

Heart, Soul, Mind, and Strength 2021
Deuteronomy 6:4-12 Mark 12:28-34

Deuteronomy 6:4-12 (New Revised Standard Version)

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

Mark 12:28-34 (New Revised Standard Version)

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’ —this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

In 1953, President Eisenhower appointed
Clare Boothe Luce to serve as our ambassador to Italy.
Shortly after she arrived, she began to feel sick,
and as her health declined, medical tests revealed
that her illness was due to arsenic poisoning.

This was during the height of the Cold War,
so at first they thought it must be a secret Russian or KGB plot,
but when they ran more thorough security checks on all her staff
there wasn't any evidence that anyone was trying to poison her.

As it turned out, it was nothing so nefarious, but that the paint
in the bedroom of her 17th century villa contained arsenic lead,
and she was slowly being poisoned by paint dust and flakes.

**She was unaware of the environmental toxins surrounding her,
which were weakening her vigor and damaging her health.**

**So too we can be unaware and distracted,
and even seduced by this world's values and ways,
like toxic dust or paint chips falling into our lives ...
... and be as oblivious to that spiritual danger and threat**

as the ambassador was about being gradually poisoned.

**It is a struggle not to be enticed & distracted away from God's will,
and seduced by the things, the desires and values of our world,
or succumb to the fear, anxiety, threats & events of this world.**

God liberated the Israelites, rescued away from Egyptian bondage.
When the Israelites reached the edge of the Promised Land,
it have been a 40-year trek through the wilderness from slavery
and now at last, God's promises were about to be fulfilled.

In Deut., his final sermon, Moses reminds them of their history,
of all that God had done for them along the way escaping from Egypt,
and reminds them of all that God had instructed and commanded.

Then Moses warns them that they would be facing
an even more powerful and constant **new danger--- syncretism,**
i.e. becoming like and living like their pagan neighbors. vs. 10-12

When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, **take care that you do not forget the Lord**, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

“do not forget the Lord” is more than just remember what happened.
It's also **responding to God's enduring faithfulness and love
by living out the life & blessings that God intends for them...**
... as we read earlier, vs. 4-6

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.”

The point is, we are to respond to God's love with our whole being,
heart, soul, mind, and strength,
which most often takes the form of loving our neighbor.

God's Law wasn't given to be an onerous requirement, duty or demand,
but to emerge as our natural our heartfelt desire to please God,
and to reflect God's gracious love **that we have received-**
that if we can get our relationships right,
all the rest of life will fall right into place.

- knowing

When we are aware and **trust grace** as God's promise and truth **for us**,
that truth of God's unrelenting love and desire to bless us,
**that same grace has the power to grow and transform us
into living better, more joyful and meaningful lives.**

In many Christian denominations and church traditions,
the primary emphasis and main goal and task of ministry
is seen as getting sinners to walk up front to the altar,
and recite the formula to receive Christ as their Savior.

Certainly it is critical to take that **initial step of faith**,
to recognize & receive God's love & grace offered through Jesus.
It is the most important truth that will ever happen to us,
as in the parable of the lost sheep, **to let one's self be found.**

But as a Presbyterian, my emphasis also focuses **on what comes next**,

the challenge of living a life of faith **after conversion**,
and what it means to live as a faithful Christian
after responding to God's call, grace and invitation.

I've found that the real adventure begins **after we are believers**,
as we seek to understand our faith and what has God done,
and God's purpose being accomplished in and through my life...
... that is, trying to understand and make sense of what I believe,
and what it means to know and truly walk with the Lord our God.

The point of God's saving grace and our call to walk in faith
is not to rest in a recliner feeling comfortable, secure and holy,
but grace acts as a catapult hurling us to live out God's love...
... to use the gifts & blessings of God faithfully, usefully and well,
to grow by living up to the very best that God created us to be.

In our Mark text, a group of religious leaders had challenged Jesus
through a series of hostile questions intending to trip him up.

But one scribe, was impressed by the answers he gave,
and so he asks Jesus a serious theological question. vs. 28

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?"

What is the essence, the foundation, the basis of God's law?

What is the most important? **What does God really want from us?**

vs. 29-31

Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'

The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Jesus answered by quoting from, Deut. 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18,
and the scribe readily agrees with Jesus, saying: vs. 33

'to love God with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,' --this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

Our outward behavior truly expresses our inward attitude of heart
far more than just complying with religious rules and ritual.

If we are walking with God, then **by our behavior toward others**,
we show them the same mercy, as God has shown mercy to us,
and we treat them, as we want and desire to be treated.

In faithful response to God's gracious love and blessings,
we ourselves become caring dispensers of God's love and grace,
as God's commandments and Holy Spirit show us how to live
in loving relationship with both God and our neighbors.

The commandments match the way God designed and created our world,
showing us how to live into justice, caring for one another,
and enjoy healthy-gracious relationships, as God intends.

As we read in Deuteronomy, vs. 5, 8-9

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ... Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

on your hand

God's grace and love, are to guide our hands in all that we do.

on your forehead

God's grace and love, are to guide the thoughts we think,
our attitudes, our perspectives & the goals we choose to live.

on your house and on your gates

God's grace and Holy Spirit, truth and love are to guide us
right where we live and in every aspect of how we live.

What does this commitment to God, heart, soul, mind and might look like?

Our commitment to God is an on-going spiritual journey,
as a growing and deepening walk of faith with God
that changes us and transforms us along the way.

Our relationship with God is always **in process**. It's never static,
and we are either walking toward Jesus or we are walking away,
either we are going deeper or becoming more complacent.

Our call and task is to be responsive to God's love and grace,
and as his disciples, to look for what God is doing,
in the world, in the church and in people's lives,
--- and joyfully join in whatever God is up to.

Today we are celebrating All Saints Day and Reformation Sunday,
when we mark over 500 years since the Protestant Reformation began...
**... which eventually led to the separation that divided
Protestant Christians from Roman Catholic Christians.**

But Martin Luther wasn't trying to split the church, only reform it.
The watchword and phrase was, "ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda"
translated, - the church reformed, always reforming...
... meaning that in this world, the Church is never done,
for we are called to live increasingly Christian lives,
that are always changing, renewing and growing
by drawing ever nearer through our walk with Jesus.

The message of Reformation is don't settle for mere comfort and ease,
and don't you abandon your hopes & dreams or stop striving & trying,
and don't accept that the way things are now, as final!

God's promise and our call is to go further, deeper, higher & closer
to respond by making an effort to be more faithful and useful,
because God always has something more and even better for us.

Trust our God who has always been faithful, steadfast, good and wise,
and welcome risk and change as opportunity for something better...
... for if we try to stay as we are, then we will surely decline & go backwards.

In competitive sports,

how many times have you watched a team blow their comfortable lead,
and lose the game because they eased up before the final whistle?

Or can you imagine a musician
who spends decades learning to master their instrument,
then laying off their discipline and practice time--

- and how quickly they'll get sloppy as their skills deteriorate?

In most of life, and especially in our Christian journey of faith,
if we are not constantly striving to grow deeper and improve,
then really, we are sure to decline and slip backwards.

Christian life is never a place where we arrive and then remain,
but it is a pilgrimage ongoing -- it is a journey and adventure,
and it is one
that God intends to last for the whole of our lifetime...
... and we are called to play all the way through to the last inning.

When we are aware and accept grace as God's promise and truth **for us**,
that truth of God's unrelenting love and desire to bless us,

**that same grace has the power to grow and transform us
toward living better, more joyful and meaningful lives.**

We need to hear and heed, to reflect on that message of truth today.
So, how is your faith, your walk with God progressing?
Today, would you describe it as vigorous and growing?

So, how is your faith making a difference, and is it
defining your relationships & how you live your life?

How has your walk of faith changed or improved this past month?

The ultimate question is, **what does God want from us? ---
-for if we don't know what God wants, then how can we fulfill?,
and how can we possibly get our call to discipleship right?**

We answer by asking, how can I more faithfully participate
in God's grace and purpose, God's mission and Kingdom?

**Our call is to grow and enlarge our faith & God's grace in our lives,
as by our faithful response we will become a gift back to God.**

Our call is to celebrate with wonder and delight and open eagerness
by offering our absolute best in response to God's blessings & grace,
and by taking more pleasure in joyfully serving God
as grateful participants in the mission of the Church.

So what does God want?

that we respond to God's love with our whole being,
heart, soul, mind and strength,
which most often takes its form by loving our neighbor.

The two commandments are inseparable: 1 John 4:20-21 (*The Message*)

If anyone boasts, "I love God," and goes right on hating his brother or sister, thinking nothing of it, he is a liar. If he won't love the person he can see, how can he love the God he can't see? The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You've got to love both.