

“For the Love of God”

Mark 12:28-34



Dr. Will Cotton
Senior Pastor

How many times have you heard it said, “For the love of God...”, sometimes with the substitute “Pete” for God. It is a phrase that is usually said in anger and frustration, really as profanity. But as I read this passage about the greatest commandments, I began to ask myself and now you the question, “What if we did think, do and say everything ‘for the love of God.’” Jesus said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, your mind and your strength.” Jesus was quoting and expanding Deuteronomy 6:5. When Moses taught that commandment, it was really ways to say the same thing, to love the Lord with all that you are. By the time Jesus taught it, people divided these into distinct parts, just as we do today. Through Jesus I invite you to consider what it means to love God emotionally, spiritually, intellectually and physically, to love God four-dimensionally.

The first dimension is the emotional love of God: **You shall love the LORD with all your heart.** As 21st century Western civilization trained Americans, we could easily miss what Jesus and Moses were saying. When we think heart, we think of that organ in the lower center of our chest that keeps us alive. Hebrews believed the heart was in the stomach – a place where we feel passion. When we say “This is my gut reaction,” we are closer to what the Bible means by heart. When, in the miracles of Jesus, the gospel writers said, “Jesus had compassion on them.” It literally translates that “his guts went out to them.” The idea here is that the love of God is a passion for us.

When we gather together for a worship service, it is to be a labor of passion. Most churches never get there. Many guys find it difficult to openly praise God. We stand with arms folded, hoping that we can sit down soon and not feel so uncomfortable or bored. Why is it so easy for guys to hit an opponent in a football game or fire a gun at a skeet or an animal, but so difficult to sing to the LORD who made us and gave us breath? Is it possible that we teach our boys at an early age that singing to God or worshipping God is a feminine thing? Critics say that is because we don’t have enough things in church to relate to men and I agree. The Gospel According to Baseball was one way to invite men and sports loving women to hear afresh the grace of God. But I also wonder if we aren’t guilty of teaching boys and men that it is unmanly to worship and develop a love relationship with God. Dads, model a love relationship with God with your children. It will pay off hugely later in their lives.

But it is not just a gender issue. If we’re not careful, our faith can be a “head trip” only. It can be about what we know and how we are raised more than a true love encounter with God. This is part of our history as United Methodists. The Wesleys were brilliant scholars and thought that doing the right thing and knowing the right thing would make their relationship with God work. Then they met the Moravians on the way back to England from a disastrous missionary attempt in the American colony of Georgia. They told them of a heart relationship with God that led to John Wesley’s Aldersgate experience and the beginning of the Methodist movement. It was a heart encounter with God that gave us our birth. I ask you this morning? Is there a passion for God in your life? If not, when will you invite God to change that?

The second dimension after heart is soul. When Jesus invited Nicodemus to be born again of the Spirit, he was invited a deeply committed, well-studied man to open an arena of his life to God. When we say, “I

gave my heart to Christ,” we are talking about more than emotion, we are talking about something bigger in which the very essence of who we are gets united with our creator. That soul unity is there even when our hearts no longer feel Christ. It is when in the words of Paul in Romans 8, “Our spirit bears witness with His Spirit that we are children of God.” This is what the hymn means when we sing, “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine.” I have discovered that it can feel like God is 100 miles away, and I can be doubting the very things I have always believed and still there is the presence of God. Like David says in Psalm 139, “If I make my bed in Sheol (the place of the dead), you still are there.

This is the dimension that our regular prayer and devotional time is crucial, where our spiritual love for God deepens and strengthens. Some day our hearts will quit beating and our gut will cease to feel. Our minds will cease to function. Then what is eternal, what is soul is what enters into everlasting life, acquiring a new body in a whole new existence. In fact, our soul love of God is where that which is eternal happens in this life.

One of the things I love to do is to take long walks with God. It can be in the mountains, or along the beach or at a retreat at some place less exotic. After I have poured out my heart to God, confessed my sin, and gotten quiet, there is a presence that sometimes I feel strongly and sometimes not. But I leave there with the inner knowing that God and I have met and updated. Rarely is that time dramatic, but nearly always that time is profound. How long has it been since you cultivated your soul connection with God?

If Jesus had followed Moses’ order, here, we would be at loving God with our strength, but Jesus added a dimension. It was the one that was already included in the Greek version of the Old Testament that was popular in Jesus’ day. **You shall love the Lord with all your mind.** I’ll never forget Klaus Penzel, my History of Christianity professor saying to us with great passion. “There is a place for the intellectual love of God. After all, Jesus did say, “Love the Lord with your mind.” Do you remember when Jesus was about 12 years old and got lost from his parents and where they found him? They found him in back and forth conversation with the scribes, the learned teachers of the day. And do you remember his response to his angry and fearful parents, “Don’t you know that I would be in my Father’s house?” Or I grew up with it in the King James, “Don’t you know that I would be about my Father’s business?” What was the business he was about? It was the intellectual love of God.

These are very fast changing and complex times. And it has always been a temptation for people to choose the quick fix. So we find easy answers preachers and teachers who will tell us what we’ve always known and believed and make us feel good, rather than those who will challenge us to grow, think, and perhaps, God forbid, change the way we think. As a United Methodist, your founders were teachers and scholars at Oxford. As a United Methodist you are part of a movement that has planted more schools and universities than any other Christian denomination. John Wesley preached, “Let us unite the two so long divided, knowledge and vital piety.” I must say that in United Methodist churches I have seen the balance of both. Some churches have knowledge and some have vital piety, leaving both sides deprived. Just as spiritual coldness is epidemic in our churches so is intellectual sloth, mental laziness. And because of intellectual sloth, we are victims for every “new thing,” and every sincere or charismatically offered approach.

There is a faulty logic, a logic of convenience we tend to use with our Christian faith. We say to ourselves, I am a Christian, and I think this way, so Jesus thinks like I do. On the subjects Christians fight about most, each side claims the Christian point of view. So on homosexuality, abortion, gun control, war and peace, welfare and a host of other issues we claim that Christ thinks like us. When a person talks like that, I know they have never really read Jesus. They sincerely believe in Christ and sincerely have a point of view and link them together. I must tell you something shocking. Jesus doesn’t think like me. Aren’t you glad? And Jesus doesn’t think like you, either. And I am glad. For the bible says that we are to have “the mind of Christ,” not that Christ is to have the “mind of us.” This requires great humility on our part,

humility toward Christ with whom we have just begun to understand and humility with others who may hear Christ differently than us.

And when I speak of the intellectual love of God, I am talking about it in two ways. First, people need to read and study God's Word. Take 30 minutes a day to read and study. It will change your life as you feed on daily living bread. We really have no reason to claim spiritual burnout or emptiness if we aren't eating. Second, I believe the intellectual love of God involves how our minds grow in the other arenas of our lives. I learn at home, at work, at school, at the university, and at church to the glory of God.

We now come to the fourth dimension in living for the love of God, it is loving God physically – **“with all our strength.”** The King James Version describes it as loving the Lord “with all our might.” One thing for sure when you do something with all your might, it is the focus of what you are doing. There is no might left for anything else.

Old Testament was so much more physical than ours. They clapped, played instruments, sat, stood, bowed, danced, jumped, submitted offerings, burnt offerings, burnt incense and shouted to the Lord. People burnt calories, broke and sweat and used significant energy in worship. The body was an instrument of worship.

Their physical strength to live each day, to win a battle, to work in the fields was understood as a gift. That's why the story of Samson is so tragic. He allowed his strength to be used for immorality and to follow other gods. Most of us don't think of our play, our work, our eating, our sleeping and our service as something we do to the Lord, but the Bible says so. In this very sensual, physically-obsessed society we do not worship our bodies, but we are called to honor God with them. We are to take care of our bodies with balanced nutrition, good hygiene and exercise that builds and sustains. I can't help but wonder about tattoos on this count. I know there are Christian tattoos and tattoos have been used throughout history. The Jews were not to do them. It is not something to get legalistic about, but we do need to be sure that we are honoring God with them.

But clearly the biggest thing in the Bible about the physical love of God is keeping our actions godly. Jesus says in hyperbole, “If your eye offends you, pluck it out...If your right hand offends you, cut it off.” Paul says in a discussion of sexual immorality in I Corinthians 6, **“Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Glorify God with your body.”** To act in sexual immorality – everything from adultery to participation in pornography is an act which expresses a lack of love for God.

So this is the four-dimensional love of God to which Jesus calls: with all of our hearts, with all of our souls, with all of our minds, and with all our strength. This is what Jesus called the greatest commandment. It is the most important thing we do and it is the foundation for anything else we do that is worthwhile. So now I am back to the question I asked at the beginning of the sermon, “What if we did think, do and say everything for the love of God?” Then we would be living by the greatest commandment. I wonder if that wouldn't be the greatest way to live.