

“Loving God With Our Mind” Matthew 22:34-40
NTS Convocation Sermon – February 6, 2012

It seemed like a fairly harmless question.

One of the Pharisees, an expert in Jewish law, asked Jesus:
“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law of Moses?”

Fairly harmless on the surface, but Matthew tells us it was actually a trap.

Jewish scholars of that day had counted up all the laws of Moses and had come up with **613** separate commandments.

248 positive commands, corresponding to the number of parts of the body (these were the DO’S).

And **365** negative commands, corresponding to the days of the year (these were the DON’TS).

Rabbinical teachers could offer commentary on those **613** commandments, but they were not allowed to rank them in any kind of order, because that would make some commandments more important than others.

And so by asking Jesus to choose ONE commandment as the most important would expose him to criticism over the **612** he didn’t choose.

It was a total set up.

Jesus’s answer is interesting. He responds by quoting Deuteronomy 6.

It was brilliant because it was the second half of the *Shema*, the Jewish confession of faith. ***“You shall love the Lord your God***

with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” Every faithful Jew recited those words several times a day. It was the most familiar passage in the Hebrew Scriptures.

But rather than quote it exactly as it was written in Deuteronomy, Jesus added a word, which would have really stood out to someone who was used to hearing it in a particular way.

When I say the phrase: “*Can you hear me now?*” Most of you know that is Verizon’s ad campaign for cell phones. And you would also know that what comes immediately after is . . . ? “GOOD!” “*Can you hear me now? GOOD!*”

But what if I said: “*Can you hear me now? . . . AWESOME!*” Would that stand out a bit? Of course. Why? Because you are so used to hearing it the other way, that to hear it said in a different way would really jump out to you.

That’s exactly what Jesus did. He said it differently. He not only added a word, but he left out a word. He said: “***Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your . . . MIND.***” Instead of saying “strength,” he said “mind.”

Mark and Luke tell us Jesus also used the word “strength”, but all three synoptics have Jesus using “mind/*dianoia*”.

Now of course, Jesus wasn’t changing the meaning of the commandment. The commandment is about loving God with our ENTIRE SELVES – with our WHOLE BEING: with our bodies, with our passions, with our wills, AND with our intellects.

Why would Jesus highlight loving God with your mind? Perhaps it’s because Jesus knew when you capture a person’s heart you have devotion. But when you transform a person’s mind you have knowledge and wisdom to direct that devotion.

The apostle Paul picked up on this idea. He said: ***“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”***

When we give our minds to God, God changes the way we think. God forms in us the mind of Christ so that we can know and do his will. Loving God with our minds is an act of worship.

One of things I love most about Nazarene Theological Seminary is that it is a learning community committed to loving God with our minds.

I’ve been thinking about a few of the things I’ve learned about loving God with my mind.

1. The first thing I’ve learned is that I love God with my mind when I have a teachable spirit.

A teachable spirit is acknowledging that God has created us with both the potential and need to grow.

A teachable spirit is the opposite of narrow-mindedness. It is admitting to yourself and to others that you don’t have all the answers. And not just giving lip service to it, but humbly placing yourself in the position to gain new perspectives and understandings.

When I came to college as a 17-year-old freshman, I really thought I was God’s gift to my professors. I had very few questions, with a lot of answers.

I just knew I was going to be like 12-year-old Jesus in the Temple sitting around amazing all the experts. And they were all going to wonder: *“Why didn’t somebody tell us about this prodigy being raised right under our noses?”*

I'm sure my teachers just rolled their eyes. I remember writing a paper for my freshman composition class. My thesis was to scientifically prove why dinosaurs could have been on Noah's ark. Something to do with eggs and Jurassic Park DNA in mosquitos!

But my teachers didn't give up on me. They were patient and loving. And the more time I spent with those people of great knowledge, wisdom, AND HUMILITY, the more I realized how little I really knew.

Have you ever noticed that some of the wisest people are also some of the most humble people? Why is that? I think it's because they've discovered the joy of not having to be right all the time.

They're open to other viewpoints because they recognize that teachable people are growing people. They can live without having every question answered, because part of what it means to be human is to have the capacity to change and recalibrate our thinking from time to time.

Those who constantly insist on their own "rightness," and refuse to see life through the eyes of another perspective, are basically frightened, insecure people who want life to be simple and safe. And the Bible has a name for them . . . fools.

Proverbs 1:7 says: ***"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. But fools despise wisdom and understanding."***

Life can be slippery, and it's not always "black and white," . . . even for a Christian. And so to love God with our minds is first of all the humble awareness that I need to learn and grow, to be the very best I can be for the Kingdom of God.

We love God with our minds when we have a teachable spirit.

2. I've also learned that I love God with my mind when I become a student of ALL of life.

I'm not sure why I thought this, but as a kid I had this idea that anything that had to do with Christianity and the Church was all good . . . and anything not having to do with Christianity and the Church was all bad.

I had this separation in mind between the sacred and secular. And sacred was holy and secular was unholy.

But as I have grown in my faith I have come to see a pervasive beauty all around us, shot through with God's goodness and grace.

Revelation happens in so many ways.

- God speaks through great thinkers.
- God speaks through children.

- God speaks through nature.
- God speaks through emotions.

- God speaks through creativity.
- God speaks through simplicity.

- God speaks through the miraculous.
- God speaks through the ordinary.

God is not limited by our finite minds. God has the power to speak to multiple people in multiple ways. And when God speaks, if we're willing to listen and learn, he will TEACH us.

Now, some folks still struggle with that. And the reason is because they're always trying to make distinctions between the

“sacred” and the “secular” – or between things that are “holy” and things that are “not.”

That mindset arises out of the belief that God is UP THERE and we are DOWN HERE; and “down here” is bad and “up there” is good. And we should never allow the “up there” to get mixed up with the “down here,” or the “up there” will be contaminated by the “down here”; and the goal is to get OUT of “down here” and get “up there”!

But if you carry that to its logical conclusion then there’s no need for biblical justice, or helping the poor, or working to eliminate world hunger, or doing something about the AIDS pandemic in Africa. Why? Because that would be the “secular” and far less spiritual than the more “sacred” things of getting people saved and sanctified.

But we don’t believe that! In fact, the church across the ages has rightly called that way of thinking a heresy called Gnosticism.

We are not Christian Gnostics!

- We believe that a little bit of heaven has come to earth.
- We believe that Jesus came in the flesh, and took hold of the real stuff of life.
- We believe that he came to give us power to deal with the real world and real people.
- We believe God is redeeming the world to be a place where his Kingdom can come and he can set up his reign and his rule.
- And if we DON’T believe that, then we don’t believe in the Incarnation!

Listen again to Proverbs 1: ***“Wisdom cries out IN THE STREET; in the SQUARES she raises her voice. At the BUSIEST CORNER she cries out; at the ENTRANCE OF***

THE CITY GATES she speaks. Hear her... because I am calling you there.”

God can teach us anything, anywhere! And so we are holistic in our thinking. We don't try and break the world down into manageable little parts. We embrace the goodness of all of life.

We become a student of the Bible, YES, but we do more than that – we become a student of LIFE – so that we can learn to **think Christianly** in ALL realms of our world.

If we fail to do that, not only will we never live life to the full – we will also never be able to speak a word of hope to the people who LIVE in the DOWN HERE of life.

We love God with our minds when we become students of life.

3. Finally, I've learned that I love God with my mind by being a life-long learner.

It was interesting to listen to the people who came up to offer their congratulations to me following my graduation from seminary. They would say: *“Boy, it must feel great to be done with your education and not have to study anymore!”*

But do you know the main thing I learned in all of my formal education? **I learned that I will always be a learner.** I will always be stretching. I will always be growing. I don't know it all. And I want to spend the rest of my life engaging my mind in the learning process.

If we ever reach the point in our lives when we think we've arrived – I don't care if it's 30, 60, or 90 – when we're no longer pliable to be taught something new, we have said NO to our spiritual growth. And that is death.

I want to be a lifelong learner. I want to be a student of God's word. I want to be a student of people. I want to be a student of creation. I want to read well, listen well, speak well, learn well, and think well.

How do you hone the practice of being a life-long learner?

Spend time daily in God's Word

And not just to "get up" a sermon!

The psalmist says: ***"Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path."***

When Wesley said he was a man of one Book, he didn't mean he never studied any book except the Bible. To the contrary, Wesley read hundreds of other books from a diverse array of disciplines. But what he did mean is that, no other book could take the place of the Scriptures to nourish his heart and feed his mind.

There are times we read God's Word for *information* – to discover what it says. But we must also read God's Word for *transformation* – what it means for us.

I am moved when I think about what God has done to preserve his Word for us today. Scribes spending their entire lives in dark rooms, working at tables by candlelight, to carefully write out the Scriptures on scrolls, word for word.

I think about millions of Christians in the world today whose most valuable possession is a single page of Scripture. People who risk their lives to read it, study it, and proclaim it.

Cherish God's Word!

Spend time daily in God's Word AND prayer

Study and prayer go together. The Holy Spirit is our greatest teacher. Real prayer brings discernment, clarity, and intimacy with our Heavenly Father. No minister of the gospel can give away what is not being done in them.

Read good books

Read. Most people don't really read anymore. 40% of people in the U.S. read one book or less a year. The majority get their information through cliff notes, sound bites, and graphic images. As a result, many of us find ourselves over stimulated and under challenged.

Good. There are a millions of options out there today. You only have so many years to read. Make sure you make the best of it.

Read Widely. Deep piety and expansive intellects are not mutually exclusive. Read history, business, biographies, philosophy, novels. Expand your mind.

But . . . guard your mind

Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Your mind is the doorway to that temple. What you look at, listen to, think about, and dwell on, eventually determine the temple.

“Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

God can use a transformed mind to change the world.

Mattie Mallory was born in Kansas in 1865. She was a college graduate (very rare for women in those days), and a trained teacher. She loved God with all her heart, soul, and MIND.

And so do you know what she did? When she was in her early 40's, she spent all of her inheritance money, sold all the various parcels of land that she owned, and bought a new piece of property. And then along with a few other people who also loved God with all their heart, soul, and mind, she formed a new town on that property.

It was a little holiness community that began with an orphanage, a home for unwed mothers, a church, and a college.

That was in 1909. Do you know what they named that town? Bethany.

That orphanage is now called the Children's Center. That college is now called Southern Nazarene University. That church is now called Bethany First Church of the Nazarene.

When God transforms a person's mind, he can use them to transform the world.

Jesus said loving God with your mind is an act of worship.

Servant of God, will you commit to love God with your mind?