.45). The problem with these loves is that they are twisted and harmful without God (Augustine 2025: 6.6). Self-love must be ruled by humility and truth so that we see ourselves correctly according to what God has said about us. We cannot love ourselves well without loving ourselves on account of God. This is called sanity love because it recognizes how we too easily think too little or much of ourselves when we are not embracing what God has said about us (Augustine 2012: 9.1.4). We often love ourselves so poorly it is a form of abuse. For example, an alcoholic loves himself poorly by going to the bar again and again. Self-love too often drives our culture because we have elevated our feelings and identity in this age of expressive individualism.

The things under us refer to other creatures and creations that God has put under man's rule and authority. We can only love things properly and truly if we love them as a stewardship, recognizing God is their true owner who has put creation under our care (Augustine 2004: 15.22). As sinners we have twisted desires and purposes that seek to use God's good gifts in ways outside of his purpose and for our own evil goals. We end up serving things created rather than ruling over them as Image Bearers. We are called to enjoy the fruit of our labor and celebrate the fattened calf, which is a proper love that stewards what God has given. At the same time, we are commanded not to love the things of this world.

One clear gift from God to steward is sex, which is designed to promote unity and love in a marriage. (Contrary to what is often stated, Augustine was not anti-sex, *per se*, but rather strongly opposed to sexual activity that was selfish in nature; in writing *Confessions*, while admitting his sinful sexual history, he did note that had he been

married, his sexual activity would have been suitable, even acceptable (Augustine 2025: 2.2.3.) When we love this gift in itself and pursue it as an end in itself, Augustine stands with Paul who warns that it carries significant repercussions (Augustine 2025: Book 8; cf., 1 Corinthians 6:12-20). It has the power of uniting us with someone who is not our spouse and confuses our love with lust. In like manner, words are another powerful gift we have that can corrupt our heart with the lies we tell ourselves or harm others with slander, gossip, or false teaching (James 3). Words have been given to us so we can commune with God and each other, which means words are central to knowing him and making him known. Words are too often used to promote our selfish purposes.

The commands to love God and neighbor, what Augustine designates above and beside love, are commanded because these are the loves we are most prone to neglect because of self-love or twisted belief (Augustine 2008: 1.46). The love of neighbor is the most complicated because neighbor is the larger category that contains spouse, parents, children, friends, enemies, fellow believers, missionaries, church members, coworkers, and so on. This has posed further complicating challenges for us in our modern world of nation states, national identity, and therefore migration (the source of the dispute between Vice President Vance and the Pope). Reed has argued convincingly the idea of concentric circles is not what Augustine had in mind, at least in how we think today of political entities: '[Augustine] was uncompromising in affirming that kingship and ethnicity matter less than our common humanity' (Reed 2012; cf. Augustine 2008: 1:28). Indeed, in his treatise, *The Good of Marriage*, Augustine endeavored to explain that there were three benefits of marriage (procreation, fidelity of the married couple, and the sacramental bond they shared (Augustine 2017). However, he did also live within a framework whereby the family unit was 'foundation for the city, while the city in turn served as the foundation of the empire' (Hunter n.d). In acknowledging this order, Augustine was not thinking in terms of concentric circles, nor in terms of nation statehood, but building blocks for an ordered, holy, humanity. The marital relationship serves as an example of the relational nature of image bearing; 'friendship and community are the primary goods while human sexual activity is the means to an end' (Hunter n.d).

The love for God is the most important as the supreme love that alone can order all our loves so we live the blessed life under God (Augustine 2025: 10.22). The following table expresses the directionality and the relationship of the Biblical ordering of our loves:

Direction	Command	Relationship/ Identity	Love	Order	Reason
Up	God	Creator/ Yahweh/Fa- ther	Su- preme	With all I have and all I love	for his own sake
In	Self	Created in God's Image	Sanity	humility and truth	on account of God and according to God
Beside	One Another	Brother in Christ	Sacri- ficial	Covenant	On Account of Christ and accord- ing to His Love
Beside	Wife (Fam- ily)	Spouse, par- ents, children	Sacri- ficial	Covenant	On Account of Christ and accord- ing to His Love
Beside	Neighbor	Created like me	Same	Closeness and Circumstance	on account of God and according to God
Below	Stuff	Created for me	Stew- ard	made to rule earth, not be ruled by it	on account of God and according to God

Love God First

We are commanded to love God with all that we are, which means we love him on his own account not an account of another love (Augustine 2025: 10.29). This is based on God being the most lovely and worthy of love, and the most loving. The God who is love and extends his love calls us back to him so we can know his love and love him. He is the only true source of love and final end of love for those he made in his own image and those he loved by sending his Son in love. It is amazing how God first calls us to believe he loves us and sent his Son to die for us. We come to him loving the great gift of salvation and as we enjoy this gift, we grow to love the Giver of the gifts more and more (Levering 2013). We love God because he first loved us, and his love is manifested first by what he gives us. Augustine roots the love of neighbor within the love of God:

The end of the commandment is love, and that twofold, the love of God and the love of our neighbor. Now, if you take in your entity—that is, soul and body together—and your neighbor in his entirety (for man is made up of soul and body), you will find that none of the classes of things that are to be loved is overlooked in these two commandments. For though, when the love of God comes first, and the measure of our love for Him

is prescribed in such terms that it is evident all other things find their center in Him (Augustine 1887: 530).

With it being the case that our love for neighbor is rooted in our love for God, it is nevertheless important to remember that Augustine does not place *human beings* in a hierarchy of value. Granted, he does note that time, place, and circumstance may mean that a Christian must prioritize aspects of relational care; however, he does not demarcate that prioritization on superficial predications: ‘No sinner is to be loved as a sinner; and every man is to be loved as a man for God’s sake; but God is to be loved for His own sake’ (Augustine 2008: 1.27.28). He concludes by noting that if we are to love God more than *any* man, we are therefore to love God more than ourselves (Augustine 2008: 1.27.28). For Augustine, the love of God is the foundational building block for any healthy, holy, expression of love. He might agree with a paraphrasing of John Piper: ‘We love others best when we love God most.’

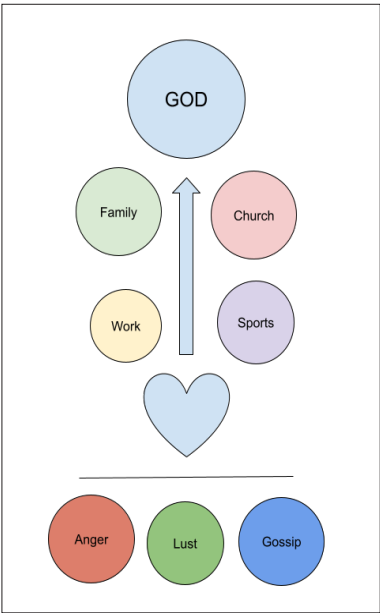


Figure 1: True Love of God

True Love of God is the first model that directs all our love toward God and seeks to love everyone and everything under him and with the value and priority that he has assigned. As Augustine expressed, this is the primary ordering of healthy, holy, love. To prioritize loving God will result in a genuine overflow of loving others appropriately. This means we seek to know how and why we love others and what things we

should not love that would distract us or pervert our love for him. This love does not allow us to determine who is unworthy of our love because we love ourselves and our neighbor, and even our enemy according to God's instruction and for his sake. This love seeks to be consistent and faithful to God who is true and helps us abide in his truth and enjoy the life he blesses (Augustine 2025: 10.28). The God who is love and loves us teaches us how to love him and everything else according to his design.

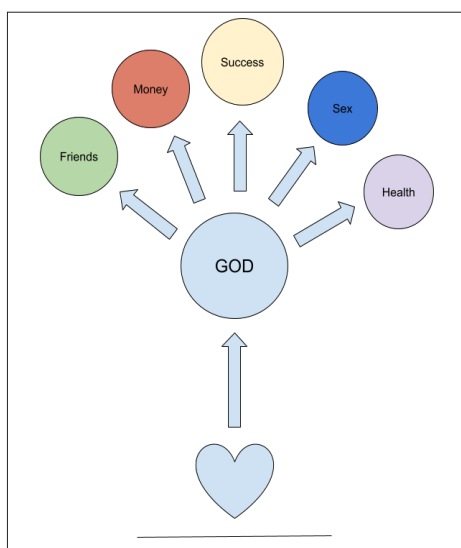


Figure 2: Pagan Love Using God

Pagan Love Using God is the second model that does not love God in himself, but loves him in order to receive and enjoy the things we want from God. The greatest love is on the things we enjoy that he has created and our love for God is only for the gifts he gives, not for him as the Glorious Giver (Smith 2019). We decide the value and priorities and expect God to help us with how we have prioritized what is worthy of love. We may ask God for help to think about what we love and see his commands as helpful when we agree, but ultimately we decide who and what is beneath us and what is to be desired as lovely.

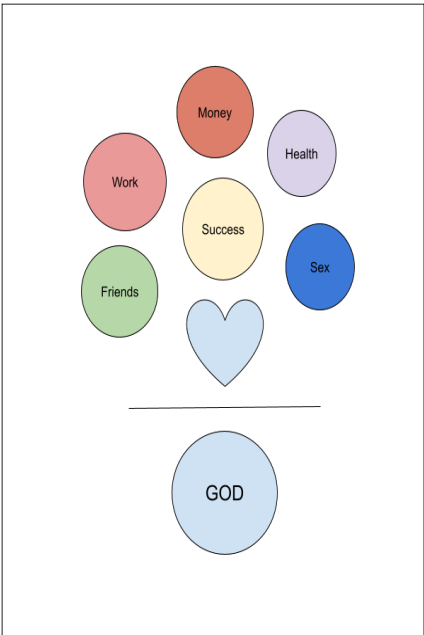


Figure 3: *Self Love Hating God*

Self Love Hating God is the last model that rejects even the notion of God as the giver of good gifts. This love is primarily what we desire without any reverence for God. Every desire and passion is considered good and pursued based on how enticed we are by them. Our loves are not ordered with a direct purpose beyond what we think best satisfies us in every new circumstance. Our loves and priorities shift around constantly as most loves are disconnected and move us to and fro. The things that we put below us as unlovely are the things we personally find gross and the people we have decided to deny as unworthy of our love because they are deemed beneath us.

Regarding the models, the first is the only option for believers. It requires a faith in God as good, generous, and authoritative. We are regularly tempted to believe God is harsh, stingy, and withholding from us the most enjoyable life with his law. We think we deserve better or that he could be doing a better job at satisfying our needs and wants. Faith in the God who has revealed himself as love and demonstrated his love is the beginning point. Paul reasons with us in Romans 8:32: ‘If God did not withhold his own beloved Son, what good thing would he withhold from us?’

Ordering Loves Beside Us

Jesus’ second command orders our relationship with those beside us as fellow hu-

mans, our equals, because we are called to love our neighbor as ourselves. The qualification for loving God is with everything and in every way because he is our glorious Creator. The qualification for loving our neighbors is based on God making every human being in his image with the same honor, dignity, and worth. This is why we do not murder, harbor anger, insult, or dehumanize other image bearers (cf., Matthew 5). The command is to recognize that every human being is equal because of God, so we love each other as equals on account of God. This is against the prideful ways we withhold our love from those we perceive as enemies or even actively oppose others because we simply do not like them. God's laws correct and redirect our fickle loves. This is where we start to feel the tension regarding God's authority because he defines who is our neighbor and even commands that we love our enemies.

The primary difficulty of the command to love your neighbor is revealed in the parable of the Good Samaritan and the direct instruction in the Sermon on the Mount. In both of these, Jesus is confronting the legal loopholes we create to justify our hatred of the neighbors we want to treat as enemies. Jesus makes sure his disciples hear that every enemy is your neighbor first. It is important also to remember that every neighbor is not your enemy. The practical ways in which Jesus commands his disciples to love their enemies is by praying for them and greeting them. This does not mean we must be best friends with our enemies or not have any boundaries when there are real threats and dangers. It means we remain open-hearted and hopeful in prayer, and warm and welcoming with greeting. Believers learn how to love their enemies with joy by meditating on God's love for them while they were enemies (Romans 5).

It is important that we see the command to love must include feelings about people, but also means we are to act in love in opposition to how we feel about some people. We have reduced love to the idea of something we fall into or a swirling up of affection. God commands our loves to be active and toward others. God's command to love means we lean toward them and seek to actively love them. Love is at its most basic level a promise, which means it is something we commit to with faithfulness. This is over and against our contemporary desire for love as random acts of kindness. To love others is to invite them into our lives and seek to care for them and bless their lives.

When we see what this kind of love expects of us, it helps us see the need for a clear way of ordering our loves so that we do not neglect people. We are limited in how much love, time, and energy we can promise and keep. Augustine's rule to help us order our loves calls us to prioritize those who are close in 'time, space, and circumstance' (Augustine 2008: 1.61). I want to offer a modification to this equation

with the rule that we prioritize our loves based on who is close to us in covenant, location, and circumstance.

CLOSE IN COVENANT

The neighbors who are also believers in Christ are united with us with a spiritual closeness because of the covenant we share in Christ. This order is based on the argument above that the call to love fellow Christians as Christ loved the church is a higher love that calls for prioritization over our love for neighbor as ourselves. The covenant love should be first because we are loving on account of God and according to his instruction. Not only does the love one another command have a higher measure of love, but we should also see that God loves his church/elect in a more intense and covenantal way than he loves every human being as his creation (Augustine 1887: 1.14). God's love for all humans is good and is seen in his blessing with what we call common grace and provision. God's love for the church (our 'one anothers') is the same love that the Father has for the Son for all eternity because we are all adopted into the divine family in the Son.

The closeness of covenant love has its own priority. I propose that the first priority of covenant love is your spouse. Husbands are commanded to love their wives as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:24). This is the same measure as the new commandment, but this marriage commandment (which can logically imply wives to love their husbands in the same way) would make your spouse the first in priority before the other members of the church. This love order is applied to elders as they must first care for their own family well before adding on the responsibility of eldering for the family of God. There is a first in order and priority implied in this call. Sadly, sometimes this comes at the cost of other relationships, even family, as Jesus makes it clear some will have to lose their earthly father and mother to follow Christ (Luke 14:26).

The new commandment as applied to believers is the next in closeness of covenant. For believers seeking to love God with all they are and to order their loves, this means their local church is the next priority because these are the believers you have covenanted with to worship and follow Christ together. This means there is a priority of seeking to care for the local church we belong to, striving to know others and be known in order to fulfill the many one another commands. The most significant one another command as we consider loving brothers on account of God is the call to forgive one another as God in Christ has forgiven us (Ephesians 4:32). Christ is very clear that we cannot love him who has shared his inheritance as Son with us and hate our brothers or neglect to love our brothers. Abiding in Christ means keeping the commandment to love one another.

How to love one another will look different for believers in different circumstances (work, kids, caring for parents, calling in ministry), but the call to be a committed member of a local church remains constant. The closeness in covenant and proximity places the local church at the center and as the primary beginning point. This does not mean members of other churches are despised or neglected. It means that where you have committed yourself as a member should direct your love to prioritize your efforts to grow as a disciple and make disciples. One of the ways this call to prioritizing and ordering loves is recognizing you will have to say no to many opportunities that seem good to the world in order to keep the love promises you have made to Christ and his church. For example, professionals will have to say no to promotions that take them away from family and church. Along this line of thinking, families, too, must say no to sporting or hobby commitments that would take them away from dedicated love of and with the church.

CLOSE IN LOCATION

The love your neighbor and enemy commands are meant to challenge our tendency to refuse certain neighbors our love. The category of neighbor as image bearer is absolutely essential as the most basic and important way we should see every human being (Augustine 1887: 526). This protects us from disregarding them quickly and calls us to see them in light of God. The only way to love human beings is to love them on account of God and according to his commands.

The rule of closeness or nearness is important today because we live in a difficult and dangerous age where we can know about and connect with people all over the world. I have observed the tendency of many to love people who are not close with sentiment and gifts, yet not love those who they interact with every day well. Those closest to us are often the hardest to love because we know them, their sin, and their difficulties more, which makes them harder to love. The close rule gives us a priority to love those God has ordained and designed to be close to us in proximity. Jesus asks his disciples to pray for the Lord of the Harvest to raise up more laborers because he has compassion for the crowds who do not have a shepherd. This invitation to have the same compassion as Christ and participate in his labor for others begins with those we can see because they are near. It is too often too easy to look past the people God has placed near us

A warning we must hear with all of these loves is using one of them as an excuse to ignore or neglect others unnecessarily. The call to love those who are close cannot be at the exclusion of caring for those far away. Paul warns that if a man does not provide for his own family he is worse than an unbeliever. This hard teaching demonstrates the importance of the first responsibility of family, those nearest in covenant

and location. And Paul is grateful for the gift from the Corinthians that goes to help believers they do not know, but are suffering. It would be disordered love to give to people you do not know if that means you cannot provide for your own family.

The importance of this rule can be easily recognized when we experience the consequences of sin and how our neighbors as sinners do not behave appropriately. We cannot love sinners on account of themselves because we cannot love sin (Augustine 2008: 1.59). However, we can see that while a sinner, their true and God-given identity is an image bearer. This is even more important as we consider loving enemies whose sin is felt more directly in the form of persecution or insult. The call of the believer is to see them as God's image bearer and love them as God loves them. This means praying for them and greeting them with kindness (Matthew 5).

If we apply the closeness rule to love of neighbors, we should see that we have a responsibility to love those God has placed near us. This does not mean they are just like us. In a neighborhood, the goal is to seek to know neighbors and invite them into your life and home. You seek to do them good when opportunity rises. In my own neighborhood, neighbors care for widows by removing fallen trees or shoveling snow for them. If they oppose you, you still greet them with kindness and pray for them. The parable of the Good Samaritan should be especially challenging if you think of a neighbor who is close that you have regular interaction with and do not hope for their good as an Image Bearer.

The closeness rule helps us with neighbors who are also far off. I am concerned that we too often send money to help neighbors far away because it does not cost us the inconvenience of real relationship struggles. This promotes a mere sentiment of love or empathy that does not show real compassion to real people with your own life. On the other side, there is also a concern with the 'circle the wagons' mentality that only cares for their kinship who are like them and near them. One of the dangers of knowing of every war and battle and problem around the world is that you can become desensitized to the struggles and not feel the burden for image bearers who suffer from war, natural disaster, and many other causes. While you may not be close enough to provide personal care for those far away, prayer and support is nevertheless necessary in its proper place.

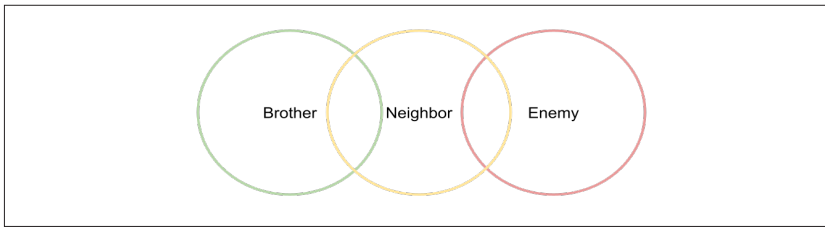


Figure 4: Circles of Proximity in Ordering Love

CIRCUMSTANCES

Finally, we need to have a healthy order in our love for neighbors because of circumstances. There are two circumstances that are emphasized in Scripture that we need to be mindful of that moves us beyond the closeness rule. The primary circumstance that is emphasized in Scripture is to love those who are poor, needy, and cannot give anything in return. This includes the widow and the orphan, as well as those who have suffered great loss because of a natural disaster or other circumstances. We should have real concern for neighbors near us who have immediate needs that can be met. And sometimes there can be such devastating circumstances that are life-threatening that we should reach beyond those who are near to love those farther away. Now, if you send money overseas to feed orphans at the expense of not providing for your own family, you have a serious disorder in your loves. However, if you easily disregard orphans in another country as another kind of people, you have a different, but also serious, disorder because you are refusing to love them on account of God.

Concluding Application

As you start ordering your loves, the most important advice is to begin with God. Know him who is love, defines love, demonstrates love, and who is easy to love in himself. Loving God more should be easy for believers who do so according to his Word because this is what God commands and desires for us. Our love for God and experiencing his love for us will lead us to honor and appreciate the measures he gives to the other love commands. When it comes to fellow humans, believers should find loving their families and other believers the best starting point because the covenant promises guide the relationship and should give clear expectations. Loving neighbors and enemies is more vulnerable and challenging.

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