

Loving God and the Neighbor Wholeheartedly

EVERYTHING PREVIOUSLY SAID in this book leads up to love, and everything that comes afterward flows from love.

From the teachings that Moses had given, Jesus selected and gave top priority to two laws of love. The first he called “the greatest commandment,” and the second he said was “like it”: “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. A second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mk 12:28–31, Mt 22:34–40, Lk 10:25–28; Dt 6:4–5, Lv 19:18).

Emphasizing these two commandments gave a needed focus for the religious lives of many of Jesus’s Jewish followers. They had been burdened with pressure to obey hundreds of laws in the scriptures plus the oral law. This second collection of laws was also

thought to be backed up by the authority of Moses and the power of the Creator. This interpretation instilled fear in many believers. In simplest terms, the Son of Man wanted to replace the religion of fear with the religion of love.

Focusing mainly on these two commandments could be liberating in the first century, but we need another liberation for the challenges involved today. The greatest commandments are rooted in the greatest truths: the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, the parenthood of God and the siblinghood of humankind. Only love can motivate us to cooperate effectively to make our siblinghood a practical reality in this world.

Receiving God's love and returning it is the first circuit of love. Its beauty and truth empower us for *the second circuit—extending Godly love to the neighbor.* And getting active in the second circuit increasingly awakens us to the goodness and power of the first circuit.

The first circuit of love starts from God, the source of love.

Receiving God's Love

We have been told that God loves us. But believing it and experiencing it are two different things. I believe that Jesus wanted us to share as much as possible his experience of being loved by our Father and loving him in return.

God loved us first, before we had any idea of the Creator. The simplest way to experience God's love is to open ourselves with the trusting, receptive faith of a little child. God wants to fill us with love and has already sent God's spirit into our hearts to do this.

Some persons find it hard to allow God's love to come into them. For example, there may be a need to release bad feelings about our body and mind. When we look in the mirror, it is common to see some physical pluses and minuses. When we observe our minds,

it is common to see some things that we feel good about and other things not so much. This human mix might not seem to fit with our idea that God truly loves us. But each of us is profoundly respected as a child of God and accepted and loved as who we are now.

The self we see in the mirror and experience in our minds is not the true and deeper self, the soul. The affection of people who truly know and love us is not based primarily on our qualities of body and mind. They love us for who we truly are.

Some people struggle to love themselves. If we give this stressful effort a vacation and dare to allow God's love in, we may discover something more soul-satisfying than what we had been striving for. We can let God's love reveal to us who we truly are.

The more we experience God's love for us, the more God becomes our *first love*. Imagine seeing your best friend and asking, "What can I do for you?" Your friend answers, "Just love me." You relax into the simplicity of natural, open, free relating. Affection comes over you, satisfying both you and your friend.

To each of us God gives all the love we can receive. And I believe that Jesus highlighted the love commandments partly because loving God and the neighbor enhances our capacity to receive divine love.

Loving God with All Our Heart, Soul, Mind, and Strength

With all our heart

Loving God begins in the heart. To love God with all our heart is to love wholeheartedly. This quality can be defined by contrast: not half-hearted, lukewarm, indecisive, or conflicted. Wholeheartedness is a sign that the whole personality is engaged.

If I am not also loving God with all my mind, soul, or strength, it will show up as a lack of wholeheartedness.

Some of Jesus's teachings enlighten us about the heart. To some Pharisees he said, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me . . .'" (Mk 7:6–7). Our heart is the seat of our motivation. If we say that we value someone or something, but our life does not show it, then our heart is actually longing for something else that competes with this value.

Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there will be your heart also." Wealthy and greedy persons' hearts are chained to the bars of gold under their pillows. Divine truth is the treasure of a truth-loving heart. The same thing holds with a heart in love with divine beauty, and a person who hungers and thirsts for divine goodness.

Jesus's frank realism about the potential for evil in the human heart helps us face it honestly. Earlier, contrasting evil and sin with the way of life, we saw that the Master listed a dozen kinds of evil that come from the human heart (Mk 7:21–22, Mt 15:19). And God knows perfectly well that we are not going to totally overcome evil tendencies in this life. But we do not want to put up a chain-link fence around any area of our life and put up a sign: "Off limits to God." Neither did Jesus tell us to examine ourselves every night before bedtime and dig around looking for mud. Seek for mud, and there is always more to find.

Jesus placed emphasis on a positive approach. "Happy are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." The promise about seeing God is partly for the next life. But we can also experience a pure heart in this life, I propose, in three steps.

The first step is to nurture the goodness that is already present in the heart. Positive psychologist Barbara Fredrickson has discovered *a natural tendency for positive feelings in the heart to blossom*

and fill us, if we allow this to occur and encourage it. Examples of positive emotions include gratitude, joy, awe, inspiration, serenity, interest, amusement, feeling good about oneself, and love.²⁵

I believe that Fredrickson has found something of how the spirit of God works in the heart. What starts as a warm feeling can rise all the way to worship.

Philosophically, I think of body, mind, soul, and spirit as the parts of the human personality. *I regard the heart as including the emotions of mind and the feelings of soul—in response to values.* One way for the pure in heart to see God is to recognize divine values of truth, beauty, and goodness on all levels in our daily lives. For example, imagine seeing violets come up in the lawn in the spring, intellectually enjoying a performance by an Iranian-American stand-up comic whose comedy is clean, and having a taste-and-see spiritual experience of Jesus sitting (invisible) across the dinner table.

The second step is to deal with the unbeautifulness that from time to time arises in the heart. One simple and positive way is to allow this prayer to blossom and fill the heart: “Create in me, a clean heart, O God, and put in me a new and right spirit” (Ps 51:10). Soaking in this prayer increases our receptivity to the divine transformation that we cannot do for ourselves. As a result, we are empowered to take human steps to cooperate with our cleansing as we continue to seek growth in loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We go forward with a happy, forgiven heart.

The third step is to rejoice in the divine mercy that gives us a pure heart to love God wholeheartedly. The Creator has designed our partnership so that a powerful decision can liberate us far more than we might have anticipated. Once we commit to loving God supremely, great things start to happen. When we pray for, and cooperate with, our transformation, God’s spirit within can put unbeautifulness out of action. It is like skating on thick ice.

The deep and icy waters below do not in the least threaten our security. We are given a taste of being pure in heart. This is the sense in which we can love God with all our heart.

With all our soul

If I am right that the heart's feelings in response to values come in large measure from the soul, then much of what has been said about wholeheartedness and being pure in heart applies to the soul. For example, to love God with all our soul, we nurture the best in our inner life and allow it to blossom. We can "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps 34:8). The soul is the part of us which does that—perceives the presence of God and discerns divine goodness. On this path we have beautifully merciful tastes of whole-souled loving, and as we advance in faith, trust, and hunger for God's righteousness, things get better and better.

In my concept, the soul is a work in progress. A soul can be lost, hurt, torn, or even rebellious. And the soul can move from lost to found, from hurt to radiant, from torn to unified, and from rebellious to wholeheartedly in love with God. However, in my opinion, the soul is more the seat of positive feelings, whereas the mind, along with its great positive potentials, is usually more exposed to negative stimuli.

When we are being soulful, we are being authentic, who we truly are. Most of us, most of the time, are centered in our body and mind. But when we move into our soul, it is like shifting into a higher gear: less taxing on the engine and more effective in traveling down the road. It is more relaxing, less gripped by the mind's tensions, as we allow ourselves to come into that better place. This is our true self, our higher self—the soul. I put it this way. I *have* a mind and a body; the soul is who I *am*.

The soul is the enduring part of us which can survive into the next life. Jesus spoke of enemies who can “kill the body but cannot kill the soul” (Mt 10:20). The power of the soul was evident in Protestant reformer Martin Luther when he was brought before a theological tribunal. They tried to pressure him into renouncing some of his controversial teachings. With his life on the line, he replied stoutly, “Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise.”²⁶ *That’s* the soul speaking. Regardless of theological differences, martyrs in every century have shown the same quality of courage.

For many people, a major challenge in loving God is how to deal gracefully with the fact that love is commanded. The mind can be motivated to obey the commandments of our just and wise Sovereign in order to fulfill a duty. But the highest motivation is love. Psalm 19 gives us more than a taste of how an intellect with a complex awareness of duty can play a supportive role in loving God with all one’s soul. I imagine the young Jesus nurturing his mind and soul on this passage and then seeing and hearing him later conducting a worship service and reading this selection.

The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul.
The decrees of the Lord are sure,
making wise the simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart.
The commands of the Lord are clear,
enlightening the eyes.
The fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring forever.
The ordinances of the Lord are true,
and righteous altogether.

They are more to be desired than gold,
 even much fine gold;
 sweeter also than honey,
 and drippings of the honeycomb.
 Moreover, by them is your servant warned;
 in keeping them there is great reward (Ps 19:7–11).

Through the author's words we feel a soul that is brimming with love for our just, wise, and loving Creator. The Psalm connects God's commandments with reviving the soul, wisdom and rejoicing, enlightening clarity, purity and permanence, truth and righteousness, the most desirable sweetness, warning and reward. In this context, "fear" refers to reverent respect and awe. God's law, decrees, precepts, commandments, and ordinances are not submitted to as demands backed up by threats. Rather, they are welcomed as revelations of the goodness of the God whose "steadfast love endures forever" (Ps 118:1).

An image may be helpful on the relation of mind and soul. Imagine driving on a winding and somewhat foggy road and coming to a sharp turn, where a curved mirror posted on the side of the road lets travelers see in a partial way what they can see better after the turn. The driver approaching the turn is like the mind, which is conscious of a partial reflection of what the soul sees. Like the driver who has passed the turn, the soul's perception of spirit is not perfectly clear, but it perceives more than what the mind sees.

With all our mind

For all the beauty of a soulful, poetic, love-saturated Psalm, the laws of love are still commandments. The Master did not say, "Try to love" or "Do your best to love." Jesus commanded us to love

because he knew that *we can*. Urgings that are too gentle merely beg for love; they lack the invigorating power of a divine command and the quality of love that motivates it. Free of harshness, divine commandments encourage us to persist when disappointments and difficulties arise. Doing our utmost wholeheartedly opens us to receive the fullness of what God is ready to do in us.

It is noteworthy that Jesus added “with all your mind.” By contrast, Moses had commanded loving God “with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (De 6:5). In the New Testament, only Mark—the least intellectually inclined gospel—includes this addition (Mk 12:28-31). I believe that Jesus was emphasizing a fuller concept of the human being; he was looking forward to a time when people would recognize that science and philosophy, for example, have a proper place in the intelligent and wise love of God.

In putting love into practice, we make daily decisions in our mind. To begin loving God with all our mind in a big way, we can give to God our decision to dedicate our mind to loving our Parent in everything we do.

A mind in love with God would not let itself be dominated by the material side of life or by the mind’s consciousness of duty. Rather, as we are able, we exercise and develop each of the mind’s three, basic, God-given capacities for practical, factual, and scientific knowledge; wisdom that comes from experience, philosophy, and superhuman sources; and the adventure of relating with God, whose spirit lives within.

To balance these three capacities means that none are omitted and none taken to excess. In each region of reality (material, intellectual, and spiritual) we are able to gain intuitive insight. Just as we may allow our positive feelings to blossom in worship, so we may seek for the mind to blossom in insightful intuition.

The example of Zacchaeus shows all these levels of mind working together. Reasoning intuitively about physical facts, he saw that the crowd in front of him was packed. Being short and realizing that he would not be able to see Jesus, he intuited that climbing up a tree would solve the problem.

When Jesus saw Zacchaeus in the tree and called him by name, there was an immediate intuitive, spiritual connection between them. He said that he would stay with him. Jesus was revealing divine mercy. When Zacchaeus insightfully realized that he had been forgiven, it triggered his spiritual rebirth.

Then Zacchaeus intuitively realized the moral significance of the injustice of getting wealthy by oppressing the poor. In response, he made his public commitment to give half his possessions to the poor and repay fourfold anyone he had cheated (Lk 19:1–10).

Loving God with all our mind, we can experience meaning and value *beginning with the smallest step forward*. We discover how *easy* it can be, how *enjoyable* it is, how *meaningful* it is to cooperate with the Creator's gifts, and *how beautifully each capacity complements the others*.

This is how our spiritual loving becomes intelligent and wise.

With all our strength

To love God fully, we mobilize all our strength for whatever our Parent has for us to do. We activate the entire personality—body, mind, and soul—to do the divine will. This mobilizing is a cooperative process, and God is the senior partner. The almighty Sovereign is the primary source of all our powers. “The Lord is my strength and my song” (Ps 118:14 RSV). “On the day I called, you answered me; you increased my strength [or boldness] of

soul” (Ps 138:3). “Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength” (Is 40:31). Depending on God required Jesus to have complete faith and trust in God.

Physical strength is essential because the body both supports a mind capable of hosting the divine spirit and also enables us to act in the world. This is how love becomes real. Physical strength, flexibility, and stamina are needed if and when the battle for survival is ours to fight. Many jobs like carpentry require physical strength. And we take care of the body by healthy habits of nutrition, rest, and exercise.

We also need strength of mind, such as knowledge and wisdom. Jesus would have grasped the insight in the proverb, “Wise warriors are mightier than strong ones, and those who have knowledge than those who have [only physical] strength” (Prv 24:5, Is 11:1–4).

Receiving God’s love and returning it with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength show the beauty and power of the first circuit of love.

You Shall Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

Love wants to do good to others. As love for God fills us, it spills over into loving other persons. As we are able, we want to do good to everyone, directly or indirectly.

If we ask God, “What can I do for you?” the answer might be, “Love me, love my family. I love everyone. As you become like me, you will increasingly learn to love each person whom you have the opportunity to get to know. And remember: your love is to be intelligent and wise.”

Jesus said that the commandment to love the neighbor was *like* the commandment to love God. This is true in three ways.

- Neighbor love can be called *the second circuit of love*. Since the divine spirit is also present in our neighbors, the love that we give to others also comes back to God.
- Our wholeheartedness in loving God is also expressed by doing the divine will wholeheartedly in serving our neighbors.
- God is the source of the love that we give both to our Parent and also to others.

If we identify with God's love for others, a new vista comes into view. We love not only with the love of a sibling, but also with a parental love. *We allow our Parent to live through us.*

The great challenge with the neighbor is to love persons very different from ourselves: strangers, competitors, opponents, and enemies. Jesus taught, "Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you" (Lk 6:27–36, Mt 5:43–48). In the ancient Mediterranean world, the maxim of doing good to friends and harm to enemies was widespread. How often do we give generous treatment to those we like and those who are like us—motivated by the expectation or hope of being well-treated in return? When the dominant motive is self-centered, Godly love waits for another opportunity to give us (again) the taste of the joy of self-forgetting, loving service.²⁷

Relevant to this topic is a student's project report. During her first project in the world religions course, this student (who wishes to remain anonymous) used Centering Prayer to cultivate her realization of God's presence within. She concluded, "I think that the biggest thing I learned from this project is that if you have the right attitude and mind, then it affects your whole being,

your actions, words, feelings, etc. If you take the time to make yourself feel good and let your inner divine shine, you can make an impact on others as well.”

Her second report began this way:

It feels like everyday you hear someone say that they hate something, whether it is a class, a family member, a friend, or somebody they barely know anything about. I used to be this way as well, thinking and truly believing that I hated certain things and people. This project has made me see that hating is much worse than I thought it was; it is not something that should just be thrown around.

The point of this project was to bring two things into my life. One was to love God with everything that I have and to love my neighbors as myself. I started this project pretty quickly after it was explained. I was eager to go out into the world with a new perspective and see everyone through new eyes. . . .

When I started out, I thought it was going to be pretty easy, but I was wrong. At first, I was just doing the bare minimum and not applying myself. I knew that I had more effort in me, and by the end of the second week, I was putting all of my effort into it. I have learned a lot, and I have grown as a person. There were many challenges I had to overcome during this project, and some were pretty hard to face.

I knew there was a deeper meaning to this project, something that I really needed to ponder. Why was it hard for me to love others? This is what I have been taught in church all of my life growing up, as well as the teaching to love God with all your heart. After a week of journaling and

reflecting, I realized that there was something about myself that I did not want to confront, but I knew I had to.

[She listed a number of things in herself that she did not like, including her body and getting poor grades on tests even though she worked hard.] I would worry that I did not love God as much as I could because I was not grateful enough for the body, mind, and soul I was made with. Whenever I wrote these ideas down in my journal and read it, I felt like I was in a sinking hole and could not get out. It was a depressing moment for me, and I was scared. I was raised never to give up, though, no matter what is standing in my path.

I decided to take a step back again and focus on the suggested golden rule, treating people how I want to be treated. . . . This time around I thought about being compassionate and putting myself in the other person's shoes. I would think about how I felt when someone did something nice for me. It makes me feel great . . . Even if it is a small gesture like a smile, it feels like they are not judging me, it makes me feel like I am not invisible.

Whenever I had this mindset, it really changed me a lot. I wanted to do these things to make people feel like they mattered, and make someone's day a little brighter.

Then something amazing happened. I felt that . . . I needed a message from God. [The next time when I went to church,] the whole mass was about loving God and loving your neighbor as the two most important commandments. I was supposed to be at that mass; the readings and the explanation of the readings from Father were my message. During that mass we talked about loving your neighbor and loving your one and only God as being two sides of

the same coin. This was a great analogy, and it really got the point across to me. God is love. You cannot love God without loving your neighbor, and you cannot love your neighbor without loving God. . . . Whenever I thought about this, I had this great feeling of happiness and joy come over me. It almost seemed that it was bursting through my soul, almost as if I was radiating my joyous feelings. I realized that God loved me for me. God is love. God is not going to judge me for my mistakes. I am not perfect. . . . God made everyone in his image, so if he loves me, there is no reason why I should not love myself. It was such a great experience, and such an overwhelming amount of emotions rushed through me, it is hard to explain. It did happen, and it also changed my life.

Fortunately, it is not the only thing that changed that day. . . . That awesome feeling of love kept surging through me, and I felt so peaceful. [Then she was able to stop hating her ex-boyfriend who had cheated on her.]

With all these new ways of life bouncing around in my soul, mind, and heart, I feel like a much happier person. I know that I love God with everything I have. I appreciate all that he has given me, and I thank him every day. I also know that I love my neighbors as myself, and it feels great because I know I am not doing it just because it is a command. I am doing it because I owe it to God and I love God. God made everyone around me, and I should be open to at least try to love them.

Toward the end of this project I realized many things. I realized how strong of a connection one can have with God and how important it is to love your neighbors as yourself. To do all these things, you have to accept

yourself for who you are. I was also lucky enough to get an amazing realization about life and God. My journey was something I will always remember, and I am proud of myself for not giving in when things were not pretty.

In sum, the first sentence of this chapter bears repeating. “Everything previously said in this book leads up to love, and everything that comes afterward flows from love.” After a reflection on receiving God’s love, the concepts of loving God wholeheartedly and the neighbor as oneself were introduced. We saw in detail how we can love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Then we saw how the two love commandments are alike; and a student paper illustrated much of the chapter concretely. The next two chapters portray love as accomplishing its mission to the neighbor through forgiveness and service.

Questions and Invitations

- What obstacles get in the way of receiving God’s love for you? What makes it hardest for you to love God and your neighbors wholeheartedly?
- How have you succeeded in receiving and giving love when obstacles were present?
- How do you interpret Jesus’s vocabulary, “heart, soul, mind, and strength”?