

The background of the entire cover is a photograph of a person seen from behind, with their arms raised in a gesture of praise or prayer. They are standing against a dramatic sky at sunset or sunrise, with the sun low on the horizon, creating a bright, golden glow and long, horizontal clouds. The person is wearing a dark, long-sleeved shirt.

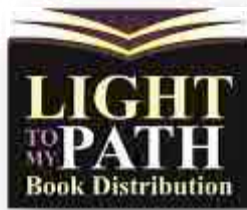
LOVING GOD

*A Study of the Great
Commandment
as found in
Mark 12:28-30*

F. Wayne MacLeod

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FOREWORD

I have done this brief study for personal reasons. It began as a word of exhortation from a brother and co-worker who asked me how I obeyed the Great Commandment. My answer revealed that, while I did love the Lord my God, I also had some areas of weaknesses. I realized that I needed to find more balance in this matter of loving the Lord with all my heart, soul, mind and strength. I felt led of the Lord to search the Scriptures to see what they taught about this most basic and important commandment of God.

I wish I could say that I have mastered and applied what I have discovered, but I can't. In fact, I believe it will take me the rest of eternity to learn how to love the Lord Jesus with the kind of love He demands and deserves. I pray that, at least, I will be committed enough to Him to make this my life-long priority in life.

As with all my books, it is not my goal to be scholarly or academic. If there is one thing I want from sharing this study with others, it would be that each reader be stimulated to love the Lord with the love He deserves. May the Spirit of God be pleased to use this simple reflection on the Great Commandment as found in Mark 12:28-30 to stimulate you to a greater love and devotion to our Lord.

F. Wayne Mac Leod

1

THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" "The most important one", answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'" (Mark 12:28-30)

Jesus spoke these words in the context of a debate with the religious leaders of the day. The Pharisees and the Sadducees had joined forces hoping to find fault with Jesus and His teachings. While they normally had significant differences, they were united in their effort to accuse Jesus of blasphemy. They bombarded Him that day with difficult questions listening very carefully to His answers for anything they could use against Him. There was anger, jealousy, deceit and hypocrisy in their words. They hated Him and His teaching. Their desire was not to learn from Him but to trick Him into saying something they could use

against Him. If they had their way, they would turn the crowd against him. More than this, however, they could find sufficient reason to kill Him and get rid of His influence among the people of the day.

One of the Pharisees present asked: "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" (Mark 12:28). While the question comes in the context of deceit and jealous anger, it was an important one. Little did this Pharisee know the impact that Jesus' answer would have on the course of spiritual history.

Jesus did not make up a new commandment that day. His answer came straight from the Old Testament law. He quoted from Deuteronomy 6:4-5 which says:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

Jesus' answer brings this Old Testament commandment to light in a new and fresh way. It places this ancient commandment before us as the greatest of all God's commandments and calls us to examine it again. Jesus went on to say that all the Law and the Prophets hung on this first and most important commandment (see Matthew 22:40). That is to say, every message the Lord ever gave to the prophets and every law of the Old Testament had this central commandment as its goal. It is the heart of God more than anything else that we learn to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

The Pharisees were legalists. They measured the value of a person's spiritual life in terms of what he or she did or did not do for the Lord. In reality the Pharisee was saying; "Jesus, what is the greatest thing we can do for the Father?"

Jesus answer is striking in this context. He told the Pharisee that day that the greatest thing he could do was to love God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength. The emphasis is on love. This is something the Pharisees often missed. They were so busy following the traditions that they did not have time for a true relationship with God.

Admittedly, I too, have often missed the point of what Jesus said that day to the Pharisee. I have worked hard for the kingdom of God but have I loved God? The church in Ephesus is an example of this. In Revelation 2 the Lord commends the church for their deeds, hard work, perseverance and dedication to the truth. In Revelation 2:4, however, He is deeply grieved because, in the midst of all their faithful spiritual activity, they had forsaken their first love. In other words, they had substituted true love for God for doctrines and service. The Lord called them to repent of this terrible sin or else He would remove their lampstand (Revelation 2:5)—their spiritual light would go out.

The response of Jesus to the question posed by the Pharisee shows me that more than anything else the Lord God is looking for a relationship of love with me. We can make our faith many things. For some it is about following a set of traditions and doctrines. Others make it about lifestyle. Others, like me, have made it about service, truth and advancing the kingdom. All of these are necessary but not of the greatest importance. The Lord God is looking first and foremost for hearts that love Him.

Notice that the word "all" is repeated four times in this commandment. We are to love the Lord God with "*all*" our heart, "*all*" our soul, "*all*" our mind and "*all*" our strength. He demands all our heart, soul, mind and strength. If we are going to be obedient to this commandment we must give ourselves completely to the Lord. There must be no

distractions. This command leaves no room for anything else. He must be everything and loving Him must be our greatest and only pursuit in life.

Obedying this commandment is not going to be easy. There will be many temptations in life to distract us. We will have to learn to die to ourselves and the pull of the flesh. Beyond this, however, I have discovered that if we are going to love the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, we need to learn how to care for ourselves so that we can love Him as he requires.

As I began this study I was experiencing ministry burnout. Physically, I was always tired. Spiritually and mentally I was drained. My emotions had gone numb and I could no longer feel anything. It was in this context that someone asked me how I obeyed this great commandment. That question disturbed me.

Over the course of the weeks and months that followed I began to ask myself some serious questions. How could I love Jesus with all my heart if I could no longer feel anything? How could I love Him with all my mind when it was so worn out I can no longer think straight? How could I love Him with all my strength if my body was tired and worn out? I realized that all my spiritual efforts were not drawing me closer to the goal of loving the Lord. If anything, they were putting me in a place where I was no longer physically, emotionally or spiritually able to give myself to Him or love Him as He deserved.

This great commandment has powerful implications in our lives and ministry. Its application will be different for each one of us. For some it will mean giving themselves more fully in service. For others like me it will mean slowing down enough to remember who and why we are serving.

For all of us it will mean dying to ourselves and seeking His guidance and healing in certain areas of our lives.

Over the course of the next few chapters we will examine briefly what it means to love the Lord God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. The topic is so vast that no study can really do justice to it, but my hope is to stimulate thought and meditation on this important commandment. I trust that this study will be a blessing to all who read it. More than anything, however, I pray that it will be a tool to draw you into a deeper and more intimate relationship of love with the Lord our God.

For Consideration:

- What is the difference between serving God and loving God? Is it possible to serve God faithfully and not really love Him as we ought to love Him?
- Take a moment to look at your own life. What is the most important thing in life for you? How does this measure up to what Jesus told the Pharisee in this chapter?
- What is the connection between loving God and caring for ourselves? Can we truly love God as He deserves if we burn ourselves out?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord Jesus that He gave His all for us. Ask Him to forgive you for the many things that have come between you and Him.
- Ask the Lord to show you in the course of this brief study, if there are any areas of your life where you have not loved Him as He deserves.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for putting service and other things before Him in your life.

Loving God with Our Heart

2

WHERE YOUR TREASURE IS

Anyone who has done a study on the difference between heart, soul, mind and strength knows that these various parts of the human being are not easy to distinguish. The heart is considered at times to be the seat of emotions. Speaking in Romans 9:2, for example, Paul said about the believers in Rome: "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart" for them. The heart is also a place of reason and intellect. This is clear from Mark 2:8 where Mark tells us that Jesus knew in His spirit "what they were thinking in their hearts." In Psalm 27:14 and Psalm 31:24 we are told to "be strong and take heart." This shows us that the heart is also a place of strength. When we consider all these verses together we see that the heart is the source of emotions, thinking, life and strength. This makes it quite difficult to separate the heart, soul, mind and strength.

Every human being is comprised of heart, soul, mind and strength. We have already seen that there is a great deal of overlap in the characteristics of each of these parts. For our purposes, and to understand what Jesus is saying in Mark 12:28-30, however, we will examine each of these aspects of human nature individually. We will begin first

with the heart. My purpose in the next few chapters is to try to grasp more fully what Jesus meant when He told the Pharisee that day that he was to love Him with all his heart.

As we begin I want us to see the heart as a place where our greatest treasures are remembered and stored. Speaking in Matthew 6:21 the Lord Jesus said: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." We have an example of this in Mary's response to the events surrounding the birth of her son, the Lord Jesus. In Luke 2:19 we read that "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." The events Mary experienced over those early days after the birth of her son were wonderful and memorable. They touched her deeply and so she stored the memory of these days in her heart. We have all experienced these kinds of events in our lives. As each special moment happens, we store it in our heart where it is kept safely and remembered fondly.

Memories are not the only things we can treasure in our hearts. In Ezekiel 28:5 the Lord God grieved that the region of Tyre had allowed their hearts to grow proud because of their increased wealth.

By your great skill in trading you have increased your wealth, and because of your wealth your heart has grown proud.

In our materialistic age we don't have to look very far to find people who treasure earthly wealth and possessions in their heart. Even believers can fall into this trap. Listen to what Ezekiel said about his own people in Ezekiel 33:31:

My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not

put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain.

The desire for wealth and possessions can take an important place in our hearts.

Notice in Ezekiel 28:17 how the prophet also accused the nation of Tyre of treasuring earthly beauty in her heart:

Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendour. So I threw you to the earth; I made a spectacle of you before kings.

The people of Tyre were obsessed with beauty. They enjoyed their beautiful homes and possessions. Their women delighted in their jewelry and fine clothes. Their hearts were set on looking good and giving a good impression. They judged the value of an individual by his or her clothes, jewelry, homes and physical appearance. They treasured beauty in their hearts.

Speaking in Matthew 5:28 Jesus said:

But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

In saying this Jesus is showing us that pleasure also can become a treasure in our hearts. Again we do not have to look very far to see how many people have placed a high value on earthly pleasures.

What we need to understand about the things we treasure in our hearts is that they have a profound effect on our lives and actions. Listen to what Jesus tells us in Matthew 12:35:

A good man, out of the good treasure of the heart, bringeth forth good things: and an evil man, out of the evil treasure, bringeth forth evil things. (KJV)

What we store in our heart as treasure will influence how we think and respond to life in general. What we treasure in our heart will influence our priorities in life. Take for example a man who treasures wealth in his heart. Will this not have a profound effect on how he lives his life? When wealth is the treasure of his heart he will willingly ignore more important things to pursue what he treasures. What we treasure in our heart will ultimately define who we are.

When Jesus tells us that we are to love Him with all of our heart, He is telling us that we are to make Him its greatest treasure. This might sound simple but there are many things that can take the place of Christ in our heart. While we have already examined the church of Ephesus in the last chapter, I want to reconsider it again in this context. Writing to the Ephesians in Revelation 2:2-4 the Lord Jesus says:

I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.

Notice that Jesus told the church in Ephesus that He knew their deed, hard work and perseverance. Here was a church that faithfully served the Lord Jesus in the midst of persecution and tremendous difficulty. Jesus also told the Ephesians that He knew them to be a church that could not tolerate wicked men. Here was a church that hated sin and devoted themselves to righteous living. Notice third that this church had tested those who claimed to be apostles and found them to be false. They were a church that knew the truth and stood firmly on that truth. The Ephesian church endured hardships for the name of the Lord Jesus and had not grown weary. Consider for a moment this incredible church. It was hard working, stood firmly on the truth, dealt with sin and did not grow weary in suffering for His cause. Yet to this church the Lord says: "you have forsaken your first love" (verse 4).

What did the church of Ephesus treasure in its heart? It treasured faithfulness to the Lord. It treasured and guarded the truth of His Word. It treasured righteous living. All these things were important but they were missing something of even greater value. In the midst of their busy service for Christ and His kingdom they had failed to treasure Christ Himself. Their hearts were devoted to service and kingdom building but not to the person of Christ. How easy it is, in our desire for the cause of Christ to fall into this trap?

Writing to the Philippians, the apostle Paul said:

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. (Philippians 1:21)

Paul could have boasted about many things in his life. He had done more for the expansion of the kingdom of God than any other man in his day. He probably had a deeper

understanding of the truth than any other apostle. He suffered more than anyone to advance the kingdom of God. What was Paul's treasure? It was not kingdom building or soul winning although he did this very well. Paul tells us that for him to live was Christ. Christ was Paul's greatest treasure. Writing in Philippians 3:8 the apostle confessed:

What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.

There can be no question here. Paul's greatest treasure was Christ. He set Christ up in his heart as his most sought after prize. To know Him and be found in Him meant everything to Paul. Everything he did and accomplished had as its end to know Christ.

Matthew 13:45-46 compares the kingdom of heaven a merchant looking for fine pearls:

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

Here in these two verses we read of a man who set his heart on this one great and priceless pearl. This pearl became his greatest treasure. In order to have this one great pearl, he sold everything he had. This is what Jesus is asking from us today. How much is Jesus worth to you? This merchant sold everything to have the pearl of great price. Everything else in life was insignificant compared to having that one pearl. Like Paul, he considered everything else to

be rubbish compared to this great prize he sought with all his heart.

Before moving any further in this study ask yourself this one great question. What do I treasure in my heart? The heart is the place where our greatest treasures are stored. Is Jesus the greatest treasure in your heart?

I challenge you today to look deeply into that place where you store all your treasures. What do you find in that place? There is an accumulation of things there in your heart. Experiences, memories, hobbies, people, possessions and work, all find a place in this great storage shed of the heart. Where is Jesus in this picture? Is He somewhere in the back on a dusty shelf beside your friends and hobbies? Even the great apostle Paul had many things he treasured in his heart. Writing in Philippians 1:17 he said:

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me.

The Philippians were treasured in the heart of the apostle Paul. You and I will have many treasures in our hearts as well. While Paul treasured the Philippians in his heart, there was one treasure that outweighed everything. The Lord Jesus was his greatest treasure and possession. For Him, the apostle would willingly give up all other treasures. Can you say honestly in your heart today that, of all the treasures in life, none of them can be compared to the person of the Lord Jesus Christ?

If we are to love the Lord with all our heart today we must learn to treasure Him more than anything else in our heart.

All other treasures must bow down to Him. The Lord God must become our greatest treasure.

For Consideration:

- Consider the heart as the place where we store our greatest treasures. What treasures do you have in your heart? What things are important to you in life?
- How does what we treasure in our heart affect who we are as people? How do our treasures define us and who we are?
- What place does the Lord Jesus occupy in your heart? Are you willing to surrender all other treasures to know Him and experience Him in a deeper way?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to show you what you treasure in your heart. Ask Him to reveal anything you treasure that does not bring glory to His name.
- Take a moment to thank the Lord for the many things you treasure in life. Thank Him for His rich blessings.
- Ask the Lord to help you to treasure Him more than anything or anyone else in life.

3

DELIGHTING IN AND ENJOYING GOD

In the last chapter we saw that the heart is where we store our treasures. The heart, however, is much more than a storage shed for treasures; it is also the emotional centre of our being.

Admittedly, we have seen excessive focus on emotions in our day. While emotions are a natural and healthy part of worship, there are those who place emotions before God. I remember overhearing a conversation between two ladies in a lively worship service I attended some years ago. "Are you drunk yet," one lady asked. "Not yet," came the reply, "but I'm getting there." These two ladies were referring to being drunk with the Spirit. As I listened to the conversation between these ladies, however, I wondered what worship was all about for them. Was it about Jesus or was it about getting an emotional high?

Having said this, however, I want to underline the importance of emotions in our relationship with the Lord God. There is a very powerful verse in Deuteronomy 28:47 where Moses warned his people about the curse that

would come to them because they did not serve the Lord with joyfulness and gladness of heart:

Because thou servedst not the LORD thy God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart, for the abundance of all things, therefore in hunger and thirst, in nakedness and dire poverty, you will serve the enemies the LORD sends against you. He will put an iron yoke on your neck until he has destroyed you. (KJV)

It angered the Lord God that His people were not serving Him with a glad and joyful heart. Their heartless worship brought His curse on their lives. This verse tells us not only that the heart has the capacity for gladness and joy but also that joy and gladness is a necessary part of worship and service.

The Lord Jesus promised His disciples in John 16:22 that when He returned, their hearts would rejoice with a joy that no one could take from them:

And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you. (KJV)

This is the promise and will of God for all who believe. The day is coming when He will fill our hearts with joy and rejoicing in His presence. This joy and gladness, however, is not reserved for heaven. It is also to be our present experience of God.

Notice the response of David's heart to the Lord God as recorded in Acts 2:25-26:

David said about him: "I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope.

Knowing that God was with him brought great gladness and joy to the heart of David. "My tongue rejoices," he said. His heart rejoiced so much in the presence of God that he could not hold it in. He was compelled to express his feelings in worship and praise to his wonderful God.

The apostle Paul encouraged the Ephesians to make music in their hearts to God:

Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 5:19-20)

Notice that the music the Ephesians were to make was not from the lips only but "in their heart". It was a deep expression of the emotions of their heart in worship to God.

Paul told the Colossians that they were to let their hearts express gratitude to God through psalms, hymns and spiritual songs:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. (Colossians 3:16)

The heart has the ability to rejoice and delight in the good things God has given. The heart experiences joy, happiness and delight and expresses itself in words and acts of loving devotion.

Have you ever wondered what life would be like without the ability to delight and enjoy the treasures God has given us? I have gone through periods of depression. One such period left me emotionally numb. I could not experience either positive or negative emotions. I would sit in a worship service and feel absolutely nothing. As others around me worshiped and enjoyed the experience, I listened without any feeling to the intellectual truth proclaimed in the hymns and choruses we sung. I would thank God for the truth these hymns taught but felt no stirring in my heart. News that would normally bring joy, no longer stirred me. I would take a day off but could not tell you if I enjoyed my day because the ability to enjoy things had died. At this time in my life I could not delight in God or anything He had given. I felt neither joy nor sorrow. I clung to the truth I knew of God but I was emotionally numb.

If there was one thing I learned at that time it was the role and importance of emotions. God has created our hearts with the ability to enjoy what He has given. It was never God's intention that we know the truth and not delight in it. God expects that those who know Him enjoy and delight in Him and His blessings.

Throughout the Scripture the Lord God commands His people to rejoice and delight in Him and His works. Paul delighted in the Law of God (Romans 7:22). Nehemiah delighted in revering the name of the Lord his God:

O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. (Nehemiah 1:11)

The Psalmist called God's people everywhere to delight or rejoice in the Lord when he said:

Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. (Psalm 37:4)

Isaiah the prophet pleaded with his people to turn away from worldly things that could never satisfy. He encouraged them instead to turn to God so that their souls could delight in the "richest of fare."

Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. (Isaiah 55:2)

God experiences deep and profound emotion toward us. The prophet Zephaniah tells us that God takes great delight in His people and rejoices over them with singing.

The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing." (Zephaniah 3:17)

It grieves the heart of God when His people offer Him heartless worship and adoration. Listen to the grieving heart of God as He speaks about His people in Isaiah 29:13:

The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.

Their worship of God was mere ritual and heartless routine.

God has given us a heart that is able to enjoy and delight in Him and the good things He has done for us. Enjoyment and delight are essential elements in our relationship with God. God wants our emotions to be stirred in worship (this will look different for everyone). He delights to see those whose worship is fueled by delight and enjoyment of His person. Heartless and emotionless worship bring Him no honour.

As I reflect on own experience of emotional numbness, I realize that it stripped me of my ability to experience delight and enjoyment in God. I am coming to realize that if I am to love the Lord Jesus with all my heart this includes my feelings and emotions.

To love God with all my heart means learning how to express my feelings toward Him. Some of us have stifled any emotional expression in our relationship with God. We need to see afresh just how much God wants us to learn to delight in Him. I'm not saying that it is wise to disrupt or distract others in worship by our expressions of emotion. What I am saying, however, is that our hearts ought to be stirred as we come to God and reflect on His goodness and person.

As believers we have focused so much energy on serving and obeying God that we have often neglected this matter of delighting and enjoying Him. Somehow we feel it would

be wrong for us to experience delight and enjoyment. What we have seen here, however, is that God expects nothing less from us. He wants us to experience deep emotional satisfaction and joy in knowing Him. He wants our hearts to be thrilled and overwhelmed with satisfaction and delight in Him.

Zephaniah tells us how God delights and rejoices over us with singing (Zephaniah 3:17). He gives us an example to follow here. If God delights in us and expresses that delight in us with singing, how much more do we need to learn to delight and rejoice in Him?

Have you closed off your heart's emotions to God? Do you realize that in doing so you have sinned against God who commands us to delight in Him and to serve Him with joy and gladness? The God who rejoices in you asks you to open your heart to Him today. Maybe your heart, like mine, has become so heavy that it cannot feel anymore. God is willing to touch that heart and restore its tenderness. Loving God involves the emotions of the heart. God designed our heart this way so that we could enjoy and delight in Him.

For Consideration:

- What is the difference between seeking emotion and seeking God? Can we fall short of God and be content with the emotions only?
- What do we learn in this chapter about delighting in God? Do you delight in Him? Does your delight in God bring joy and happiness to your heart and life?

- Is it wrong for us to experience great delight and joy in worship? What kind of emotion does God feel toward us?

For Prayer:

- Do you feel a hardness of heart today? Ask God to soften that heart so that it learns to take great delight in Him.
- Thank the Lord that He fills your heart with delight and gratitude. Thank Him that He gave us a heart that is able to experience its greatest pleasure and joy in Him.

4

MOTIVATION AND COMMITMENT

So far we have seen that the heart is where we store up and enjoy our greatest treasures. There is something else we need to understand about the heart. What we treasure in our hearts determines our priorities and motivations in life. Consider what the Lord Jesus told His disciples in Matthew 12:35:

A good man, out of the good treasure of the heart, bringeth forth good things: and an evil man, out of the evil treasure, bringeth forth evil things. (KJV)

What we store in our hearts will determine how we act, speak and live. This is the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 15:17-19:

Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.' For out of

the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

You can tell what is on a person's heart by how he or she speaks and acts. What is in our heart determines our priorities and how we spend our time and resources.

Satan understands the significance of the heart and its role in motivating the individual. Jesus told a parable in Mark 4 about a sower who went out to sow his seeds in the ground. He told His disciples that the seed in this parable represented the Word of God sown in the heart. Notice in verse 15 that when that Word was sown in the hearts of the listeners, Satan came immediately to take it away.

And these are they by the way side, where the word is sown; but when they have heard, Satan cometh immediately, and taketh away the word that was sown in their hearts. (Mark 4:15, KJV)

Satan knows the impact our heart has on our actions, thoughts and attitudes. He will do everything he can to remove the positive influence of the Word from our hearts. Satan is in the business of snatching away godly treasures. He will bombard us with temptations in an attempt to replace the treasures of Christ with the things of this world.

The greatest motivator of all is the heart. When our heart is stirred it will stop at nothing. It will make great sacrifices for that which it treasures. King David had it in his heart to build a temple for the Lord his God. Solomon spoke of his father's desire for this temple in 2 Chronicles 6:7:

My father David had it in his heart to build a temple for the Name of the LORD, the God of Israel.

A quick look at David's life shows us how his heart's desire influenced his actions. In 1 Chronicles 28:11-29:4 David hired workers, at his own expense, to draw up plans for this temple. He instructed his men and encouraged his son Solomon to carry on his vision. He contributed sacrificially out of his own resources for the project. 1 Chronicles 29:4 tells us that he gave 110 tons of gold and 260 tons of silver for its construction. We can only imagine the value of this much gold and silver. David's heart motivated him to make these sacrifices.

The apostle Paul was called to be a missionary and evangelist. God put a great burden on his heart for those who needed to know Christ. Speaking to the Philippian church Paul said:

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me (Philippians 1:7).

The burden Paul had on his heart led him to endure great suffering. He was more than willing to face chains and persecution to fulfill the call of God on his life. Writing to the church in Rome he said:

For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race. (Romans 9:3)

Paul would willingly have been cut off from Christ if by doing so he could see the Romans come to faith.

What we treasure in our heart will determine the course of our life. When the heart is touched with a burden, everything changes. Priorities are shifted and people are willing to give everything they have. The heart is the motivational centre of our being. It is the place where commitments are made and life goals are set.

What does all this have to do with loving the Lord with all our heart? Those who know Him as their heart's greatest treasure are stirred to action. They are motivated to follow hard after Him. Their heart keeps them in times of trouble and carries them through the obstacles. Like David, with his burden for the temple, no sacrifice is too great. Like Paul and his burden for the lost, they willingly lay down their lives. Jesus becomes their priority and passion in life and obeying Him and walking with Him, their deepest desire.

Take a moment to consider the motivation behind your life. What drives your goals and determines your priorities? What are you passionate about? Jesus reminds us in Matthew 6:12 that where our treasure is, there our heart will be also. Where our heart is there will be our commitment and motivation. When Christ becomes our heart's greatest treasure, our priorities will change. Everything that used to motivate us takes second place. He becomes our focus and passion. Hearing Him, loving Him, walking with Him and honouring Him become our greatest delight. For Him, we will lay down everything we have. This was the attitude expressed by the apostle Paul in Philippians 1:20-21:

I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

What was it that motivated Paul in his life and ministry? According to Philippians 1:20-21, it was that Christ be exalted in his both his life and death. Writing in Philippians 3:8 he said:

What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.

For the apostle Paul, loving Christ with all his heart meant allowing his heart to be stirred and motivated by Christ. It meant having his will conquered by the greater will and desire of the Lord Jesus.

Those who love Jesus with all their heart have committed themselves to Him and His purpose. There is nothing they want to do more than seek Him. Everything they do has His glory as its motivation. They will lay down all they have that He will be honoured in their lives, thoughts and actions. You do not love the Lord with all your heart if He is not your motivation and desire in all things.

For Consideration:

- How does what we treasure in our heart motivate us and define who we are?
- What do our priorities in life tell us about what we treasure in our heart?
- Take a moment to examine your priorities in life. How do you use your time? What is important to

you? What does this tell you about what you treasure in your heart?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to become so real in your heart that it impacts your whole life and what you do.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for anything that has taken His place in your heart and motivated your actions.
- Ask the Lord to give you such a love for Him that He becomes your greatest motivation and that you would be willing to sacrifice all for Him and His purpose.

5

INTIMACY

When we accept the Lord Jesus into our heart we bring Him into our most private and secret place. The heart is where we keep our greatest treasures. It is the place of our most private secrets. We don't let just anyone into our hearts. Because this is the place where we guard what is most precious to us, we only let those people we can completely trust into our hearts.

When we open our hearts to someone, we expose all that is most dear to us. We expose our deepest desires and ambitions in life. We show them who we really are. Intimacy involves transparency. It cannot thrive unless we are completely honest and open. Where there are hidden secrets, intimacy will always be hindered.

When we open our hearts to the Lord Jesus we chose to expose all we are to Him. We let Him see our inconsistencies and weaknesses. We reveal to Him our hidden and secret desires. Not everyone is willing to be exposed in this way. Many respond by hardening their hearts and withdrawing from God.

Speaking through Isaiah the prophet the Lord God said about His people Israel:

For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.' (Matthew 13:15)

Isaiah speaks of a people who did not want God to see what was in their heart. While God already knew all about them, these individuals did not want to open their hearts to Him and His work. Instead they attempted to hide their attitudes, sins and actions from Him. They resisted every effort of God to expose these areas and heal them.

Intimacy involves trust. When we give our heart to someone, we place our full confidence in them because they are dealing with what we treasure most in life. We place all that is most precious to us in their hands. To be truly intimate we must have complete confidence and trust in each other. Many find this difficult.

One day God called Moses into His presence on Mount Sinai. Moses remained there for many days. The people of Israel began to wonder what had happened to Moses. They thought that maybe he had been struck dead. They were not sure they wanted to trust such a God. They feared that their sin would bring His wrath on them and they would be consumed. That day Israel rejected God in their hearts and asked Aaron to make a golden calf to replace Him (see Acts 7:39-40).

We can all identify with the people of Moses' day. We know that our heart is not as clean as it needs to be. There are

secret desires lurking there we don't even want to admit to ourselves. Who among us is not fearful of what would be revealed if God searched our heart?

Israel turned their back on the Lord God because they were not willing to trust Him with their hearts. They feared what He would do if He exposed their sin. Loving God with all your heart involves trusting Him with all that is in your heart.

In our spiritual life loving God with all our heart involves surrendering all we treasure to the Lord God. It means allowing Him to touch us in places no one has ever touched us before. It means opening ourselves for Him to see those things we don't want anyone else to see. This is not a comfortable place to be.

In 1 Peter 3:15 the apostle challenged his readers to set apart Christ as Lord in their hearts. Setting Him apart as Lord in your heart means letting Him come into your heart and examine all that is precious to you. It means letting Him cast out of your heart anything that does not please and honour Him. When we set apart the Lord Jesus in our hearts we are asking Him to come into the most private part of our being. We are giving Him control of all that we treasure and value in life. It means exposing everything we have for Him to touch, heal and do with as He pleases.

Some time ago, I had a test done on my heart. Before undergoing the procedure the doctor came to my side and said. "Legally, I need to tell you that if you undergo this procedure you could die. There is any number of things that could go wrong. Are you ready to have the test?" As I went to the operating room that day I was literally putting my heart into God's hands as the doctor performed the

test. There was a risk involved in letting the doctor tamper with my heart.

This is the way it is with God. He stands before us today and reminds us of the risk of letting Him into our heart. He will deal with anything He finds offensive. He will cut out anything that is not for our good. We could lose things that we have treasured in our hearts for years. Ultimately it comes down to a question of trust. It is God's intention to heal our hearts, but are we ready to trust Him? Will we give Him permission today to do whatever He needs to do? There can be no true intimacy with God unless we give Him this permission?

Intimacy also requires acceptance. Intimacy will never flourish where there is rejection, judgment and condemnation. Paul makes it clear that because of the work of Christ on the cross there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1) He went on to tell the Roman believers they were to accept one another just as the Lord Jesus had accepted them.

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. (Romans 15:7)

Writing to the church of Laodicea, the Lord Jesus said in Revelation 3:20:

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

Notice that the Lord Jesus stood at the door and knocked. He wanted to enter. Notice also that He promised that if anyone heard His voice and opened the door, He would come in and eat with him. What is the Lord really saying

here? The meal they would share was not just about eating; it was about fellowship and intimacy. Jesus is telling us here that when we open the door of our heart to Him, He will come in and have deep fellowship with us. We will sit down with Him and share together as friend with friend. We will know His wonderful acceptance, love and fellowship.

Loving Jesus with all our heart requires opening up and exposing our deepest and most intimate secrets to Him. It means surrendering and trusting Him with all we love and treasure most in life. When we open our heart to Him in this way He has promised to come in and fellowship with us. Only then can we know true intimacy with God.

Have you opened your heart to the Lord God? Have you surrendered all that your heart treasures most to Him? Have you allowed Him to search out and know your heart? Do you trust Him completely with your heart's treasures? Will you let Him do as He pleases with your heart? We can only say we love Him with all our heart if our heart and all its treasures is completely surrendered to Him and His purpose.

For Consideration:

- The heart is where we hide our most intimate secrets. How easy is it to open our heart and expose those secrets to the Lord?
- How does opening our hearts to the Lord require trust?
- Take a moment to consider if you are willing to let the Lord do what He pleases with the treasures of

your heart. Is there anything you would hold back from Him today?

- Can we say we love the Lord with all our heart if we hold back part of it from Him?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to surrender your heart afresh to the Lord Jesus. Commit all you treasure in your heart to Him to do with as He pleases.
- Ask the Lord to search your heart and expose anything that does not belong there. Give Him those things and ask Him to restore your intimacy with Him.

Loving God with Our Soul

6

THE ESSENCE OF WHO WE ARE

Defining the soul is not easy. Let me begin, however, by stating that the soul is distinguished from our earthy bodies in Matthew 10:28:

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

The distinction between the soul and the physical body is quite clear in this passage. A similar distinction is made by the apostle John. Writing to Gaius in 1 John 1:2 he said:

Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.

It is obvious from this that Gaius was a man whose body was in poor health. His soul, however, was in great health. Again we see the distinction between the physical body and the soul.

In the book of Revelation this distinction is made even clearer. In his vision, the apostle John saw the souls of those who had been killed for their testimony and wrote:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. (Revelation 6:9)

Speaking of those who were beheaded for their testimony about Jesus, John wrote:

I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. (Revelation 20:4)

The slain and beheaded bodies of these particular saints were dead and in the grave, but their souls lived on. We understand from this then that the soul can live independent of the physical body.

What do we know about the soul? We have already quoted Revelation 6:9 above. In this verse John saw the souls of those who have been slain because of their testimony. Notice however, in the next verse that John also heard those cry out:

How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood? (Revelation 6:10)

This verse tells us some else about these soul, separated from the body. The souls John saw in his vision cried out.

They were alive and able to communicate. Notice also that they remembered what had happened in their earthly bodies. They also asked God for justice. While the earthly body lay in the grave, these souls continued to live, reason, experience passion and cry out for justice and righteousness. It seems from this that who we are is more connected to our souls than to our physical bodies. When our bodies are laid down in death, our souls, with their ability to reason, communicate and seek God, will live on.

There is something else we need to understand about the soul. It is not defined by possessions or position in life. We often measure the importance of an individual based on his or her possessions and position in life. When the Lord God looks at us, however, He does not see what we see. In fact, he condemns those who reduce the value of life to earthly possessions and position. Listen to what the apostle James said about this in James 2:1-4:

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favouritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Our soul cannot be defined by what we have in life. Jesus made this quite clear in Matthew 6:25 when he said:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what

you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?

Notice that Jesus taught that "*life*" was much more important than the body with its need for food and clothes. The word "life" here is the same word use for soul. Speaking further on this subject the Lord Jesus told His disciples in Matthew 16:26:

What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?

This world will come and go but our soul will live on. This earthly body will die. At that point, all our earthly possessions will mean nothing to us. The soul has no need of earthly riches. It does not hunger for physical food nor does it need it to survive. It has no need of fancy clothes or houses. None of these things are of any value to the soul. Its value is not measured in money or position in life. The value God places on the soul is best seen in how He sent His Son to die so that it could be saved from sin and live forever in His presence. This earthly body will come and go. It is a temporary shelter for something of infinitely greater value –the soul.

In the passages we have examined from the book of Revelation, we noticed that the souls of those who had died were in heaven. This is important. This shows us that it is our souls that will go to be forever with the Lord. God promises to give us a new body but that body will not be like our earthly body. It will be a totally new body, unaffected by sin and the corruption of this earth (1 Corinthians 15:35-44). We will not take this earthly body with us. It will die and perish in the grave. Our souls are another matter however; they will go to be in the presence of the Lord forever.

It is hard to imagine a living part of us that does not need to be fed, clothed and sheltered. We define ourselves by our physical bodies. These physical bodies, however, are only temporary shelters for our souls. God created us as eternal beings and placed our souls in earthly and temporary bodies. The soul is the essence of who we are and must be distinguished from this earthly body.

To love the Lord with all our soul is to love Him with an eternal love that will outlast our earthly bodies and possessions. When you commit yourself to a husband or wife you commit yourself to them "as long as you both shall live." This commitment is only for as long there is life in our physical bodies. When we love the Lord with all our souls however, we are committing ourselves for all eternity. This type of love will not end with the death of our physical bodies.

The love of the soul is deeper than any physical attraction. When Jesus was on this earth He had many people seek Him for what He could give to their physical bodies. He provided food and healing of their sickness. The love of the soul is not contaminated by a desire for riches or possessions, for it has no use for these things.

The love of the soul is a love that originates in the very core of who we are. It is an undying and eternal love that will continue when this earthly body is long in the grave. Our souls define who we are when all the externals of flesh and bone are stripped away. When everything is stripped away, what remains is a soul that is defined by its love for God. There cannot be a love that is more sincere.

For Consideration:

- What is the difference between the soul and the body according to the passages of Scripture we have seen in this chapter?
- How does the understanding that the soul is not defined by possessions or position affect how we treat others?
- Why do you suppose we place so much value on our earthly bodies?
- What does it mean to love God with our soul?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to examine the motivation of your love for the Lord. Do you love Him for what you can get for your physical needs or is it a love that originates from your soul. Ask the Lord to give you a sincere love for Him from the very depth of your being.
- Thank the Lord that His desire is that our love for Him last longer than our earthly bodies. Thank Him that He wants us to remain in this relationship of love for all eternity.

7

THE COMMITMENT OF THE SOUL

While we cannot see the soul, we have a role to play in shaping and defining its priorities and commitments. The Bible makes it clear that the destiny, shape and priorities of the soul depend, to some extent, on us.

Listen to what the Lord Jesus said in Matthew 10:28:

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Jesus told His listeners to fear the One who could destroy both the soul and the body in hell. This tells us that some souls are on a path to hell. On the other hand, in Revelation 6:9 and Revelation 20:4, John the apostle saw the souls of those who had been killed for their faith in the presence of God in heaven.

Not all souls will share the same destiny. Some souls will spend eternity in hell while others will rest in the presence

of their Lord in heaven. One of the most important decisions you and I will ever make concerns the destiny of our souls. The Lord Jesus died on the cross of Calvary to pay the penalty for our sins. Sin separated our souls from God. No soul could enter the presence of God without first being cleansed of its sin. Only those who accept the work of the Lord Jesus and His forgiveness can know this cleansing. To love the Lord God with all our soul implies first that we accept His offer to save our souls from sin through His work on the cross of Calvary. No one can say they love the Lord God with all their soul if they have rejected His offer to save their soul.

Making a decision about the future of our souls is the most important decision we will ever make. It is not, however, the only decision we must make in regards to our souls. Now that we have come to know Christ and have received His forgiveness, the next question relates to the commitment and priorities of our soul. Jesus told His disciples in Matthew 16:24-26:

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?

Jesus gives us a standard to live by here in this passage. He told His disciples that if they were going to follow Him, then several things needed to take place. They would have to deny themselves and take up their cross. This meant that they would have to abandon their own plans and agendas and surrender to His purpose for their lives. No one can follow Him who was not willing to leave the world

behind. This is a decision each one of us will have to make for our lives. Now that Jesus has saved our souls, what will be the commitment of those souls to Him in return?

Jesus demonstrated His commitment to us by His life on earth. Matthew tells us that he gave his life as a "ransom for many" (see Matthew 20:28). Jesus chose to give his life to accomplish the purpose and will of His father in our salvation. He now calls us to follow His example.

A quick look at the early church shows us the commitment of believers to give their life to the cause of the Lord Jesus. The commitment of Peter is clear in John 13:37 when he said:

Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.

The early church sent Judas and Silas along with Barnabas and Paul to the believers in Jerusalem. Notice what the church said about these men in Acts 15:25-26:

So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul— men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When the believers tried to convince Paul not to go to Jerusalem, Paul wrote in Acts 20:24:

I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

Paul was not afraid to lay down his life for the cause of the Lord Jesus. He made it his commitment to live for the Lord and his glory even if it meant physical death.

Paul told the church to welcome Epaphroditus in Philippians 2:25-30 because he had almost died risking his life to make up for what the Philippians could not give him.

All these individuals made a commitment in their soul to follow the Lord no matter the cost. They were not afraid to suffer in their physical body nor did for their Lord. What will be the commitment of our souls? Jesus challenges us in Luke 14:26:

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.

Jesus is not commanding us to hate our father, mother, wife and children. This would go against other clear teaching in the Bible. What He *is* telling us, however, is that we are to be willing to leave everything behind for the cause of the Lord Jesus. We must love Him more than anything else, even more than our own life.

In Revelation 6:9-10 we read about the souls of those who had been slain. In heaven these souls communed with God, reasoned and felt the pain of injustice on the earth.

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?"

When these souls were in their earthly bodies, they chose to live for the Lord. They risked their physical lives for His cause. They committed their bodies to serving Him and doing His purposes. They willingly surrendered those bodies to suffer and even die for His glory knowing that when those bodies were taken from them, their souls would enter the presence of the Lord in heaven.

While the bodies in which these souls were housed experienced tremendous suffering and pain, it was the commitment of each of these souls to live for the Lord their God. They would not let physical pain and suffering keep them from serving and honouring their God. Like Paul the apostle they exercised discipline over their bodies and forced them into submission to God's higher calling:

No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. (1 Corinthians 9:27)

Behind the suffering of the body was a real soul committed to honouring the cause of Christ no matter the cost. These souls made it their priority and goal to remain true even if it meant losing everything.

Do you love the Lord God will all you soul today? Than you will be willing to commit yourself to His purpose even if it means the death of your physical body? If you love Him with all your soul, then you will give your life to His purpose. To love the Lord God in this way is to follow the example of the Lord Jesus who willingly laid down His life for us.

For Consideration:

- How often have our decisions in life been influenced more by our physical needs rather than by our soul's desire and passion?
- Will all souls enter the presence of the Lord in heaven? Will all souls commit themselves to seeking God and His purpose? What does this teach us about the decisions the soul has to make?
- Have you committed your soul to seek after the Lord? Have you made it your soul's commitment to surrender all to the Lord today?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He has given us a free will to seek after Him. Ask Him to give you grace to commit your soul to Him and His purposes for your life.
- Do you know someone who has never committed their soul to the Lord Jesus and received His forgiveness? Take a moment to pray for that person. Ask God to reveal to them their need and to soften their heart to receive Him.

8

PURITY OF CHARACTER

There is one more aspect to loving Jesus with our souls we need to examine. The Bible challenges us to keep watch over our souls. In fact the writer to the Hebrews tells us that God had given us leaders to help us do just that:

Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you. (Hebrews 13:17, KJV)

If there is one thing for sure in this life it is that our great enemy Satan is also watching our souls and trying to influence them to turn from our Creator. The apostle Peter made very bold declarations in his life. He also denied the Lord Jesus three times. Peter understood how easy it is for the believer to fall. He understood the power of the enemy to deceive and tempt. There is a great battle taking place for the allegiance of our souls.

Writing in 1 Peter 2:11 the apostle, who knew what it was like to fall prey to the temptations of the enemy, wrote:

Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.

Who among us has not felt the sting of these arrows in our soul? The enemy would like nothing more than to fill our souls with sinful lusts and desires. His intention is to distract us from the purpose of our Creator and set our souls on a path of destruction and spiritual defeat.

Listen to what the apostle Peter had to say about false teachers in 2 Peter 2:14:

With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed- an accursed brood!

Notice the phrase "they seduce the unstable." What Peter is telling his readers is that these false teachers were leading souls from the truth of God's Word.

We are living in a world that has been "seduced" by false teachers and temptations of Satan. This is not new. Writing in Romans 1:21-25 the apostle Paul spoke of the corruption that ravaged the souls of men and women of his day:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth

of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

Many people have allowed their souls to be contaminated by the lusts of this world and the temptations that surround them. They give place in their lives to evil desires and sinful attitudes. They surrender their souls to sinful ways.

Satan's war is against our soul. As believers, we have the obligation to keep our souls pure and right before God. Listen to Paul's prayer for the believers in 1 Thessalonians 5:23:

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul prayed that the spirit, soul and body of the believers in Thessalonica would be kept blameless. This tells us that we can sin against our souls by allowing them to be corrupted by the temptations of this world. Many have fallen prey to these temptations and have corrupted their souls.

Loving Jesus with all our soul implies keeping our souls pure and free from distraction. It is the great desire of the Lord Jesus to present us to his father as a bride “without stain or wrinkle.” Listen to Paul's challenge to the believers in Ephesus:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as

a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. (Ephesians 5:25-27)

Notice that Christ gave himself to us to make us clean so that he could present us to the father as holy and blameless. Remember it is our souls that will enter the presence of God in heaven.

The apostle Peter writes in 2 Peter 3:14:

So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.

It is the obligation of each believer, in light of what the Lord Jesus has done, to keep our souls pure and blameless. This process will require a very specific effort on our part. The apostle Peter tells us in 1 Peter 1:22:

Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit to unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently. (KJV)

Peter tells us that the believers to whom he had written were purifying their souls through obedience to the Word of God. He encouraged them to continue doing this. If we are to keep our souls pure we must learn to walk in obedience to the truth of God's Word.

Our souls can be corrupted and follow after evil. If we love the Lord with all our souls we will have to make every effort to purify those souls from all impurities. We will make it our

priority to keep those souls clean for our Lord. When I married my wife, I promised to keep myself for her alone. This is what the believer must do as well. We must keep our souls for the Lord Jesus alone. Out of love and devotion to Him we guard our souls so that they please Him and bring Him great delight and honour.

From the very beginning of time the enemy has tried to corrupt the souls of men and women by turning them from the purpose of the Lord God and His Word. To love God with all our souls means keeping our lives pure and free from evil. The Old Testament law required that only those lambs without blemish could be offered to the Lord as a sin offering. God expects that as we prepare our souls to be with Him forever, we will do all we can to purify them.

Loving God with all our soul means offering Him a soul that is pure, blameless and without wrinkle. If you love Him with all your soul you will not want to have anything in your life that displeases Him or pushes Him away. You will do everything in your power to honour Him in your attitudes, practices and thoughts.

For Consideration:

- Can our souls be influenced by evil?
- How does keeping our souls pure and undefiled reveal our love for God?
- How has the enemy been trying to defile our souls today? What particular temptations do you struggle with?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to reveal any way in which your soul has been attracted by sin and evil. Ask God to forgive you and cleans you.
- Ask God to give you a heart that wants to keep pure and free from any sin that would defile your soul.
- Thank the Lord that He is able to cleanse and forgive us for the impurities of our soul.

Loving God with Our Strength

9

BE STRONG

Sometime ago I was weary from the stress of much service. I remember at that time how the Lord spoke to my heart. "Wayne," I heard Him say in my heart, "you can't give out of emptiness; you have to give out of overflow." This had a profound impact on my thinking from that point on. I had been saturated with the teaching that we always had to empty ourselves and that at best we were empty vessels. The problem with this teaching is that an empty vessel has nothing to give. If we are going to give we need to have something to give. This requires being filled.

This study comes in the context of my struggle with ministry burnout. I had been giving much to the service of the Lord but I wasn't being filled. There came a point in my life where I was physically, spiritually and emotionally drained. On one occasion I blacked out while driving my car and ended upside down in a ditch. The physical exhaustion gave way to emotional exhaustion and depression and yet I continued to minister without getting the proper rest.

It was in this context that a co-worker asked me a life changing question. "Wayne," he asked, "how do you obey the first commandment?" That question struck its mark. As

I reflected on this over the weeks and month that followed, I began to realize that I did not love Jesus as I needed to love Him. How could I love Him with all my strength if I was burnt out and physically exhausted all the time? I could not give what I no longer had. If I was going to love Jesus with all my strength, the first thing I needed to do was to be strengthened.

The Lord Jesus tells us in Acts 20:35 that “it is more blessed to give than to receive.” The Lord Jesus is telling us that He delights more in giving to us than receiving from us. It is important that we understand this. The Lord wants to give. He wants to strengthen and equip us. He wants to fill us with His strength and gifts. It is His great delight to do this for us.

Writing to the Ephesians the apostle Paul challenged them to be filled with the measure of the fullness of God.

And to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (Ephesians 3:19-21)

Notice the connection in these verses between being filled with the fullness of God and the praise that wells up in the heart of Paul. Receiving strength and fullness from the Lord produces a heart of love and devotion. We are overwhelmed by the goodness of God in strengthening and filling us, and express this in deeper love and devotion to Him.

In Ephesians 5:18 Paul told the believers:

Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.

Being filled with the Spirit is not an option here; it is a command. God commands us to be filled. Loving God with all our strength involves first being filled with the strength that comes from His Spirit. We have nothing to give until we first receive from God. If we want to love God with all our strength we must first open ourselves to receive everything He wants to give.

There are some people who feel that if we focus too much on receiving we take the focus off God. This is not the case. The hymn writer John Newton, who lived from 1725-1807 wrote:

The best return for one like me,
So wretched and so poor,
Is from His gifts to draw a plea
And ask Him still for more.

I cannot serve Him as I ought,
No works have I to boast,
Yet I would glory in the thought,
That I should owe Him most.¹

For years now the words of this hymn have struck me. John Newton understood the desire of God to give. He understood that unless he received from God, he would have

¹ Newton, John, "For Mercies Countless as the Sands," Grace Hymns: London: Grace Publications Trust, 1978, #15

nothing to give in return. He made it his commitment to receive as much as he could from God so that it could be used to honour Him in his life. We cannot give what we do not have. We must cry out to God for more. We must open ourselves to receive all that He is so willing to give so that we have something to give Him back.

If we are to love God with all our strength we must also realize the limitations of our physical bodies. The Psalmist wrote in Psalm 127:2:

In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for he grants sleep to those he loves.

God pours His strength into our frail human bodies. These bodies and minds grow weary when we do not care for them and get the rest we need. The Psalmist tells us that God gives His loved ones rest. If we are to use the strength God provides to its greatest capacity we need to care for these earthly bodies. If I wear out my body by carelessness, how can I have strength to love the Lord with all my strength? How can I use the gifts He has given me when I am exhausted and overworked? Even our earthly bosses know that productivity at the work place goes down when the workers are overtired. The same is true in our spiritual service. If we are going to love God with all our strength, we will need to care for the vessels into which God pours His strength. There are times when we are so overworked and overtired that our efforts for the Lord, though from a good heart, are far less than He deserves.

Loving Jesus with all our strength involves first letting Him give us all we need for ministry and service. If He doesn't give we will have nothing to offer. As believers we need to be filled to overflowing. As He fills us we are renewed and

strengthened. God will not only fill us but He will also overflow in us to others. If we give out of emptiness we will soon shrivel up. When we give out of overflow, however, we are constantly being renewed. No one can continue to give out of emptiness. We must be filled and overflowing if we are going to continue in service. The prayer of the apostle Paul for the believers in 1 Thessalonians 3:12 was that they would overflow in love for each other.

May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.

What is true of love is also true of our strength. We must overflow with the strength God provides so that not only will we be filled and satisfied but others will be as well.

The strength God provides must be renewed each day. It is renewed as we seek the Lord and His filling but it is also renewed as we care for the bodies which are the instruments God uses to demonstrate His strength to the world. To love the Lord with all your strength involves both receiving from him all that He desires to give and caring for the earthly vessels into which He places that strength. To consistently push yourself beyond what your earthly vessel can handle will only lead to a diminishing capacity to love God with all your strength.

For Consideration:

- Where does our strength come from to serve the Lord?

- Is it wrong for us to seek to be filled more and more with the strength of the Lord? What should be our motivation for seeking the strength of the Lord?
- How important is it of us to recognize our limitations in these earthly bodies? How important is it that we care for the bodies into which the Lord pours His strength?
- Have you serving the Lord out of your emptiness? What can you do to be strengthened?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the strength He makes available to you.
- Ask the Lord to give you grace to use the strength He gives you to honour His name.
- Ask the Lord to help you to care for the body into which He pours His strength.
- Take a moment to confess to the Lord that you have not always taken care of the vessel He has chosen to use to pour out His strength.

10

PERSEVERING IN DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

In the last chapter we saw that, if we want to love the Lord with all our strength, we need to be a people who are seeking to be filled each day with the strength He so willingly provides.

Serving God with all our strength is not easy. God provides the strength we need, but this does not remove the struggle or difficulty in life. There is a wonderful story in the book of 2 Samuel 23:9-10 about one of David's mighty men, a man by the name of Eleazar:

Next to him was Eleazar son of Dodai the Ahohite. As one of the three mighty men, he was with David when they taunted the Philistines gathered at Pas Dammim for battle. Then the men of Israel retreated, but he stood his ground and struck down the Philistines till his hand grew tired and froze to the sword. The LORD brought about a great victory that day. The troops returned to Eleazar, but only to strip the dead.

Eleazar is an example of a man who served the Lord God with all his strength. He stood his ground and defended a piece of land by himself. When everyone else abandoned their post, Eleazar fought the enemy until his hand grew so tired it froze to his sword. God rewarded his faithfulness and gave him victory. The rest of David's army came back simply to strip the dead of their valuables.

In Eleazar's case, loving the Lord with all his strength involved a lot of hard work and discipline. It meant standing alone when everyone else abandoned their post. There was pain and suffering for him, but he was willing to make the effort.

We see this same dedication in the life of the apostle Paul. We read in Acts 14:19-22:

Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe. They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith.

After being stoned in Lystra and left for dead outside the city, Paul got up and traveled to the city of Derbe where he continued to preach the good news and strengthen believers. While I have never been stoned for my faith, I can imagine that Paul suffered tremendously. He may have been knocked unconscious by these stones. He was likely bruised and maybe had a few broken bones. Traveling in that condition required tremendous strength of body and

emotion. Paul's love for the Lord Jesus, however, was such that he was more than willing to invest all his strength into reaching others with the message of the gospel of Jesus' love and forgiveness.

Paul went to great lengths in 2 Corinthians 11:25-29 to describe the difficulties he faced in his ministry for the Lord:

Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

You can't read this passage without being struck by the tremendous amount of physical and emotional strength required to endure what Paul endured. Here was a man who was physically beaten and stoned. He was shipwrecked and for a whole night and day fought for his life in the open sea. He laboured and toiled constantly. Sometimes he had no sleep and experienced hunger and piercing cold. All this, no doubt, exhausted his resources of strength. What kept him going? What was his motivation? He is a powerful example of a man who loved his Saviour with all his strength.

Paul's example is not the only such example in the Scriptures. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of many other individuals who were willing to suffer and endure great physical hardships for the cause of their Lord. Listen to what he writes in Hebrews 11:32-38:

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

The people spoken of here were ordinary men and women strengthened by God to face the battle. They were tortured, jeered, flogged, chained, stoned, sawn in two, mistreated and persecuted. They lived in caves, mountains, deserts and in holes in the ground. These were a people with no support. Their faithfulness to the Lord God required tremendous amounts of physical and emotional strength. They endured all and persevered in the strength the Lord provided, showing us what it means to love with all their strength.

I don't know what opposition you have to face today. We may not face the same opposition as those of whom the writer to the Hebrews spoke but God is calling us to stand firm in the strength He provides. Writing to the Galatians Paul says:

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. (Galatians 6:9)

The challenge of the apostle Paul to the Galatians was not to grow weary. They were not to give up. They were to persevere in the work God had given them. As one who has been in ministry for some time now, I understand how easy it is for us to grow weary in serving the Lord. Sometimes the obstacles that stand in our way can discourage us. Like Jeremiah, sometimes we work for years not seeing fruit for our hard labours. Sometimes people don't appreciate our efforts. Many great servants of God before us have grown weary. The prophet Elijah is a clear example of this. In 1 Kings 19 after defeating the prophets of Baal, Elijah was physically and emotionally depleted. In 1 Kings 19:4 we read:

He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."

Here was a discouraged prophet. He was discouraged because his strength was depleted. He had nothing left emotionally or physically to give. In his weakened condition, he was ready to give up.

It is important for us to note here in 1 Kings 19:7 that an angel of the Lord came and provided Elijah with food. That

food strengthened Elijah so that he was able to make a forty day trip to Mount Horeb where he would meet with God.

The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. (1 Kings 19:7-8)

There on the mountain, the Lord God met with Elijah, speaking to him in a gentle whisper. Elijah's physical strength had been renewed by the food the angel had brought him. Here on the mountain the Lord renewed his spiritual and emotional strength and sent him out again.

In Galatians 6:9 Paul challenged the Galatian church not to grow weary. The apostle knew what it was like to face opposition and struggle. He knew what it was to face the temptation to grow weary. He also knew however, like Elijah, the strengthening power of the Lord. That strength can be ours as well. If we are willing to be faithful, God will provide us with the strength we need.

He does not ask us to do anything that He was not willing to do for us. Hebrews 12:2-3 challenges us to look to Jesus as our example. He loved us with all His strength when He laid down his life for us on the cross:

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful

men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

During His brief stay on this earth, the Lord Jesus gave Himself fully to the work of the Father on our behalf. Luke 9:58 tells us that He had no place even to lay His head.

Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

He knew what it was like to be mocked and ridiculed. He felt the pain of the whip on His back. He was crucified on a cross and endured this for our sake. He gave us an example to follow. He told His disciples that if they wanted to follow Him they would have to take up their own crosses daily.

Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. (Luke 9:23)

Jesus does not promise that things will be easy in life. In fact, He makes it quite clear that the opposite will be the case. Those who follow Him will be asked to love Him with all the strength they have. This will require discipline and endurance. He promises to fill all who obey with the strength they need. Loving the Lord God with all our strength means walking through difficult places and persevering in troubling times.

For Consideration:

- Will loving and walking with God always be easy? What kind of obstacles will we have to face? What struggles will we have to endure?
- How did the apostle Paul demonstrate that He loved God with all his strength?
- How did Jesus love us with all His strength?
- Are you willing to love God with all the strength you have?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the strength He provides. Ask Him to give you grace to use that strength for Him and His service.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have not persevered or trusted Him to the end.
- Ask the Lord to strengthen you in the struggle you face today. Commit yourself to using all the strength He provides to walk faithfully with Him.

11

SERVING GOD

To serve the Lord God with all our strength implies using the abilities He has given. Paul told the Corinthians that each one of them had received a gift from the Lord to use for His glory.

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. (1 Corinthians 12:7-10)

The apostle further challenged the Roman believers to make use of the various gifts God had given them.

We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him

serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully. (Romans 12:6-8)

Notice how Paul exhorted the Romans to use the gifts God had given them in proportion to their faith, generously, diligently and cheerfully. God expects nothing less from us today. If we are to love the Lord God with all our strength we need to discover the gifts He has given us and put those gifts to use.

Jesus told a parable in Luke 25:15-30 about a master who went on a journey. Before leaving on his journey, he gave each of his servants a certain amount of money. Because he knew his servants, the master gave each according to their ability (Luke 25:15). His expectation was that they invest what he had given them so that at his return he would receive his money with interest (Luke 25:27).

One of the servants buried his money and returned it to the Lord with no interest. Luke tells us that the master was very angry with him for not investing the money and making a profit. The clear lesson from this is that God expects a return with interest on His investment in our lives.

What a privilege we have to be instruments in the hands of the Lord for the expansion of His kingdom. He has gifted each of us for a particular work. This is an honour we dare not take lightly. We demonstrate our love for the Lord God in how we use the gifts He has given.

Imagine for a moment that you purchased a special gift for a friend. You put much thought into this gift and invested a lot of your hard earned money finding just the right gift.

Imagine that your friend received this gift with thanks but put in a closet and never took it out or used it. How would you feel as the giver of the gift?

Sometime ago the Lord showed me a picture of a young child whose father had just bought him a brand new tricycle. I remember noticing the joy on the face of the young child as he rode that tricycle up and down the walkway to his house. What struck me even more, however, was what I saw when I looked at the father. As he watched his son there was great joy on his face as well. The Lord showed me that day that the greatest way to say thank-you to Him is to use and enjoy the gifts we have received from His hand. We demonstrate our love for God by using and enjoying the abilities He has given us.

I want to point out here that loving the Lord with all our strength and abilities is a requirement for all ages. In North America where I live, many people look forward to their retirement years where they no longer have to work. These individuals may certainly deserve a rest from their earthly work. The fact of the matter, however, is that there is no such thing as a spiritual retirement. When God tells us that we are to love Him with all our strength He puts no age restrictions on this command.

I have often found great delight in watching believers in their final years continue to offer their abilities and strength to the Lord. It is true that our physical, emotional and mental abilities seem to diminish with age but the requirement to love the Lord with all our strength remains. You may not feel like you have a lot to give but God delights in watching you use the little you do have for His glory.

In the parable of Luke 25 the master gave each of his servants a different amount of money. A quick look around us

will show that not all people have been given the same gifts, in the same measure. Some people seem to be given extraordinary gifts and responsibilities. The gifts of others seem to be very ordinary. What we have is not what is important; it is what we do with what we have.

John 6:1-14 recounts the story of how a young boy's small lunch was used to feed a great crowd. This young lad offered the little he had and the Lord honoured it by feeding an entire multitude. Many with even greater resources fail to accomplish as much.

Jesus expects us to use the gifts and abilities He has given, whether that is little or much. Listen to what he told His disciples in Luke 12:48:

From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

The more the Lord gives, the more He expects in return. Who among us has not received many blessings from the Lord? We all have one or more spiritual gifts from Him. We have a special role to play for the expansion of the kingdom. God wants us to use whatever we have been given for His glory.

There are two important details I want to emphasize in this chapter. First, as children of God, we are absolutely secure in our relationship with our heavenly Father. Because of what the Lord Jesus has done on the cross of Calvary, I am fully accepted by the Father. God will not accept me more if I serve Him more, nor will He accept me less if I serve Him less. My acceptance before God has to do with the work of Christ on my behalf and not on my efforts to please Him. His love for me does not depend on how I use

my abilities. Because I am perfectly accepted already, I am freed now to serve Him out of love and devotion. I serve not to be accepted but out of a motivation of love and devotion to God.

The second principle we need to understand here is that the God we serve is a sovereign and all-powerful God. He created the world as we know it without our help. He keeps the world without our aid. This awesome and wonderful God is fully able to accomplish His purposes without us. He has chosen, however, to involve us in this great plan of expanding His kingdom. Why would an all-powerful and sovereign God commit to us the task of expanding His kingdom? It is not because He needs us. Ultimately it is because He loves. He delights in giving us gifts and watching us cheerfully use them. He delights in seeing His children marvel at His power at work in them. His heart is thrilled as we overflow in praise and thanksgiving at the miraculous things He is doing through us for His sake.

When my son was growing up, I used to have him help me in my chores around the house. This was not because I needed his help. In fact, his skills had not yet sufficiently developed to be a real help. I actually spent as much time trying to help him as I did in doing the task at hand. Sometimes his help made the task even more difficult. Why would I ask him to help when I was perfectly able to do the task, with less effort, without him? I was doing this out of love for him. I wanted to spend time with him. I wanted to interact with him. This is how it is with the Lord God. He chooses to use us not because He needs us, but because He loves us.

Loving God with all our strength involves partnering with God in the expansion of His kingdom. Those who love God with all their strength delight to use the abilities God has

given them for His glory. They rejoice in using their strength for Him because it is a means of fellowship with him. They delight in joining him in the expansion of his kingdom. Their hearts are filled with praise as they watch God's Spirit pour through them and use them in wonderful ways for the glory and delight of their heavenly Father.

In my personal experience I have often found that my closest connection to God has been through the use of the gifts He has given me. I have found that when I am writing or teaching God seems to draw close. I experience my closest fellowship and intimacy with God in using the strength He has given me. We love God by using the strength He has given us.

For Consideration:

- What strengths and gifts has the Lord given you? How have you been using them for His glory?
- What is the difference between serving God to be accepted by Him and serving God out of love and devotion to Him?
- What is the connection between serving God and fellowship with God? How has your fellowship with God been enhanced by your service?
- Is love for God the motivation behind your service?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you grace to demonstrate your deep love for Him through how you serve Him with the strength and gifts He has provided.

- Ask the Lord to forgive you for times you have not served out of love and devotion to Him.
- Ask God to show you how you can use the strengths and gifts He has given you to demonstrate your love for Him more.

Loving God with Our Mind

KEEPING THE MIND PURE

The word "mind" in Scripture refers to the part of us that processes understanding and thoughts. In this study I want to examine two aspects to loving the Lord with our mind.

The first aspect of loving the Lord with our mind has to do with keeping our minds pure. If you are married, you will recall the vows you made to your partner. You promised to refuse all others and be faithful to him or her alone. This required that you commit yourself to a certain way of life and thought. You turned from others to give yourself to your partner. Jesus expects no less from us. He expects that when we commit ourselves to Him, we will demonstrate our love and commitment by rejecting everything that is not pleasing to Him.

The mind is the processing station for many of our activities. Consider for a moment what happened in the Garden of Eden. Satan came to Eve with a carefully reasoned argument. His first task was to get Eve to question, in her mind, what God had said about the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. He reasoned with her and convinced her that obeying what God said did not make sense. When Eve was convinced in her mind, she allowed her heart to

desire the forbidden fruit. What her heart desired, she acted on by reaching out her hand to take. The entrance point for Satan was the mind. Eve allowed Satan to reason with her and play with her thoughts.

Consider another example. Listen to what the Lord Jesus told His disciples in Matthew 5:28:

But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

How does this adultery of the heart take place? It is true that the heart is evil and longs for forbidden pleasures. Often however, what touches our heart must first pass through the mind. If we want to protect our heart, we must first guard our mind. When we allow evil thoughts and desires into our mind, they will soon filter down to the heart.

When we came to the Lord Jesus we committed ourselves fully to Him. Our heart, soul, strength and mind were all part of that commitment. I cannot love the Lord God with my mind if I allow things into it that displease Him or come between us. If we are to love the Lord with our mind we must make a special effort to keep our minds pure and right before Him.

Paul told the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 that they were the temples of God. The Spirit of God was in them. They had been cleaned and set apart for God and His purposes. Because of this, they were to honour the Lord God in their bodies.

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received

from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.

Notice that Paul told the Corinthians that they were to honour God with their bodies. The KJV adds the phrase "and in your spirit." This is because the word used for "body" in this verse is a very broad word that refers to the whole being. In other words, because we are the temples of the Holy Spirit we need to keep our whole being pure (body and mind). We must not allow anything impure to enter these temples. Loving Jesus with our mind clearly involves keeping our minds pure and separated for him. There are many areas of temptation for our minds as believers.

First, we must beware of what rises up from our own sinful nature. The battle to keep our minds pure for the Lord begins with conquering the sinful nature. Even believers can have evil thoughts and attitudes. We can think evil of our brother or sister. We can allow lustful thoughts to arise from our evil nature. Paul speaks of this in Colossians 3:5 when he says:

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

Those who love the Lord God with their mind must make it their commitment to put to death the evil thoughts, lusts and desires that rise up from their sinful nature and grieve their Lord. They do this out of love and devotion to their God.

Because I love my wife and have committed myself to her, I guard my thoughts about other women and keep them at a distance. The Lord Jesus expects this from us as well. He expects that all who love Him will be true to Him in their

mind. They will turn from every thought, attitude and lust that arises in their mind that dishonours Him.

Loving from the mind is a very personal matter. People do not see the thoughts of our mind. It is easy to look good on the outside but another thing to have the right thoughts and attitudes in our heart. To love God with the mind requires deep sincerity. It requires a commitment in an area of our life that no one else knows about.

While many evil thoughts and attitudes arise from our own sinful nature, there is a second source of temptation for the mind. Paul tells us that the sinful mind is hostile to God:

The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. (Romans 8:7)

The fruit of this hostile mind is evident all around us. The advertisements on our television and magazines cater to the sinful desires of the flesh. We are bombarded everywhere we turn with the evil influence of this sinful mind. It has found its way into our schools, workplaces and churches.

In the country where I live we have removed the Bible from our schools. In its place, we have taught evolution as a way of explaining our existence and made public opinion our authority. Sex education classes now teach children immoral lifestyles. We have taught that "alternative lifestyles" such as homosexuality are acceptable and have legalized homosexual marriages.

Television programmes, movies and books promote sin and laugh at God and His principles. Even believers have been influenced by this sinful worldly mindset. It is difficult

for us as believers to live in this world and not be bombarded by the teaching and thoughts of a mind without God. This worldly mindset grieves the Spirit of God and has no place in the life of the believer.

Listen to what the apostle Paul told the Colossians:

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— (Colossians 1:21-22)

Notice how Paul told the believers in Colossae that they were, at one time, enemies of God in their minds. They were enemies because their minds were not in tune with God. Their thoughts were contrary to God and His ways. Paul described the unbeliever of his day in Philippians 3:19 when he said:

Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.

The ungodly have their minds on "earthly things." Those who love God with their mind will take their mind off earthly things and seek God's mind and thoughts. They will commit themselves to resist the ungodly mindset of the world to keep their minds pure and holy for their Lord.

There is another source of temptation for the believer. Satan will do all he can to fill our minds with impure and ungodly thoughts and lusts. There are several examples of this in the Scripture. Listen to the response of Jesus when Peter rejected the idea of Him dying on the cross:

Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." (Matthew 16:33)

Notice that Jesus attributes Peter's thoughts to Satan. In other words, the thoughts Peter had at that time were put in his mind by Satan to discourage Jesus.

When Ananias came with a gift to the church and lied about the amount of money he had received for the sale of his property, Peter said to him:

Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land. (Acts 5:3)

Where did the idea come from to lie to the church? According to Peter, Satan put it in the mind and heart of Ananias.

Paul told the church in Ephesus that they were fighting "spiritual forces in heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). He encouraged them, therefore, to put on the "helmet of salvation" (Ephesians 6:17). As believers we need to have our minds protected with this helmet. We can be assured that Satan will bombard every mind that is not protected by the helmet of salvation with his ungodly thoughts and lusts.

Who among us has not experienced these ungodly thoughts? They come at us in an unguarded moment like a flaming arrow striking their mark and leaving us discouraged and frustrated. Some time ago, I was walking home after working all morning at a coffee shop on a chapter in a book I was writing. As I left the coffee shop that morning

I heard an inaudible voice in my head say: "What do you think you are doing? What is the purpose of writing Bible commentaries?" I knew that Satan was trying to discourage me in the work God had called me to do. That arrow hit its mark in my mind and I wrestled with those thoughts until the next day before God gave me victory.

Jesus was tempted by Satan in the Gospels. Matthew 4 recounts the story of how Satan tried to tempt Jesus by twisting Scripture. If Jesus was tempted by Satan, certainly, as His followers, we need to protect ourselves from his ungodly thoughts and attitudes.

There is a great battle taking place for our mind. That battle is taking place because of our own sinful flesh. We are surrounded in this world with ungodly thinking. Satan also will do his best to penetrate our thoughts and attitudes.

Loving God with our minds implies taking up arms to guard our mind from impurities and ungodly thoughts, attitudes and imaginations. Those who love God with all their mind have no place for these ungodly thoughts. They want their minds be a place where the Holy Spirit delights to live and work. They keep their minds pure and free from any thought, attitude or lust that would dishonour Him and His name.

For Consideration:

- Can we love God with our mind if we allow things that grieve Him into our minds?

- What kind of thoughts and attitudes do you have in your mind? What do those thoughts and attitudes reveal about your love for God?
- How does loving God with our mind prove the sincerity of our love? Who knows the thoughts of our heart?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to search your mind to see if there is anything offensive to Him. Ask Him to remove those thoughts and attitudes that grieve His heart.
- Ask the Lord to give you a love that is so sincere for Him that it would willingly remove even the secret thoughts of the mind that do not give Him pleasure.

13

ENGAGING AND DISCIPLINING THE MIND

In the last chapter we said that loving Jesus with our mind implied keeping our minds pure. Loving God with all our minds requires more than this however. Writing in 1 Peter 1:13, the apostle Peter said this:

Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.

The phrase "prepare your minds for action" is significant. The mind is an important tool in the battle against the flesh, the world and Satan. How do we prepare our minds for action against the enemy? The Bible has several things to say about this.

The Renewing of the Mind

First, if we are to prepare our minds for action, we will need to listen to the words of Paul in Romans 12:2 when he says:

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Paul told the Romans that they were not to conform to the pattern of the world but be transformed by the "renewing of their mind."

The apostle made it clear in Philippians 3:19 that the mind of the ungodly person was on earthly things. Writing in Romans 8:7 he said:

The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.

These are powerful words from the apostle about the unbelieving mind. We need to remember, however, that this was our mind until we came to the Lord Jesus. To some extent, we are still influenced by the world's way of thinking. Paul told the Romans that they were not to conform any longer to the world's way of thinking but to allow the Lord God to transform or renew their minds.

The ministry of renewing the mind belongs to the Holy Spirit. As we surrender to Him, He will change our way of thinking. He will convict us of our ungodly thoughts and counsel us in the ways of God. As we surrender to Him, our minds are transformed. We begin to see things as God sees them. The sin we enjoyed becomes repulsive to us. Our old attitudes are changed.

As our minds are renewed, intimacy with God increases because we are one with Him in our thoughts and attitudes. As long as our mind is hostile to God, we cannot

enjoy intimacy with Him. As He transforms our mind, He also draws us closer to Himself. If we want to love the Lord with all our minds we must learn to submit to the work of the Spirit in renewing our minds.

The Mind Controlled by the Spirit

Paul told the believers in Romans 8:5-6 that they were also to allow the Spirit of God to control their minds.

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace.

Paul takes this work of the Spirit a step further in this passage. Not only are we to let the Spirit renew our minds, we are also to let Him control them. When the Spirit of God controls our minds, we allow Him to correct and change any thought or attitude that is not pleasing to the Father. When He convicts us of a wrong attitude or thought, we submit and correct it. We open our mind to the ever watchful eye of the Spirit of God. We submit to His teaching, counsel and conviction.

Notice in Romans 8:6 that there is great reward for those who have surrendered their minds to the control of the Holy Spirit. According to Paul, the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace. Those who surrender their minds to the control of the Spirit of God will enter into deeper life and peace with the Lord their God. Sinful thoughts and attitudes can only hinder our relationship with the Father. When we allow the Spirit of God control, He corrects and

brings all thoughts into submission to the heart of the Father. This removes the barriers that stand between us and our God resulting in deeper spiritual life, greater peace and intimacy.

Taking Our Thoughts Captive

So far we have looked at the role of the Spirit of God in renewing minds and drawing us closer to Himself. We too have an important role to play. Listen to Paul's exhortation in 2 Corinthians 10:5:

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

Paul told the Corinthians that they were to take "captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." Consider the immensity of this task for a moment. How many thoughts pass through your mind in the course of the day? Have you taken each thought captive and made it obedient to the will of the Lord Jesus? This means that when you find yourself thinking ungodly thoughts you are to stop and correct those thoughts.

Some time ago my wife and I attended a French language school. The teachers challenged us to begin thinking in the French language. I took this challenge seriously. I remember a time when I was shaving and thinking about some things in my life. I realized that I was thinking in English and so I stopped myself and forced myself to think out those thoughts in French. This was a stretch for me initially but it became more natural over time. Eventually I was thinking in French. Paul challenged the Corinthians to stop

any thought that did not glorify Christ and bring it into submission to the will of the heavenly Father. In some ways this requires retraining the mind to focus on those things that are godly and holy and shunning those thoughts that displease Him.

When we find ourselves complaining about our lot in life, we need to stop those thoughts, and confess our lack of confidence in God. When we find ourselves thinking evil of a brother or sister we need to do the same. We cannot experience true intimacy with God if we allow these thoughts and attitudes to continue. We need to make a special effort to take these thoughts and attitudes captive. Loving God with our mind requires taking our thoughts and attitudes captive so they don't come between us and our Lord.

Filling our Minds with the Knowledge of His Will

Paul's prayer for the believers in Colossians 1:9 is important if we are to understand what it means to love the Lord God with our mind:

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

Paul prayed that the minds of the believers of Colossae would be filled with the knowledge of God's will. How are our minds filled with the knowledge of God's will? We have already seen that this takes place through the ministry of the Holy Spirit who instructs the believer. The believer is also filled with the knowledge of God's will through the Spirit-inspired Word of God.

Listen to Paul's advice to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15:

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

Paul challenged Timothy to be a workman who handled the word of truth correctly. As he did, he would be able to present himself to God "as one approved."

Consider for a moment the wife who wants to please her husband. How can she do this if she doesn't know what her husband likes or dislikes? The same is true in our relationship with God. If we want to present ourselves as "approved workmen" we need to understand the will and purpose of our Lord.

If we are to love God with all our minds, we must fill our minds with the knowledge of God's will that comes through a careful study and application of the truths of the Scriptures. By understanding His will we are able to please Him more fully.

The psalmist shows us another reason why it is important to fill ourselves with the knowledge of God's will when he writes in Psalm 119:11:

I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.

By studying the word of God and taking it into our minds and hearts we can keep ourselves pure in the moment of temptation. As our minds are filled with the knowledge of the will of God, we know how to respond when faced with

the temptations of the enemy. Listen to Paul's advice to the believers in Philippians 4:9:

Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Notice the phrase "whatever you have learned or received." The apostle Paul had taught the Philippians well. He showed them the will of God for their lives. They had heard Paul's teaching and taken it into their minds. Now Paul was telling them to apply it to their lives. Notice the promise of the Scriptures for those who applied this knowledge of truth to their lives. Paul told the Philippians that the God of peace would be with them. God would draw close to them as they took the truth they learned and lived it out. What began as lessons learned in the mind ultimately drew the believers of Philippi into a deeper relationship with God. To love the Lord with our mind requires that we fill our minds with the knowledge of His character and will so that, as it is applied, we are drawn into deeper fellowship with God.

Disciplining the Mind

In Philippians 4:8 the apostle Paul challenged the Philippians to discipline their minds to think in accordance with the will of the Father.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

We can allow our minds to focus on many things in this life. We can think about ungodly things such as lusts or

sinful practices. We can allow our minds to focus on past hurts and wounds inflicted on us by other people. We can allow our minds to be entertained by things that dishonour the Lord. Paul challenged the Philippians to set their minds on those things that were noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy. Anything that does not fit these criteria needs to be destroyed and erased from our minds. Believers are to discipline their mind to think on the things Paul mentions here in this verse.

Engaging the Mind

There is one further aspect to loving God with the mind I would like to examine in this context. Listen to Paul's counsel to the believers in Corinth regarding worship. Writing in 1 Corinthians 14:15 he said:

So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind.

Have you ever been worshipping in church and realized that your mind was not engaged? How many times have we mouthed the words of a hymn or chorus without giving any thought to what we were singing? How many times have we prayed without giving careful thought to what we were praying?

Paul told the believers in Corinth that when they worshipped God they were to engage their minds. It is possible to get so caught up in the moment that we disconnect our minds. Worship should involve the mind. This means that we need to give careful thought to what we are singing, praying or speaking.

Some time ago I was speaking with a brother in the Lord who was pastoring a church in another community. He told me that when he came to his church all they wanted to do was study the Bible. He went on to say that he felt the need to change the focus to worshipping God instead. I reminded him that it was not one or the other. Our study of the Bible should be fuel for worship. The more we understand God, the more cause we have to worship and praise Him. Fill your minds with God and His Word. Discipline yourself to focus on the truth of his Word and you will find your hearts being lifted up in praise and worship.

God expects that when we worship him we do so with our mind engaged. He expects that when we sing and pray we do so with our minds focused on Him and the truth we speak. True worship engages the mind.

If we are to love the Lord God with our minds, we must keep them pure. We must also prepare those minds for action. Preparing our minds for action involves realizing that we are in a battle. This requires that we keep our minds from the sinful attitudes and thoughts that well up in us. It requires taking each thought captive to the will of God. Loving God with our mind also implies filling our minds with the knowledge of His will through careful study of His word so we know how to please Him. Finally, it means engaging our minds in worship and prayer as we let the knowledge of who He is fill our hearts and influence our actions.

For Consideration:

- Does your mind need to be renewed? What thoughts and attitudes do you find in your mind? Do those thoughts and attitudes please the Lord?
- Are you willing to allow the Spirit of God to convict you of any wrong thought or attitude?
- How do you fill your mind with things that are pleasing to God?
- How do you worship the Lord with your mind? Have you ever found yourself worshipping the Lord with a mind that was disengaged or thinking of something else?
- What is the connection between intimacy with God and a mind that is focused on Him and His will? Can we experience true intimacy with God if our mind is filled with unholy thoughts and attitudes?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to search your mind and convict you of anything that is not pleasing to Him.
- Thank the Lord that He wants to renew our mind and bring them into submission to Him and His will. Ask Him to renew your mind. Surrender any particular thought or attitude to His Holy Spirit.
- Ask God to give you grace and discipline to keep your mind holy and pure before Him.

A Final Word

14

"ALL" AND "YOUR"

In Mark 12:30 there are two little words that are repeated four times. It is easy to miss the significance of this in a quick reading of the verse. Listen to what Jesus tells us in this passage:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. (Mark 12:30)

Notice first the word "all." This word is tremendously significant and I do not want to miss taking a moment to deal with it here.

Each one of us has different strengths, personalities and gifts. I personally experience little emotion but tend to be a deep thinker. My wife is more of an action person whose concern is to get the job done. These strengths, personalities and gifts influence how we see life in general.

What is true of our personalities is also true in regards to our gifts. I tend to be a teacher and find great joy in reflecting on Bible passages. The tool of my trade is my mind. As

one who has gifts of helps and mercy, my wife experiences the pain of others in her heart and feels the need to use her strength to act on what she feels.

Even our past experience can affect how we live and what is important to us. Consider the individual who has been deeply wounded by a tragedy in his or her life. To deal with the pain, this individual has suppressed his or her feelings so as not to get hurt any more. Maybe you have burnt yourself out physically in your work and your health has suffered because of it. Now you are very timid about overextending yourself. I grew up in a family that emphasized the importance of hard work. This has become part of how I now see life.

What I am trying to say here is that each of us has strengths and weaknesses. These strengths and weaknesses will affect how we obey the great commandment. Some people will love the Lord naturally with their heart. Others, like me, tend to focus on the mind and the strength. Because I am not a very emotional person, I struggle with this aspect in my relationship with the Lord. We all have strengths and weaknesses. The problem, however, is that the Lord does not give us an option in this command. He tells us that we are to love him with *all* our heart, *all* our soul, *all* our mind and *all* our strength. In other words, we are to love him in all four areas. We can't pick and choose here.

This is a real challenge. Personally, I have loved the Lord with my strength but have been weak in the area of loving Him with my heart. Heart involves emotions and, as I said, I have never been an emotional type of person. I just don't get excited about things in life. How am I to obey this commandment?

In part, the answer comes in the form of the second word repeated four times in Mark's account. The word is the word "your." This too is an important word because it makes the commandment personal to me. The Lord Jesus says that you are to love Him with all "your" heart, all "your" soul, all "your" mind and all "your" strength. This means that I don't have to be like everyone else. This means that my love for the Lord will look different from everyone else's love. Jesus does not demand that I have the same strength as my brother or express my love with the same emotions. He looks at me and says: "Wayne, I want you to love me with the strength you have. I want you to love me with the emotions you have." Comparing myself to someone else is senseless. God does not expect that I be the same as everyone else. Trying to be like someone else in this matter will only lead to frustration. That is why I am thankful for the word "your" in this passage.

Having said this, it would be easy for me to become careless in my love for the Lord God. I could very easily excuse my lack of love in any one of these four areas by saying that it is just my personality. I could say, for example, "I'm just not an emotional kind of person" and close that part of my life to the Lord. I could also say, "I'm just not a very intelligent person" and not take the time to study His Word.

Jesus makes it clear here that every one of us is to love Him with heart, soul, mind and strength. Every one of us is obligated to love Him in all four areas. There are to be no excuses for a lack of love in any of these areas. If you are not an emotional (heart) type of person you will have to seek the Lord about this in your life. You will have to ask God to touch this part of your life so that you can relate to Him as He desires. It may not look like my neighbour but at least I know that God is touching my heart and I am experiencing love for Him from my heart.

It is all too easy for us to do what comes naturally to us. You can love the Lord with all your strength and not have time for Him in any other way. This will only lead to frustration and burnout. What is important for us here is that we learn to find balance. For some of us this will mean slowing down and spending more quiet time with the Lord to develop our relationship with Him in a new way. For others, it will mean spending less time in study and more time in ministry or simple worship.

It would also be easy for us to find individuals who have modeled love for God in any one of these four areas and base our lives on their example. It is true that God has given us wonderful examples of love for Him in the body. We can learn much from each other and stimulate each other by our examples. It is important, however, that the love we demonstrate to the Lord be our own personal expression. God does not call us to live someone else's life. He has given us a personality that is unique to ourselves and expects that our love for Him in these four areas will not only be growing but also a genuine expression of our own personality.

As we conclude this reflection I would encourage you to take time to meditate on this great commandment and what God has been teaching you in this study. Let me offer you three words to help in your personal reflection.

"Love"

Take a moment to consider this word love. The Lord God is calling us to love Him first and foremost. This means that everything we do and think should have love for the Lord God as its motivation and goal. Do your actions and thoughts come from a motivation of love for God? Do they

have as their goal a deeper devotion to Him? Take a moment to examine your day. How much of what you did today was motivated by love for God? Has your life been about service, doctrine, traditions, or anything else? The greatest commandment is not about promoting truth, extending the kingdom or maintaining traditions, it is about love. This is what our lives need to be about. Love for God ought to be our motivation and desire in life. Is this the driving force behind your life?

"All"

God commands us to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. This means that we all have a responsibility to love him in all four areas of our lives. Take a moment to reflect on this word "all". Are there areas of your life where you do not love the Lord God as you should? What are those areas? Are there hindrances to loving God in any one of these areas? Take a moment to ask the Lord to heal anything from the past that keeps you from loving him as you should in that area of your life. Ask God to forgive you for allowing things to block your love for him in this area. Ask Him to teach you to love Him in this way.

Have you been unbalanced in your love for God? Have you neglected any one of these four areas by focusing all your love for God in only one direction? Ask God to help you to find greater balance. Ask Him to show you where you need to spend more time and energy so that you love Him as He requires.

"Your"

The word "your" makes our love for God personal. Has your love for God been an expression of the personality He has given you or have you been influenced by what others expect of you. Do you feel guilty because you don't love or worship God in the same way as a brother or sister? Have you accepted who God has made you to be and the type of relationship He wants to have with you personally? Can you accept those whose love for God is different from yours own without criticism and judgment?

I would encourage each reader to take time before the Lord to consider where they stand in this matter of loving God. Remember that Jesus said that this was the greatest of all the commandments. It would do us well to spend quality time considering His teaching on this matter and its personal application to our lives.

My prayer is that all who take the time to read this brief study will be encouraged and challenged to love God in a deeper and more balanced way that reflects the personality and gifts God has given uniquely to them. May God use this study to stimulate the love of many.

For Consideration:

- Is it possible to love God strongly in one area and fail to love Him in another? For example, is it possible to love God with all our heart but fail to love Him as we should with our mind?

- Should I expect that my love for God will look exactly like someone else's? How will my personality and gifts affect the shape of my love for God?
- How important is it that we learn to love God in all four areas of our life (heart, mind, soul, strength)? Where are you weak? What are your strengths?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to love Him with heart, mind, soul and strength. Ask Him to teach you where you have been weak.
- Thank the Lord that His relationship with you will be different from your neighbour. Thank Him that He has gifted you in a different way. Ask Him to help you to love Him as He has gifted you to love Him.
- Thank the Lord that He wants us to love Him. Thank Him that He cares particularly about you. Thank Him that of all the things He could require of us, His greatest requirement is love.

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