

God's Answer to Your Greatest Struggles
Our Struggle for Meaning: Distilled Wisdom
Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Mark 12:28-34

The ability to reduce profound ideas to simple statements takes great wisdom. A clergyman, Robert Fulghum once wrote an essay entitled "Everything I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten." In his essay, he proposes that the simple rules learned in kindergarten will do for life. These "simple things" include: share everything, play fair, don't hit people, put things back where you found them, clean up your own mess, flush the toilet, remember that warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.

Ernest Hemingway, one of the best writers of the twentieth century, put this principle into practice. When he graduated from high school his parents wanted him to go to college. Instead, he took a job with the *Kansas City Star* as a cub reporter. His editor gave him some advice: use short sentences, avoid slang, speak plainly, and shy away from adjectives. Hemingway later said that those were the "best rules I ever learned for the business of writing." These simple words of "distilled wisdom" propelled him to greatness.

Fred Rogers, the Mister Rogers of children's television, once said, "Life is deep and simple, and what our society gives us is shallow and complicated."¹ The ability to distill profound subjects into a handful of simple, easy-to-remember guidelines is a mark of profound wisdom. And isn't this what God has done? He has taken all of life and told us in ten statements how to live wisely. These ten statements are the Ten Commandments. In the coming weeks, starting on January 28, we will begin a series on the Ten Commandments entitled "God's Answer to Your Greatest Struggles." Did you know that each one of the Ten Commandments addresses an area of struggle in your life and mine?

Think of it. Whether it's God, worship, religion, rest, or authority; or whether it's peace, purity, integrity, truth or contentment. We struggle in each of these areas. And the Ten Commandments give us God's wisdom for each of these areas of struggle.

A recent church ad had a picture of two hands holding stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed with a caption reading: "For fast, fast relief – take two tablets." What spells relief in these areas of great struggle in our life? We'll look at God's response.

But God's distilled wisdom for life found in the Ten Commandments can be "distilled" even more. One day, a religious leader overheard Jesus answering those who had asked some difficult theological questions. So he decided that he would ask a question of his own: "Jesus, what commandment is the greatest of all?" To understand just what motivated such a question, you have to understand that the Jews at this period of time had added tradition upon tradition to the commands of the Old Testament. It's no wonder that some might ask, "But what really is essential? How do I get back to the basics?"

As you begin 2007 maybe you're asking a question like that. Just what is the "big idea" of my life? What's the point? What are the deep and yet simple things that give meaning to all the rest?

In answer to that question, notice Jesus' response to this religious man. It's found in Mark 12:29-31 –

Jesus answered, "The foremost is, 'HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD; AND 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.”
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Amazing. This is “distilled wisdom.” Jesus has taken the Ten Commandments and distilled their essence down to two: Love God and love your neighbor. And if you want to take it another step, this can be boiled down to one command: LOVE.ⁱⁱ

Jesus, of course, is citing the great Hebrew SHEMA (meaning “Hear”) of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 as well as Leviticus 19:18 which says: “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.”

In his response to this questioning religious leader, Jesus begins (v 29): “The foremost is this, “Hear O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord.” Now there are basically two ways to understand that statement. It could emphasize God’s *uniqueness*. In other words, Yahweh our God is the one and only Yahweh. Or it could emphasize God’s *unity*. The Lord our God is *one* Lord. While both meanings may be assumed, I believe that the emphasis is upon God’s *uniqueness*.

Jesus is citing Deuteronomy 6. And in Deuteronomy chapters 6-11 Moses seems to be developing more fully the implications of the 1st commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me.” In other words, because the Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament alone is God, he alone is to be the object of our worship, allegiance and affection. In the world of the Old Testament, no other so-called “gods” are worthy of such devotion; not Baal in the Caananite pantheon, not Amon-Re in Egypt, not Marduk in Babylon. Or in our world today, we must allow nothing in our lives that would stand between us and God. For anything that would dampen our passionate, exclusive devotion to the God of the Bible – be it sports, leisure, food, entertainment, relationship, family, job, career – anything that takes the place that only God should have in our lives is a form of idolatry.

Actress Halle Berry has recently said: “I believe in God. I just don’t know if that God is Jehovah, Buddha or Allah.” In an interview by Nike this past October, Tiger Woods said, “My father was a Christian—of course Christianity was part of my life. But my mother is Asian, and Buddhism was also part of my childhood. So I practice both faiths respectfully.”ⁱⁱⁱ But the God of the Old and New Testament simply does not leave us such choices. “A man cannot serve two masters,” Jesus says. “Either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will devoted to one and despise the other.” Because the God of the Bible is one – and there is no other – He demands our exclusive love, affection and devotion.

The following two verses tell us just what this exclusive love relationship with God should look like – it means to love God with our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. This is both the kindergarten and the university classroom of the Christian life. It is both simple and profound. It is God’s wisdom distilled. It’s the “bottom line” of life and eternity.

But what does it mean? And how do I do this? Love God with all of my “heart,” “soul,” “mind,” and “strength?” Just what does that imply? In the Hebrew language the heart was considered to be the seat of the mind, the intellect, the will as well as a wide range of emotions. The soul was considered the center of one’s personality, one’s being.^{iv} And one’s strength focused more on the physical, tangible means of expressing what is in the mind, heart and soul. Basically, then, we can summarize by saying that we are to love God exclusively. And we are to do this our mind (i.e. thoughtfully), with our heart and soul (i.e. passionately), and with our strength (i.e. actively).

WE ARE TO LOVE GOD THOUGHTFULLY – HE WANTS OUR ATTENTION

First, we are to love the Lord our God with all of our “mind.” It’s not surprising that this is where God starts. The mind is the gateway to our entire being. Solomon said, “For as a man thinks in his heart, so is he” (Proverbs 23:7). Descartes said, “I think, therefore I am.” His point was that thought was the evidence that we actually exist.

Moses, who originally taught these words in Deuteronomy 6 seemed to understand this. Notice what he says beginning in verse 6:

“These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. “ You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. “You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. Deuteronomy 6:6-9 NASU

The point is this. The truth about God is revealed in His Word. Therefore, His Word is to be front and center in our lives. Moses isn’t talking here about a 10 minute devotional in the morning. He isn’t talking about simply reading through your Chronological Bible (as we are doing this year) and once you’re done with the reading for the day, laying that aside and getting on with *real* life. Notice what he does say: “When you sit in your house...when you walk by the way...when you lie down...when you rise up.” He goes on to say that God’s Word is to be as “frontals on your forehead.” The truth of God’s Word is to be stuck right between the eyes. It is to be front and center in our lives, 27/7!

We are to love God thoughtfully. And we love God thoughtfully when we give God our attention. And we give God our attention when we read, study, and meditate on the truth revealed about God in his Word. However, here we have a problem. Let me explain it this way.

“Muse” was the name given to an ancient Greek god who spent much time in solitude and thinking. It has become a word that means to ponder, think, consider, meditate, and reflect. But do you know what happened to old “Muse?” We have added the letter “a” before his name. The little letter “a” used as a prefix gives a negative sense to any word. (If one is not a *theist* he’s an *atheist*). The whole entertainment industry is built on the principle of *a*-musement. When we are amused, we don’t think, we let the actors and producers and athletes think for us. Amusement is what the Devil uses to keep us from thinking, especially about God and His Word.^v

To love God thoughtfully may mean laying aside some of your amusement and learning to “muse” on God as revealed in His Word. That is loving God with all your mind.

WE ARE TO LOVE GOD PASSIONATELY – HE WANTS OUR AFFECTIONS

But we are also to love God not only thoughtfully, but passionately. God wants not only our attention. He wants our affection. We are to love God with all of our “heart” and all of our “soul,” both of which include the aspect of our emotions and affection.

What if I said I loved my children but I never hugged them, or kissed them, or touched them? My stated love would be perceived as cold, calculated, and emotionally distant. It’s possible for my children to have my attention, but not my affection. Likewise, it’s possible for God to have your attention without really having your affection. You can love God with your mind, and yet hold back your heart and soul.

In fact, this seems to be implied by the very one asking Jesus this question about the greatest commandment in Mark 12. In verse 32 he says, “Right, Teacher, you have truly stated...” To love God in this way is “much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” In other words, outward, ceremonial and cerebral worship is not what God is looking for. He looks on the heart.

The prophet Isaiah puts it this way:

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.

Composer Matt Redman says the same thing but with differing words (and we sang these words earlier):

I'll bring you more than a song,
Because the song itself is not what you've required.
You search much deeper within
Than the way things appear
You're looking into my *heart*.

Though trained to be logical and rational, Jonathan Edwards insisted that true religion is primarily rooted in the affections, not in reason. He wrote the famous *Treatise on Religious Affections* to prove his point, and in the treatise he reveals his own deep feelings of religious devotion.^{vi}

How is God calling you this year to love him more passionately? Maybe it's to spend more time in singing to the Lord and pouring out your heart and soul to him. Maybe it's to learn to express your praise to God by lifting your hands or bowing your knees. Maybe it's becoming more aware of God's presence with you 24/7 where ever you are and telling him in return, “Lord, I love you.” Or maybe it's allowing Him to have control over certain negative emotions in your life that can empty your emotional tank and keep you from loving God passionately, emotions such as anger, unwarranted fear or depression.

WE ARE TO LOVE GOD ACTIVELY – HE WANTS OUR ABILITIES

Both Jesus' words in Mark 12 and Moses' teaching in Deuteronomy 6 says that we are to love God with all of our “strength” or “might.”

We are to love God thoughtfully; He wants our attention. We are to love God passionately; He wants our affection. We are to love God actively; He wants our abilities.

It is here that the vertical focus of this distilled piece of wisdom takes on horizontal implications. As we give God our attention and express to him our affection, this naturally results in giving him our abilities as we serve others. No wonder Jesus adds, “The second (greatest commandment) is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

As you look ahead to this year, 2007, how does God want you to love Him with all your strength, *i.e.* using your God-given abilities and gifts to love your neighbor as yourself? Have you even identified your spiritual gifts? God has equipped you because He wants to use you in service to

others. Generally speaking, your service to others will only be as effective as the degree to which you have identified your gifting and are serving in line with that.

The opportunities for “loving your neighbor as yourself” abound here at Central. We need mentors who can invest one-on-one in the life of a younger believer. We need those who have a heart for children to reach out to the Vestal school campus by teaching with PREP. We are in constant need of more qualified help in our nursery and pre-school ministries on Sunday mornings. Whatever your heart for ministry, we either have existing ministries in and through the CB family or, if not, we are willing to consider starting a new ministry as an expression of your gifting.

One final word. John reminds us in his first epistle: “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:10, 11). Maybe you’re feeling like all we’ve spoken of this morning is just too heavy and burdensome. After all, how do you have the needed motivation to love God exclusively, thoughtfully, passionately, and actively. Here, John gives you and me the needed motivation. It is God’s love for you and me. God has loved you *thoughtfully*. Knowing the desperate condition of your sin, He has provided the necessary remedy in Christ.

More than that, God loves you *passionately*. His love is no opaque, calculated love lacking personal sacrifice. No, his love for you is an expression beyond words of divine affection. His heart was broken and his body crushed as a demonstration of indescribable, passionate love.

And God has loved you and me *actively*. His was an active love that led him to make the supreme sacrifice for you and me. As John reminds us elsewhere, “God so love the world *that He gave...*”

It is this thoughtful, passionate, active love that you and I reflect on as we take together these elements: the bread and the cup. And as you do, I invite you to ask the question: In response to such divine love, how is God calling me this year, in 2007, to love him more thoughtfully, passionately, and actively?

ⁱ Fred Rogers, the Mister Rogers of childrens television, from *Christianity Today* (3-6-00), p.45. Clipped from www.preachingtoday.com.

ⁱⁱ Adapted from Robert J. Morgan, “Distilled Wisdom” in *Stories, Illustrations & Quotes* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 730-31.

ⁱⁱⁱ Elliot Harris, “Woods Takes Evangelical to Sunday School,” *Chicago Sun-Times* (10-19-06); Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church* (Zondervan, 2003), p. 54. Both citations clipped from www.PreachingToday.com.

^{iv} In Gen 2:7 and 19 man is described as a living “soul” or being. “Heart, soul and mind” is used frequently in Deut 4:29; 10:12; 11:13; 13:3; 26:16; 30:2, 6, 10.

^v Adapted from Robert J. Morgan, “Muse or Amuse” in *Stories, Illustrations & Quotes* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 545.

^{vi} “Jonathan Edwards,” *Christian History*, no. 8.