

“With all your soul”
Focus on Worship
Deut. 6:4-9, Psalm 143, Matt. 26:36-39, Luke 1:46-55
January 24, 2010

Name that tune: *Heart and Soul*. “Heart and soul, I fell in love with you, Heart and soul, the way a fool would do, Madly, because you held me tight...” When we think about loving someone “heart and soul” what that usually describes is loving them with the totality of our being. Have you ever thought about loving God that way? Of ‘falling in love with *God*—heart and soul’? Can you even imagine what that would look like for you? It’s not such a crazy idea. Both the Old and New Testaments *command* us to love God with all our heart and soul.

We’re focusing on worship as we begin this new year, and the foundational verse for our messages is what Jesus said was the greatest commandment in all the Jewish Law. Jesus was quoting, of course, from the Hebrew Scriptures, what we now call the Old Testament. Jews call these verses ‘The Shema,’ because the first word in Hebrew is *shema* which means ‘Hear.’ Deut. 6:4-5: “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.” These verses were and are for the Jewish people, what we might call ‘life verses.’ This passage constitutes the central prayer in the Jewish prayerbook; these are often the first verses of Scripture a Jewish child learns. Observant Jews recite these verses twice a day, morning and evening. And it is traditional for Jews to say the Shema as their last words: “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.”

These verses remind us that when we worship God, our love for God, is not to be merely emotional nor strictly intellectual nor demonstrated *primarily* by what we do. We are told to love God with ALL—*all* that we are: Heart, soul, and strength, Deuteronomy says. Jesus added the word ‘mind’ when He referenced this passage. One definition for worship we’ve been using is this: Worship is responding to all that God is with all that we are.

Last week, we talked about what it means to love God with all your heart. Part of that is *expressing* your love for God passionately. Publicly displaying your affection for God. When we gather for worship, we do that when we praise God, thank God, tell Him we love Him. We do that in the hymns and songs and prayers that are part of our worship together. But what does it mean to love God ‘with all your soul’? What’s the difference between ‘heart’ and ‘soul’?

The truth is that in biblical thought, ‘heart’ and ‘soul’ are quite similar, almost identical, in their meaning. So it’s really hard to draw a clear distinction between one’s heart and one’s soul. If the words often mean essentially the same thing in the Bible, what’s the difference between loving God with all your *heart* and loving Him with all your *soul*? Throughout the Old Testament, the word we translate ‘soul’ is used with reference to the whole person, and both the Hebrew and Greek words for ‘soul’ are sometimes translated as ‘life.’ So your soul is your life, the essence of who you are. Your soul is not something you *have*; it is the way you *are*, your way of being. We are, after all, human *beings*, not human *doings* or human *havings*.

So your soul is your essential self, with your unique, individual personality. Notice that the word ‘personality’ includes the word ‘person.’ Your soul is who you are as a person. Your unique character and nature. Who you are, what you believe and therefore, how you live. All of it. What kind of person you *really* are. Who you are when no one’s looking. One theologian has described the soul as a human being’s striving, willing, purposeful, self.¹

If loving God with all your heart means expressing your love for God passionately, loving God with all your soul means loving God with your will. Loving God with all your soul means making decisions based on what God wants, not necessarily what you want. It means deciding to do what God wants you to do, even though you may prefer to do something else. So loving God with all your soul means surrender and obedience, two words that are generally not our favorites. When I am loving God with all my soul, I will surrender my will to God’s will. My will, my thoughts, my feelings, my life. I will obey God’s commands rather than following my desires. I will decide to obey God rather than my feelings or what makes sense to me.

One preacher says that, “Surrender is the heart of worship.” Maybe we should say that surrender is the *soul* of worship. Because you see, true worship happens when you give yourself completely to God. In fact, the biblical words for worship in both the Hebrew and Greek are words that mean to bow down or prostrate oneself. When we bow down to someone or something, we are basically offering ourselves in service to whatever we are bowing down to. And in so doing, we give up control, surrender our rights to ourselves, and that which we worship takes over. We turn our very selves—our soul, our life—over to that which we worship. Which is supposed to be God, and nobody or nothing else. When we gather for worship, we love God with all our souls when we confess our sins, acknowledging that God is right and we are wrong. We love God with all our souls when we pray, when we’re brutally honest with God about what we want and need. When we offer ourselves to Him, all that we are: our time, our talents, and our money.

Now, there are lots and lots of references to the soul in the Bible. The great majority of them are found in the Psalms. In fact, there are more than twice as many references to ‘soul’ in the Psalms than in any other Old Testament book. And this makes sense because the Psalms are prayers and songs that very often seem to come from the very depths of the writers’ beings. Almost every emotion known to humanity is expressed, often quite poignantly, in the psalms. The psalmists very often cry out to God from the core of who they are. From the depths of their soul. Listen again to verse 8 from Psalm 143. Psalm 143:8: “Let the morning bring me word of Your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in You. Show me the way I should go, for to You I lift up my soul.” NLT: “...for I give myself to you.”

“I have put my trust in You.” Act of the will. “Show me the way I should go...” The psalmist wants to do what God wants him to do. So he surrenders his own will, putting his trust in God. Surrender is best demonstrated in obedience. When Mary is visited by the angel and told that she is to become the mother of the Son of God, her remarkable response is one of surrender and obedience: Luke 1:38: “May it be to me as you have said.” And then, after going to see her cousin Elizabeth who is also pregnant under unusual circumstances, Mary sings to God from the depth of a joyful soul: Luke 1:46-55.

¹ Rudolf Bultmann, ref. in George Eldon Ladd *A Theology of the New Testament.*

Based upon knowing who God is, Mary knows who she is. She knows that God is her Savior, and that she is His servant. She knows that it is God who has done great things for her: it is not luck or coincidence or good genes or her own hard work that will cause her to be called ‘blessed.’ Mostly in her song, Mary focuses on God: who He is and what He has done: “His mercy extends...He has performed mighty deeds...He has scattered the proud...He has brought down rulers and lifted up the humble...He has filled the hungry...He has helped His people...” Mary sings from the depths of her soul—with all that is within her—glorifying and praising God for who He is, what He’s done, and what He will yet do. *That’s* worship. And we get to listen in as Mary loves God with all her soul. She knows it’s not about her. It’s all about God. Mary surrenders herself, her fears, her questions, and gives herself up in wonder and praise and amazement to God—with all her soul. *That’s* worship.

But the most powerful example of surrender and obedience to the will of God is Jesus. In this familiar passage, we get a glimpse into Jesus' sorrowful soul as He cries out to God: Matt. 26:36-39. From the depths of His soul, Jesus cries out to His Father in prayer. He does not want to go through the torment and agony of crucifixion. And yet He surrenders His desires to the will of the Father. And He obediently submits Himself to God. “Yet not as I will, but as You will.” And so must we. You know, we say it every week in the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

We say that—but do we really mean it? How many of you realize that when you say, “Thy will be done on earth,” you mean in *your* life? Not just generally somewhere on earth, but you are praying for God’s will to be done in your specific life. When you pray those words, you are praying for God to have His way—not only in heaven, where God always has it His way—but also on earth, in *your* life, in *your* home, in *your* job, in *your* circumstances. “Thy will” means God’s will. “Thy will” is not “my will,” though to be honest, I wish it were. To really pray these words and mean them requires true surrender and a willingness to obey God. To love Him with all your soul.

Now, the *opposite* of loving God with all your soul is what most of us do most of the time. It’s not that we don’t love God *some*. It’s just that it’s not *all*. We give God Sunday morning, but not Monday...Saturday night. We give God lip-service on Sunday morning: We say the prayers and sing the songs and smile at our pew-mates. But inside we refuse to acknowledge and surrender our bitterness and resentment and unforgiveness. We refuse to surrender our fear and trust God. We refuse to acknowledge our sin, turn away from it, and live God’s way. We give God a few minutes of attention while we read the daily devotional, and then never think of Him again while we go about our day’s business. Busyness, is more like it. We fill our lives with busyness rather than filling our souls with God. Because somehow, filling our souls with God, a constant, expectant attention to God with all we are, doesn’t seem, well, productive or practical. That’s something for the nuns and monks and pastors among us. Not regular people. We live in the *real* world. We want just enough of Jesus to stay out of hell but not so much that He takes over.

So how do we get to a place where we are willing to be willing to obey God’s will? How do we get to a place where we surrender to God and love Him with *all* that we are? Let’s go back to the Shema a moment and look at the verses that follow: Deut. 6:6-9.

The commandments of God were to be upon their hearts, impressed on their children, talked about through the day, even tied on their bodies as reminders and written for all to see, on the gates of their cities and the houses they lived in. In this way, these words became part of who they are—and so *God* became part of who they are. Woven into the very fabric of their very life and being. Written on their souls. To worship God with all your soul means that God is not just one part of your life, the Sunday morning part. Faith and religion are not just *part* of who you are or what you do. It means that your relationship with God is the defining relationship of your life. That God's teaching is central to who you are.

And so you know it by heart, you impress it on your children, you talk about God and what He has said constantly, naturally, in all the comings and goings of your day. It means that God's commands are placed before you so you will never forget who God is and who you are and never forget to worship Him in *all* things, at *all* times, with *all* you are: heart and soul.