



Last Sunday we began a new series of messages titled *The Great Commandments*. During the worship services last week I also asked that you help me with the next series of messages I will present. That series is titled *I Love the Church Because...* and I would love to hear from you. Would you finish that title with a few sentences, or perhaps a paragraph or two, and send them to me? I will not use any identifying characteristics if I incorporate what you send to me, but I would love to hear how you finish that title.

As we began our current series of messages last week, I used a passage from the Old Testament prophet Micah, and this week travel further back into the Old Testament to one of the most foundational of all passages. The passage comes from the book of Deuteronomy and is commonly called the *Shema*. The word *Shema* is actually the Hebrew word for *hear*, and is the first word of verse 4. Though *shema* is simply a Hebrew word, it also becomes a title for what is, in essence, a prayer, which is all of verses 4 – 9. Taken together, these verses become a prayer that has for centuries been offered each day in the morning and evening. This would be, if it is an apt comparison, the Hebrew version of John 3:16, in that it is a passage that children would learn from a young age and would be almost universally quoted from memory.

This passage certainly would have been one of the first pieces of Scripture that Jesus learned as a boy. He would turn to this passage later, during his ministry, quoting it in Matthew 22:35-40 (35 *One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" 37 Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.*") and Mark 12:28-34 (28 *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?" 29 "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." 32 "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. 33 To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." 34 When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more*

questions). Jesus also quotes these passages in Luke 10:25-37, and then tells the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Follow along with me as I read our Scripture text this morning from Deuteronomy 6:1-9 –

1 These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess,

2 so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life.

3 Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you.

4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

5 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

6 These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts.

7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.

9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

I will take a few minutes this morning to speak to those three expressions of love that Deuteronomy mentions, but I am going to substitute one of them in the same way Jesus substituted. Deuteronomy says to love God with all of our *heart, soul, and strength*. Jesus uses the words *heart, soul, and mind*. I think it's a good idea to use the phrasing that Jesus used.

1. Mind.

I start with the mind because it is one of the overlooked components of our love for God. I find it interestingly ironic that, in our modern, technology obsessed, scientific age, we are not really people of the mind. We talk about the importance of education, and even base much of our education upon science and technology. Many colleges and universities, and an increasing number of secondary schools, build their curriculum around STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) to the exclusion of the liberal arts and many of the traditional educational curricula. But even with this increasing move to the sciences, we are people who remain more oriented towards the experiential and the emotional, which are represented by the heart. How many times do we hear ourselves say, or how often do we hear in entertainment – romantic movies, in particular – that we should *stop using our head and start following our heart?*

But is that always the best of advice? Not always. As one person reminded me this morning, *follow your heart, but take your mind along with you because your heart is an idiot*. Very sage advice, indeed! Our mind is a necessary balance to our heart, which doesn't always make the best of decisions. Sometimes, for instance, we will say *my heart just isn't in it*. But just because my heart isn't in something isn't an excuse to forsake responsibilities. There are some Sunday mornings when I might be particularly tired and my heart tells me to stay home and in bed, but my head reminds me that there are people who will be here and they will be waiting on me to stand up hear and bring a message. My head tells me that I have a responsibility as the minister of this church to show up, and to not only show up here but show up in hospitals, and nursing homes, and funeral homes, which are not places that I always enjoy entering, but it is important that I do so. My heart is often attracted to all the nice guitars hanging on the wall of a music store, and as much as I believe they need a good home I know that if I followed my heart our basement walls would be covered with guitars. My head tells me that as much as my heart wants to take some of those guitars home, I have bills to pay. I need to pay the mortgage, and the electric bill, and the insurance bill, and lots of other bills as well.

It's a wonderful thing to follow our hearts, until it's a bad idea because our hearts might lead us somewhere unpractical and harmful to us. That's why God gave us a mind; so that we can make a good and logical decision. We can't be ruled by emotion. We can't be ruled by impulse. We can't be ruled by every wind that blows our way.

Jesus warned us that we should be as *wise as serpents and innocent as doves* (Matthew 10:16). He called us to use our minds and in his brilliance he was such a great example of how to use our minds. Jesus was brilliant in his teaching, constructing those amazing parables that drew people in and then drove home his point. He was brilliant in the way he dealt with his opponents, as there were many times they presented Jesus with what they believed to be an unanswerable question, and believing they had effectively trapped him. But they did not, as Jesus came back with a brilliant response and left them speechless, and often wary of challenging him again. As we read the Gospels it is truly impressive to see the ways in which the mind of Jesus worked.

I have spent a lot of time over the course of my life studying. And while I wasn't always the most ambitious of students, and not always the best student, I always liked the classroom and I love to learn. I have a lot of years invested in classes and degree programs, and in spite of all the time and work invested there are many days when I feel as though I don't know very much. There are many days when I wish someone would ask me a question I have the answer to.

There has too often been, in the history of American Protestantism, especially, a spirit of anti-intellectualism that has permeated too many churches. It is an anti-intellectualism that sometimes seems to glory in ignorance, and that is not, I'm certain, what God would desire. We do not check our minds at the front door of the church; instead we sharpen our minds and we feed our minds, and we challenge our minds.

Verse 7 says to *impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.* That's an entreaty to take seriously the call we have to spiritual education. I believe that, as followers of Jesus, we ought to use the minds that God has given to us. The mind really is a terrible thing to waste, as the old commercial said. When the Hebrew people taught their children to recite this prayer it was part of a larger piece of spiritual education they provided for their families. I am grateful for the opportunity churches have to provide spiritual education, but we need as much spiritual education in the home as we can have as well. When you children, or your grandchildren, ask you a spiritual question and you don't know, take the time to study and seek an answer.

2. Heart.

There were times in history – the Enlightenment, for instance – when the mind took precedence over the heart. At that point in history, they would have puzzled over our insistence to *follow our heart rather than our head.* During the Enlightenment, they would have been people who would follow their heads rather than their hearts.

But we don't want to be ruled by the head, do we? We don't want to be a Mr. Spock, all logic and no emotion. Because of the power of love, we are people more oriented to the heart, and as much as I like to learn and as much as I like to think and ponder over things, I'll take the heart. The heart and its accompanying emotion are beautiful gifts.

But I should add that it doesn't have to be an either/or. In verse 8, the command to *tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads,* was practiced quite literally, as the ancient Hebrews wore items called phylacteries, which are small leather boxes which contained the verses of the *Shema* (and they are still used today). Phylacteries are worn on the forehead and left arm during times of prayer. I really like the symbolism in the way phylacteries are tied to a person's body. One was tied around the forehead, as if to symbolize the mind and our call to think and meditate and be thoughtful. The other phylactery was tied around the wrist, where it would nestle against the heartbeat, as a

reminder that we are not people of the mind only, but of the heart as well. There is a balance to being people of the mind and the heart, but if I had to choose, I would choose on the side of the heart, because it represents love.

It is love that binds us together, and that love also informs our language of how we speak of ourselves and it selects the metaphors we use to describe who we are as God's people. We often use the word *family* as a metaphor for the church. *We are like a family here*, people will often say about their church. One metaphor of the church, in the New Testament (often overlooked) is the church as the *Bride of Christ*. The image of the church as the *Bride of Christ* is particularly powerful, I believe, because we can't conceive of a love more powerful than the love that joins together two people in marriage. It is a powerful, powerful force, and a beautiful force in life.

We need the heart because it is the seat of our passion, and we need passion in life. My mind will tell me, logically, that I need to step out of my own life and do something for others, but when my heart is touched by the sight of someone who is suffering, or someone who is hurt, or someone who is treated unjustly, that's when passion will fill my heart and I will be moved and motivated in a way that the mind cannot accomplish. When Jesus observed what was going on in the Temple and saw the way that the moneychangers and others were taking advantage of the worshippers, he could have walked around and said, thoughtfully, *you know, I've been walking around here and observing what's going on, and I'd like to make a suggestion about how we can make this an experience that is fair to all involved*. Is that what he did? No! When Jesus saw what was taking place his heart was about to explode out of his chest, his passion was aroused, and his righteous anger rose within him as he fashioned a whip and began to knock over the tables of the moneychangers and drive them out while proclaiming *my Father's house is a house of prayer but you have turned it into a den of thieves!* (Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:13-16). In that instance, certainly, the heart trumped the head, and rightfully so.

In John 11 we read of the death of Lazarus. Jesus traveled to Bethany, where Lazarus had lived with his sisters, Mary and Martha. Jesus could have turned to Mary and Martha in their heartbreak and offered them a theological treatise on death and resurrection, but he did not. Instead, Jesus went to the tomb of Lazarus, and what did he do? He wept (John 11:35). Isn't that a beautiful, powerful image? I don't know about you, but I feel so much better to think about the fact that Jesus wept. I'm glad that the heart of Jesus was sometimes so touched and so broken that he wept. I am moved to think of Jesus, there at the tomb of Lazarus, with tears streaming down his face and into the dirt and dust of that land. It makes me feel better when my heart is touched or broken. Sometimes I weep because I am so overwhelmed with fears or struggles and I don't know what to do but the fact that Jesus also wept gives me strength. I can't always reason myself out of fear and struggles, but I can weep and allow those tears to cleanse my soul and when they have cleansed my soul I can feel the strength of God welling up within me and I know I can make it another day. Maybe nothing has changed, but I feel better, because I know that God is a God who weeps with me and a God who has had heartbreak, just like each of us.

3. *Soul.*

The mind and the heart are a little bit easier in terms of what they represent. What about the soul? I have to be honest and say that, while the mind and heart were relatively easy for me, the soul was a bit tougher. After a good deal of thought this is what I came to think – the soul represents that upon which we stake our lives. The soul represents what it is that we have built our lives upon, and what kind of foundation we have for our lives? In Matthew 16:26, Jesus says, *What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?*

It is very easy to trade away our souls for something much less valuable. Sometimes we use the term *Esau trade* to describe a very bad decision. Esau, you will remember, traded his birthright to his brother Jacob for some food (Genesis 25:27-34 – *27 The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents. 28 Isaac,*

who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob. **29** Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. **30** He said to Jacob, “Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I’m famished!” (That is why he was also called Edom.) **31** Jacob replied, “First sell me your birthright.” **32** “Look, I am about to die,” Esau said. “What good is the birthright to me?” **33** But Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob. **34** Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright.) It has become too easy, in our modern world, to make an Esau trade for our souls. We can easily trade away that which is of far great value – our soul – for something new, shiny, bright, and attractive, but ultimately of far lesser value.

In Luke 12:13-21 Jesus tell the story of a rich man, who did just that. Jesus tells us that the man committed the very error of which Jesus warned – he gained everything, but lost his soul in the process (**13** Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” **14** Jesus replied, “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?” **15** Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.” **16** And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. **17** He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’ **18** “Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. **19** And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.”’ **20** “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ **21** “This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”).

The heart and mind are important for many reasons, but one of the most important of reasons is to protect our souls. The mind helps us to filter out the false claims to our souls and the heart will guide us to the true loves in life that will attach us to what will ultimately nourish our souls.

It is very common for people to wear items of jewelry or clothing that symbolize their faith or, perhaps, remind the wearer of their faith and its importance in their lives, much as the ancient Hebrews wore phylacteries. I wear two items on my right wrist for that purpose. One is a leather strap that wraps three times around my wrist. Tanya and I bought a few of these when we were at the Vatican two years ago. It has the Lord’s Prayer printed in Latin on the leather. I also have a bracelet with the word *peace* on it, and the symbol of a dove engraved on it, which is the symbol of the Holy Spirit. I wear it because peace is a hope and a prayer not only for the world, but for my own heart and the heart of others, and it serves as a reminder to me of the peace that Jesus is the source of that peace.

The heart, soul, and mind are great gifts of God to us, and are, ultimately, to be the guiding stars in our love for him.