

Welcome everyone! It is wonderful to have you at worship with us. Over the past couple of months, I have met dozens and dozens of new people here at church. And if that's you, I want you to know how honored we are that you've decided to spend time with us. We hope you feel drawn close to God, you have a chance to hear his Word, and you're growing in your relationship to him. Everything at our church is built around the numbers **317**. We don't just want to be a church in our city, we want to be a church for our city. We have a threefold mission, a singular vision, and seven priorities that we build around. Today I want to focus on our threefold mission, which is to love God, love people, and make disciples. That's what we are about. That's our focus; that's our goal. That's our desire. If you cut us, that's what we bleed—love for God, love for others, and a commitment to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

We have spent the previous nine weeks talking about who God is, focusing on His nature, His character, and His attributes. Today, hopefully knowing God a bit better and appreciating Him a little more, we are beginning a new series called **ALL** and talking about what it looks like to love God with all that we have and all that we are. Our base text for this series is Mark 12:28-30. This passage takes place during the last week of Jesus' life. The religious leaders are trying to expose Jesus and publicly humiliate Him. In front of large crowds, they ask Him questions that they think are going to stump Him. During that time, "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?'" There are 613 commandments in the Bible. They are all important, because they all come from God—but is there one that matters the most? Jesus said, actually, there is. "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: '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 mind and with all your strength.'"

Jesus said the most important thing, the key thing God wants from us, is to love Him. And not to love Him with some of our life, but to love Him with all our lives. God doesn't want to be a compartment in our lives. When I get up each morning I go to my dresser. I have a drawer for my socks, a drawer for my shirts, a drawer for my pants, a drawer for miscellaneous items. Sometimes we treat our lives that way. We segment our lives out into compartments: work life, home life, friendships, faith. That's not how God designed us to work. God doesn't want to be given a drawer in your life; He wants all your life. That's what we get to focus on the next four weeks as we talk about loving God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Today, we get to give attention to loving God with all our heart.

Physically speaking, we all know that the heart is the organ in our body that pumps our blood and keeps us alive. Because of that, we must be very careful about the condition and health of our heart. About six weeks ago, I started having some unexplained pain on the left side of my chest. I would be sitting in my office, or eating lunch, or driving down the road, not doing anything particularly strenuous, and suddenly I would have sharp pain right here. Usually, I'm not much of an alarmist. Rub some dirt on it, take a Tylenol, get back to business. But something registered differently in my mind this time. I wasn't dealing with a hurt finger or a bruised knee; this was my heart, so I called my doctor. They said it would probably take a while to get in, but when I described my symptoms, they made time for me right away. They took my pulse, took my blood pressure, and listened to my heart. They did an EKG, took a chest x-ray, and drew blood. Fortunately, everything came back looking great. I was ordered to take a little medicine for a couple days, and since then I've been feeling great. At a physical level, we know without any question how important it is for us to give attention to the health of our hearts, how important it is to do an occasional examination to make sure everything is in good, healthy working order. How much truer is that at a spiritual level.

When the Bible speaks of the heart, the Greek word is **cardia**. This is where we get our word “cardiology.” But the biblical meaning of the word is so much more encompassing than simply the organ inside our chest. When the Bible speaks of the heart, it’s multifaceted.

- The heart is where we experience love and hate:
 - “Love one another deeply, from the heart” (1 Peter 1:22).
 - “Do not hate your neighbor in your heart” (Leviticus 19:17).

- The heart is where we feel joy and sorrow:
 - “Fill my heart with joy” (Psalm 4:7).
 - “How long must I have sorrow in my heart?” (Psalm 13:2).

- The heart is where we think and make commitments:
 - “Jesus knew what the Pharisees were thinking in their hearts” (Mark 2:8).
 - “(Some people say flattering things to you), but their heart is not with you” (Proverbs 23:7).

- The heart is where we determine what we want:
 - “My heart’s desire...is (for all the Israelites) to be saved” (Romans 10:1).
 - “Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4).

If we were to take all of this together, we could say this: the heart is the encompassing center of our being. Because it is so important, Proverbs 4:23 says, “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.” This is an important concept to grasp. Oftentimes, when people conceptualize what it means to be human, the default assumption is that we are primarily thinking beings, meaning our lives are primarily oriented and directed by what we believe to be true, as though human beings were like safety deposit boxes, and all you have to do is deposit the right information, insert the right facts and data, and all of a sudden, people will begin to do the right things. That’s how most people approach education—let me teach you to think the right things. How many of you have ever done something that didn’t line up with what you knew in your mind was right? We know we shouldn’t eat that bowl of ice cream at 11:00 at night, but we do it anyway. We know our value and worth isn’t determined by our physical appearance, but we spend a ton of time and money trying to make ourselves look better. We know reading books is better than watching TV, but our books collect dust on the shelves as we binge the latest series on Netflix. It’s not enough to know the right things *up here*, we have to love the right things *in here*.

Several times over the last few weeks we’ve quoted AW Tozer, “The most important thing about a person is what comes to their minds when they think about God.” That statement is right, but it’s not entirely complete. It’s not enough to simply think the right thoughts about God; those thoughts must eventually make their way into our hearts and change the way we live our lives. Perhaps we could add to this to Tozer’s statement: “. . . and how their thoughts about God shape their heart, inspire their imagination, and influence the direction of their life.” The mind undoubtedly matters, but the heart is the control center of our lives.

I want to say four truths about our hearts today, and I’ve decided to personalize the truths today. Because this isn’t just a “general” message; this is for each one of us specifically. God wants me to love him with all my heart. Not only did Jesus tell us this is the first and greatest command, that we love Him with all our hearts, we see it all throughout Scripture. In Exodus 20, after God brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and entered into a covenant relationship with them, He gave them ten commandments to live by. What is the first of those ten commandments? “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3).

In other words, there cannot be anything in life more important than me. I am to be first, number one, no rivals. Not your boyfriend or girlfriend, not your spouse, not your kids, not your job, not your hobby, not your sports teams, no one and nothing is to come before me. Deuteronomy 6:4 is the verse that every Jewish person begins their day saying: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” The word “one” speaks not only to God’s unity, but also to His priority. God isn’t supposed to come second or third or fourth in our lives; He’s supposed to be number one.

Jesus gave two insightful parables about this in Matthew 13:44-46.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.”

In both parables, a person finds something that is of incomparable worth. It has indisputable value, greater value than everything else they have combined. So when they find it, they gladly, with great joy, liquidate all their other assets, things that they cared about, things that had meaning and significance to them, in order to acquire the field or the pearl which was worth exponentially more. Jesus says that’s what our relationship with God is to be like. We should be willing not only to reprioritize everything, but, if necessary, to give up everything, to put God first. When Keren and I married each other, we said, “Forsaking all others, I will be faithful to you alone for as long as we both shall live.” That’s what God wants: that exclusivity and whole-hearted priority from us. He wants us to love Him with all our hearts.

But here’s the problem, which is the second truth we need to focus on today: my heart does not naturally love God the right way. Just like most of our taste buds love KitKats more than kale and our bodies love sitting on the couch more than going to the gym, our hearts do not naturally love God the right way. Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.” And look at Romans 3:10-12: “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.” It’s not just some of us or most of us—all of us are guilty of this. God spoke to the nation of Israel in Jeremiah 2:11-13 and said: “‘My people have exchanged their glorious God for worthless idols. Be appalled at this, you heavens, and shudder with great horror,’ declares the Lord. ‘My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.’”

It’s not only the nation of Israel who has done this. We have all done this. Though we know we are to put God first, though we know we are to love Him with all our hearts, we give ourselves to the pursuit of wealth under the illusion that enough money will provide security and significance. Or we give ourselves to the pursuit of pleasure under the illusion that feeling good for a moment will fill a void and bring lasting satisfaction. Or we give ourselves to the pursuit of beauty under the illusion we need to be desired and stay young forever. Or we give ourselves to the pursuit of approval under the illusion that the validation and acceptance of others is meaningful and lasting. We forsake God, the source of living water and dig our own cisterns to try to hold water, even though the truth is, they are cracked and can’t hold water. It’s what CS Lewis talked about when he said our hearts are far too easily satisfied, like a couple kids who are content playing in the mud because they can’t fathom what it’s like to take a vacation to the sea.

Our hearts were designed to love God, so when we love things that are other than God, and therefore by definition lesser than God, our hearts become damaged. A car was made to run on gasoline, not coca cola. If rising gas prices have you concerned such that you decide to put in half gasoline and half coca cola,

your engine is going to be damaged. That's what happens to our hearts when we don't love God with all we are. It's like taking a flute and using it to roast marshmallows. Can you do it? Sure, but that's not what it was designed for. And if you do it long enough, there will be major damage.

Though the bad news is that our hearts do not naturally love God the right way, the good news of the gospel is that God is able to change my heart. When I say God is able to change my heart, I don't just mean God is able to give me a pill once a day and, over the course of three months, bring my cholesterol down fifteen points. God is able to actually change our hearts. The very first heart transplant surgery took place in 1967 in South Africa. A doctor named Christiaan Barnard removed a heart from a donor and placed it in 53-year-old Louis Washkansky. It was the first successful surgery of its kind in human history. When they made the announcement, media from around the world rushed to South Africa to learn more. The press made it, and I am quoting, "*the most publicized event in world medical history.*" The journalists and news organizations figured that if there was hope that someone could get a new heart, everyone had to know about it.

How much more important it is for everyone to know that God, the Great Physician, can give them a new heart? The Bible tells us in Ezekiel 36:26, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." This is such an incredible promise that God makes. Apart from the grace of God, we are all in desperate need. It's like a doctor sits down with you and tells you your heart is compromised. And not in the sort of way where you need to cut back on the red meat, eat a few more salads, walk a mile a day and call it good, but the sort of situation where the doctor says, "I have really hard news to share with you: your heart is irreparably compromised, there's no medicine you can take, there is nothing you can do to make it better. Your only hope is for a new heart." And just like if a doctor told you that you'd have to wait for someone who was a perfect match for you to die for you to have hope, that's the very thing God, in His sacrificial love, brings about. His own son, who lived a faultless life so He could be a perfect match for all humanity, died for us so that we could live. That is what salvation is about: God exchanging our sinful and disordered heart with the perfect heart of Christ. And all we have to do is call on His name to receive that promise.

That sets us up for our final truth about the heart: my heart will be shaped by my habits. Even after a person places their faith in Jesus and commits to living for Him, even after God gives us a new heart, our heart is formed by our behaviors, our desires are shaped by the routines and commitments we make on a daily basis.

I went to a small college in southwest Missouri that didn't have a sports program, and we weren't allowed to have TVs in our room, so I spent several years of my life not watching or thinking about college sports. Then I graduated and moved to Lexington, Kentucky, where they do have a college sports program, and everyone in the city is infatuated with it. I was told by the senior pastor at the church that if I didn't learn to love the UK, I would not have a successful ministry. But I was confused: how was I supposed to just "make" myself like them? I didn't go to that school; why would I cheer for them? Then something unexpected started happening: people in the city, once they found out that I wasn't from there, bought me UK gear so I would be able to rep the team colors. People invited me to watch parties. I was even given season tickets so I could go to all the games. And in a matter of months, I became a serious fan. I embraced new patterns and behaviors, and my heart followed along.

The same happens all the time. Someone who has only ever drunk regular soda switches to diet. They can't stand it, but they stick with it for six weeks. All of a sudden, they love diet soda and think the regular is way too sweet. Changing habits changes affections. I could give you a dozen other examples but here's what we know: even if we have the best of intentions to love God with all our heart, if we don't embrace habits and routines in our lives that help shape and develop that love, we will end up believing in

Jesus but loving lesser things. This happened to Solomon, the third king of Israel. He began his rule with such passion and devotion to the Lord. He spent seven years building a temple and covered it with solid gold. He loved God! And God gave him exceptional wisdom. The Bible tells us Solomon was the wisest man to ever live. Rulers and dignitaries from around the world traveled to meet Solomon and sit under his wisdom. But even though he was so wise, he foolishly decided to align with the pattern of ancient kings in his day and married multiple women from other nations, who brought with them their worship of other gods. And this is what the Bible tells us happened: “Solomon’s wives turned away his heart. For it was so, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the Lord his God” (1 Kings 11:3-4). If Solomon’s heart could be turned away from loyal devotion to God because of the routines, habits, and relationships in his life, we must have the humility to recognize that it could happen to us, too.

This is why we encourage people to come to public worship every single week. It forms in us a love for God and places Him at the center of our weeks. That’s why we take communion when we gather—it fosters in us a deep connection with God and reorients our hearts to His. That’s why we read the Bible daily, to cultivate a love for His truth and His ways, that’s why we meet in life groups every week to share meals and talk about Scripture and share our lives. All of these are habits that shape what we love. These practices have nothing to do with legalism. It’s not about a long list of dos and don’ts and becoming a Pharisee; it’s about embracing a pattern and way of life that shapes us into people whose hearts are capable of loving God with all we have. It doesn’t just come from a sincere desire, any more than playing the piano beautifully comes from simply having the desire. It comes from daily and weekly choices that shape us and allow us to love God with all our hearts.

As we wrap up today, I want us to look at what God says in Joel 2:12: “‘Even now,’ declares the Lord, ‘return to me with all your heart.’” That’s what God wants from everyone one of us. No matter what may have been true of your life up until now, He wants you to commit to giving Him all your heart from this point forward.

We are going to respond in a creative way. You should have grabbed a paper when you walked in. I want you to spend some time during communion reflecting on either something you have loved more than God that you want to release or surrender, or a new habit you want to embrace to cultivate a deeper love for God. Something to surrender, or something to embrace. Write it down on that paper. Once you have, you can crumple it up and put that in the plexiglass ALL sign on your way out.