

LOVING GOD

Text: Deuteronomy 6; Mark 12

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Years ago I was having a discussion with a group of young people. I can't recall the topic or the question I asked. But I well remember the response. 'Do you want the religious answer or the real answer?' Do you get the implication here? It's saying that life is a dualism, that it is split into two parts. There is the 'spiritual' or 'sacred' part where we show our love for God. And there is the 'neutral' or 'secular' part. As some one said to me about the second part of life: 'It doesn't matter what you do. It's all sinful anyway. I mean how could sex or politics ever be done to the glory of God?' What do you think? A couple of weeks ago we learned that we come to see our 'misery', our sense of alienation and sin by looking at the law of God. The Catechism referred us to the summary in the gospel: "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. And you shall love your neighbour as yourself.*" It's a good thing we have this summary. I have discovered that a lot of people don't like long reports, they don't like reading or haven't the time, so they ask for 'executive summaries'. Others find even that too much and ask for the issue to be summed up 'in a nut shell'.

That's what we see in Mark 12. We see a scribe approach Jesus to ask him a question. The scribes and Pharisees had been trying to corner Jesus with all sorts of questions and Jesus had answered them well. So this scribe, realising that, wanted to know, (Mark 12:28) "*Of all the commandments, which is the most important.*" Now there are 613 individual statutes in the law. Jesus' answer doesn't just consider which one of all these is the best, but which gives the main principle for the whole law (Torah). What is the whole point of the law upon which everything else rests? Which is another way of saying what is the basic reason for human existence? Trying to summarise the whole law in a single sentence had been tried before. One of the scribes, Hillel the Elder (40

BC –10AD), had said to an enquiring gentile, "What you yourself hate, do not do to your neighbour; this is the whole law, the rest is commentary. Go and learn it". Jesus' reply is far deeper and more beautiful. What he says is a quote from Deuteronomy 6. To understand this summary then, we will look at it in its original context. In Deuteronomy 6 we see Moses is preparing the Israelites to cross over the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land. Moses after 40 years in the desert is reconfirming the Covenant. He is giving the people many instructions about how they should live in their new land. He says their way of life is to come down to one central thing- to recognize only one God, and to live for him totally. "Shema Israel, adoni elohim, adoni echad". That is: "*Hear, O Israel, the LORD (Yahweh) our God, the Lord is one,*" or as can also be translated "*...the only one*". And because He is the only one Moses commands the Israelites in verse 5 to "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*" The first thing you will notice is the repeating of the word "all". The word 'all' can also mean "whole". And repeated three times it makes a very strong impression- that 'all' we do is to be done in love for God. So not just a 'spiritual' part!

That is even more clearly demonstrated when we look closely at the three words that the repeated word 'all' qualifies- the words 'heart', 'soul' and 'strength'. Do you notice the word 'mind' is not mentioned here? I'll explain why in a moment. Each of these words, on their own, can represent the total person, each from its own perspective. So in fact there is a repetition as each phrase calls us to love God from our total being. We will have a look at the three words, spending most time on the word 'heart' because it is the most common in the Bible, and is very significant.

What does the Bible mean when it says "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart...*?" In our culture we often use the word 'heart' with regard to our feelings. We say that a person 'thinks with his head and feels with his heart.' For example, if we lose a loved one we are said to be 'heart broken'. Or if we are thinking more medically we refer to the heart as the bodily organ that pumps the blood through our bodies. That is the most literal sense of the word. So, in our culture, the word heart is used in a physical or emotional sense. Think of the contexts in which you use the word 'heart'. How often don't we find it said in movies and the soapies 'Just follow your heart!?' Whatever that means! The Bible's usage of the word 'heart' is much deeper and also much broader than our cultural usage. First we will see that it's much deeper. The Bible

emphasizes that God 'looks at the heart' of a person, not just his outward appearance. He does so because the heart is the starting point of a person. It is where the person is really at. Proverbs 4:23 *"Keep your heart with all diligence, for from it flows the springs of life."* In Matthew 15:18 Jesus said *"What flows out of the mouth proceeds from the heart and this defiles a man. For out of the heart comes evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander."* What these passages show is that the 'heart' refers to the real you, what a person is like on the inside, the 'I', the 'ego'. It refers to the inner motivation and drive, the real you. On that score consider your own 'heart'. What are you really like deep down? What motivates you? What are your greatest ambitions and desires, your deepest fears and concerns? The real you, what are you like? There will be some deep desires to love and serve God; but also dark sinful secrets. Do you realize God sees it all, even the deepest recesses you don't want to go to, and yet, because of Christ, He still loves you?

Secondly in the broader sense, the word 'heart' refers to the total you. That is, you as a person physically, emotionally and intellectually. We will look at some passages and demonstrate this to you. In Genesis 18:5 we see the physical sense of the word. In our NIV Bibles Abraham says to his three visitors *"Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed..."* In the original Hebrew it says *"Let me get you something to support your hearts..."* The NIV has correctly translated the passage because the word 'heart' here refers to the physical person; the person and his body that need rest and refreshment.

When we look at Genesis 6:6, we see the word used in an emotional sense. *"The Lord was grieved that He had made man, and his heart was filled with pain"*. This is the way we often use the word 'heart', especially poetically. God is very upset. His feelings are deeply hurt. So here the word is used to express the emotional side of our humanness. It is often used that way by the psalmists. If a man is happy, the psalmist says his heart *"leaps for joy"* or it *"quivers"* or *"throbs"*. If a person is afraid, the psalmists talks of his *"heart melting within him"*. On the other hand if the person is courageous then his *"heart stands firm"*. We can well understand the emotional usage of the word 'heart'. Have you ever felt your heart beat a little quicker when you saw "the love of your life"? Have you felt it miss a beat when you were badly frightened? Have you ever written a poem of love using the word 'heart'?

Now, so far, we are still within the range of how the word is used in our culture. What is very different in the Old Testament is that the word 'heart' is used to refer to the 'intellect' to thinking. The word 'heart' is used where we would use the word "mind". In fact the Old Testament does not have a separate word for 'mind' or 'brain', though it is translated as such in our English Bibles. The Hebrew Old Testament, in all those places where our English Bibles have the word 'mind' it has the word 'heart'. The Hebrew people were not aware of the significance of the brain. They assumed that it was in the 'heart' that one did all their thinking and feeling etc. As an example of the use of the word 'heart' for the mind we note the passage in 1 Samuel 14:20. The wife of Phinehas is delivering her baby when she hears of the death of her husband and father-in-law. The midwife tells her not to despair. But says the passage in verse 20: *"...she did not respond or pay any attention."* The Hebrew says, *"...she did not give her heart"*. So giving your heart means paying attention, to put your mind to it. The Bible often talks of a person *"saying in his heart..."* By that it simply means that they are thinking about it. They are planning it in their mind.

What is the point of this little word study? And it is very little because there are actually over 850 references to the heart in the Old Testament. Well it is this. When the Bible says you are to *"...love the Lord your God with all your heart..."* it does not mean that you love God with some of your emotions or some religious part of your life. It in fact means you are to love God with your entire conscious being. Your every emotion and feeling, your every desire and appetite, all your thinking and planning, your attitudes and ambitions, everything, every: dream, thought, word, action, feeling, is to come from a heart that loves God. There is no dualism.

And as if that isn't enough Deuteronomy 6:5 also adds *"...with all your soul and all your strength."* Again, we can do big word studies here but we will keep it brief. The word 'soul' also has a variety of meaning in the Old Testament. In the context of Deuteronomy 6 the 'soul' refers to the very life of a person, to their very breath. In Genesis 2:7 we read *"And the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being."* The Hebrew says *"and man became a living soul"*. The word 'soul' can also mean the real you, the living person, the breath in their body, the person's emotions and desires etc. So we can say that loving God with all your soul means your very breathing, the flow of oxygen and blood to the various parts of your body, is to be an act of devotion to

the creator. And added to that we must love God "...with all your strength". So every time you flex a muscle and use your strength to work or to play, to exercise, it is to be realized as an act of love for God.

Are you gauging the full extent of the command "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength*"? Why does God demand such total love and devotion? Because as we saw Deuteronomy 6:4 declares "*Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.*" Moses' point to Israel was to make clear that there is only one God. There are not several gods that we owe love and worship to. That was the situation Israel came out of in Egypt with the sun god and the moon god and the river god etc. There is only one Almighty Creator God. And because He is the only one, all our worship goes to Him. We are to love God totally in every part of life.

And saying this has to be more than just a pious truism, because we often do worship more than one God. For example if you only love God half heartedly, this time for God and that time for me, then you are saying that there are other gods who deserve your time and love. These other gods might be called 'me', 'dollar', 'success', 'luxury', 'power', or whatever other gods we follow in our culture. I am not saying that you should not think about yourself or your financial situation. But the point is that in your thoughts on yourself, your ambitions, your desires, you should ask 'How can I express my love for God in this? Do I love God and trust him alone so I can give generously for the work of the church and kingdom. Or do I hang on too much to money and luxury because I am subtly trusting in them as well for my well being. On top of everything else we serve God with our total being because he first loved us with His entire being. In terms of Deuteronomy he is the God who loved and redeemed a despised nation. Deuteronomy 6:12 "*I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery...*" In terms of the context in Mark 12, we see Jesus being questioned and hounded by the Pharisees. We know that Jesus actually invited the persecution of the Jews to be crucified. It was his mission to bear all the sin in our lives, all the overt actions and the covert stuff hidden deep in our hearts so that we could come back to God and know him and love him and be loved by him. If God gave us his everything in Jesus, and Jesus gave his everything for us in hell, it seems our only worthy response is to give him our everything in return to say thank you!