

Loving God

Transformative Power on the Road to Holiness

Greg Wright

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*"You cannot have the wrong thing in your heart and live right,
and you cannot have the right thing in your heart and live
wrong."*

Derek Prince

"Loving God with all your heart changes everything!"

Greg Wright

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Preface

*If you are going to write a book,
write one that makes a difference!*

*This book is about how God's love, the Gospel,
your conscious mind and your heart work together
to elevate and glorify God in your life.*

The results are life changing.

Like any good book, this is the result of years of struggle, discontentment and failure. While I have known the Lord for many years, it is only in the last few months that he has begun to deeply transform me. If you had really known me during those intervening years, I don't think you would have thought much of me. Despite what turned out to be a rather half-hearted walk with the Lord I was able to honour the Lord with my mind and lips, but my heart was all too often far from him. This resulted in me not being the disciple, husband and father I was meant to be, and it meant that I never really dealt with the problems of the heart that are common to all people, but particularly in my case, to men.

I struggled to love the Lord. I knew that the Lord loves me incredibly, but that never really reached my heart and in return my love for him was fickle at best. I was also frustrated that I was failing at the first hurdle of God's commandments. I knew that we are saved by grace,

not by keeping the law, but I also knew that my lack of deep heartfelt love for the Lord was holding me back and resulting in behaviour and desires that society would consider normal but were far from what God wants for and from me.

When I talk about loving God, I don't mean the kind of love you may have found when you fell in love with your first boy or girlfriend, wonderful though that love is. Nor do I particularly mean the feelings of awe and wonder we feel when we gaze upon the beauty of the Lord. What I really mean is the kind of self-sacrificial love that Jesus showed to us in choosing the cross, and that we must choose when the going gets tough in our walk with the Lord and our fight against sin, temptation, the flesh and the devil.

This is the book that I wish I had read as a young Christian, all those years ago. It is, I strongly recommend, the second book, after the Bible, that every young Christian reads! Even mature Christians will, I hope, benefit from reading and re-reading it, because it gives you the tools to really fight back against all the ungodly things that assail us. People in positions of serious Christian responsibility and trust, such as pastors, teachers and Christian workers will greatly benefit from reading this book. You are on the front line. The enemy is highly invested in ensuring your moral failure and public disgrace, however the Lord is totally invested in your moral success. This book will give you the tools to overcome even the worst sin and temptation that will certainly come your way. It is a battle you must win and will only win by daily growing in love for God, and taking control of and responsibility for your own mind.

“Loving God” is slightly autobiographical, documenting discoveries from my recent walk with the Lord and how he turned me around. The apostle Paul’s discussion on contentment in Philippians 4 shows us that Christian maturity does not come overnight. It comes from prayerful struggle, experience, reflection and sometimes pain.

Last year, I was listening to some wonderful sermons and talks by the late Tim Keller. In them Tim started to talk about sin and idolatry in terms of the things in our hearts. For me, the light-bulb moment happened when listening to Tim talk about lasting change, while at the same time reflecting on lost relationships. I realised that my biggest lost relationship was in fact rooted in events that happened in a garden thousands of years ago. It dawned on me that my problem was not so much those lost human relationships, painful though they are, but that ultimately, as a result of the fall, I have a God-shaped hole in my heart, and I’d spent my life trying to fill that hole with anything except the occasional bit of Jesus. I resolved to put God fully in my heart. When you consciously decide, moment by moment, to do this, your heart is transformed. Anything bad in your heart has to move out. This book is about how God’s love, the Gospel, your consciousness and your heart work together to elevate and glorify God in your life, and the results are life changing.

My hope is that you find that same life changing experience of a heart that is both fully loved by and fully loves God. As we shall see, everything substantive and substantial flows from that.

“If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

John 15:5

It is important to say that this started out as a book for Christians. It is intended to encourage anyone who feels that they could do better at loving the Lord (I hope that is all of us!). If you are not yet sure about your faith, then you are more than welcome to read on and I will help out as much as possible, but there may be other resources to help your understanding, such as carefully reading one of the gospels, attending an Alpha Course or reading one of the many introductory texts such as Tim Keller’s “The Reason for God” or “Encounters with Jesus”. As you grow in your faith, and you are beginning to understand the Gospel of Grace and that all that we have comes from God’s love and grace and nothing of ourselves, then this book begins to come into its own, and will prepare you for the spiritual battles you will certainly face. Nevertheless if you want to plough on I will do my best to explain the Gospel and its wondrous consequences.

Finally, a word of warning. This book inevitably refers mainly to the part of God’s character that is love. It would be remiss of me not to say that while yes, God is Love, God is also full of justice (just do a concordance search on Justice!) and even vengeance (remember vengeance belongs to him alone, this is one part of God’s character you are not expected to express) and that love, justice and even vengeance work together in his character. Look, for example, at the verses Jesus used to announce his ministry. I’ll bracket the words he did not say, but they were clearly implicit. My thought is that

Jesus did not say them at the time, because he came to save, not to condemn. But these words must have been known to his hearers, and thus are implicit in what he was saying about himself:

*The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour
[and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.]*

Isaiah 61:1-3

So, if you've been terribly wronged or mistreated, be sure that justice is eventually headed your way and the only viable plea that any of us have is the precious blood of The Lamb daubed over the doorposts of our hearts. We can forgive completely from the heart because true justice is near, and we must forgive deeply from our hearts because unforgiveness fills a space reserved in our hearts

for us to love God himself. We forgive because we are loved and forgiven people. There is no place in our heart to both bear grudges and for God to reside at the same time.

There are some areas of this book that you may need help with. When I talk about mental health, for example, I am talking about relatively minor mental health problems. If you have moderate to deep mental health issues or trauma, then please seek professional help. I will also talk about forgiveness. If you have been abused or traumatised and are struggling with this, then again seek professional help. Me telling you that you must forgive, and I will certainly tell you about the virtues of forgiveness, is probably not helpful because forgiveness could be a long and painful process, though I hope, one definitely worth pursuing.

I am not a psychologist and, although this book and the Bible both align incredibly well with modern psychological theory, nothing in this book should be taken as psychological advice. If in any doubt at all seek professional advice and work with a qualified professional.

This book is divided into small sections. After each section there is a prayer and a series of questions to help you to reflect on the section you have just read.

I should say a word about the prayers in this book. Personally, I am not a fan of written prayers. I prefer extemporary prayer from the heart. Nevertheless, I feel that it is important to lead the interested reader in prayers that guide the words of this book into our hearts

(yes, I'm a reader of this book too and have read it over many times). If written prayer is not for you, please feel free to skip those sections, but don't forget to pray each section into your heart! Prayer is God's primary means of changing and shaping us and aligning us to his will. There is no point in just reading this book and getting its contents into your head, you have to get its contents into your heart too, and I can think of no better way of achieving that than by prayer.

Sometimes prayers can be very simple. It is best not to ramble on. God knows our hearts anyway. So, this is my simple prayer for you, that in reading this book you too will come to love the Lord with all your heart. As we shall see, everything else, loving with mind, soul, strength and finding fruit in holiness will flow from that.

Where there are Bible readings, reflections and prayers, take your time. Don't rush. God's Word is like a fine wine, not a can of lemonade! Savour all the readings, prayers and questions for reflection, letting them slowly minister to your heart. Aim for quality not quantity. Enjoy the journey, there is no hurry.

You will notice that there is some repetition of concepts in the book. As a man I find that there is no point my wife telling me something just once and hoping it has sunk in. By the third time I'm beginning to "get it".

As I wrote this book, I became aware of two texts, both published in 2025 which cover some areas of this book but in greater depth. The first is Francis Chan and Mercy Gordon's *Beloved* (a pun on "be loved") (Chan & Gordon, 2025). This really encourages us to

experience God's love in our hearts, moving it from a merely intellectual knowledge to a deep heart knowledge. The second is Max Lucado's *Tame Your Thoughts (Three Tools to Renew Your Mind and Transform Your Life)* (Lucado, 2025), which helps us to get our thoughts under control and pointed heavenwards. The book essentially provides a biblical framework to transform our thinking, helping readers identify and replace destructive and sinful thought patterns with God-centred holy thinking. As we shall see, renewal of the mind is indeed life-transforming.

Both books dovetail wonderfully with this one. I explain engaging with and experiencing God's love and self-control of our minds, as they are both essential to loving God with all our hearts, but not in the same depth as the other two books. However, I think that both books benefit greatly from being read through the lens of this one, that is where this book comes into its own. Here we take the input of God's love for us, and apply conscious self-control of our minds, and create the output of choosing to love God with every thought.

Finally, I could not have written this book without the loving support of my family over many, many years. We have been through bad times and good. I have let you down on many occasions. You have all without exception been amazing. Thank you for bearing with me. I hope this book is a blessing to you. I love you all.

I have focused on Loving God (one being in three persons), as that is what we are commanded to do. Sometimes I talk about loving Jesus. Jesus is wholly man and wholly god. Sometimes it is easier to relate to loving Jesus than the concept of loving the entire trinity.

Remember Jesus' love for the Father and promise of the Spirit though. Draw near to those things too. I'm not going to say more than that as it could be the subject of another book and much theological debate, which I am keen to avoid since this is a very practical book.

Particular thanks go to Sally Welch who encouraged me to develop the initial ideas for this book, and to my wonderful proof readers and to those who have freed me up to write this book. You know who you are! Thank you!

I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. 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. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

Ezekiel 36:24-27

A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.

Luke 6:45

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Loving God is extremely important, yet many of us who have been Christians for a long time still struggle with loving him with all our hearts, let alone soul, mind and strength. We know that it is “rule 101” – the most important and foundational commandment. We also know that we do not live under the law, but nevertheless every commandment hangs on this foundational principle. We know we should love God with every fibre of our being, but in practice, if we’re honest with ourselves, we don’t. Not really. At times we’re at best lukewarm. Sometimes we may go for days without really thinking about God or praying or reading the Bible. Worse still, there are things in our hearts that we know should not be there and, try as we might, we just can’t get rid of them. We have things in our lives that we’re deeply ashamed of and behaviours that we can’t shake off which cause us not to like ourselves. Worse still there are unknown dark areas of our hearts which occasionally surface to surprise us (and possibly those around us!).

Let’s start by opening our Bibles and looking at the commands to love the Lord with all our hearts.

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.

Deuteronomy 6:4-5

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this

question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Matthew 22:34-40

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?" "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.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

Mark 12:28-31

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' 'What is written in the Law?' he replied. 'How do you read it?' He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, "Love your neighbour as yourself.'" 'You have answered correctly,' Jesus replied. 'Do this and you will live.'

Luke 10:25-28

As of the time of writing, I've been a Christian for 37 years and struggled with loving God with all my heart for most of that time. If that struggle is something we have in common, then you've come to the right place. On our journey we will discover what blocks love for God in our hearts, how to identify those blocks and practical steps to enable God to fully indwell in our hearts and to drive out sin and idols. I expect the results to be thoroughly life changing. Loving the Lord with all our hearts is foundational. Once that foundational basis is in place the possibilities for transformation, holiness, your ministry and God's coming kingdom are limitless.

Perhaps the world's greatest need is to see true holiness on the faces and in the lives of God's people. One of our greatest apologetics is that Christianity works. Whoever heard someone say, "I used to drink too much and come home and shout and swear at my wife, but then I became an atheist, so now I never do that"? Atheism could never affect that kind of change. If we are to convince people who are not Christians of the transformative power of Christ, then we must live out and communicate the narrative of a life of genuine love and grace where "the old has genuinely gone and the new has genuinely come". This is impossible unless we allow Jesus to completely and permanently fill our hearts. Without Jesus fully in our hearts, we can play at being Christians and even create the illusion for a while that we are godly people, but sooner or later our mask falls off, and the true state of our hearts is revealed.

Another apologetic is that in the hands of false disciples Christianity clearly does not work. There have been many people who were

lovers of self and filled with greed and lust who have wormed their way into positions of responsibility in the church with disastrous consequences. As we'll see these people were complete imposters, because it is impossible to keep our lusts and true "love for the Lord" in our hearts simultaneously.

The Journey We're Taking

The Christian life starts with a clear understanding of, and positive response to the Gospel, the Good News of God coming to earth in human form, dying at Calvary to bear away our sins, and make a pathway for humanity back into relationship with God. That relationship is a two-way street: God loves humanity and in response, some of humanity chooses to love and be in relationship with God.

Consciousness allows us to choose moment by moment, thought by thought to love God above all other things, and that is what leads us towards holiness. Expressing the character of God in every aspect of our lives.

Sacrificial love is a choice!

God in His common grace has given everyone choice. It is this choice that allows us to love him. To love sacrificially is a choice! If God simply commanded us to love him in a way that we had no choice over, what kind of love would that be? It would be like living

in a Stalinist state. We would demonstrate love because we were forced to, but that love would be wafer thin. Because we actively choose to love God, our love has meaning, depth, reality and vitality.

None of us love God anywhere near as much as he loves us and deserves to be loved. In loving God, we are not loving something abstract, but one real, creative, conscious being in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We often miss the fact that true love is deep, costly and sacrificial. God's love for us is certainly like that. We cannot afford for our love for God and the people around us to be anything less.

The heart is intricately linked to the mind. The mind is the gate-keeper of the heart. It is no surprise that there is a constant battle in everyone's mind for the attention of the heart. The devil would happily see everyone's heart and mind filled with lust, greed, anger, unforgiveness and addiction. Christians are by no means exempt. God's desire for our minds and hearts is the exact opposite. Clean pure hearts gate-kept by beautiful minds entertaining the best godly, loving thoughts and rejecting all that is less. Such a heart and mind is the only fitting dwelling space for the Holy Spirit. I would no more ask the Holy Spirit to take up residence in such an unclean heart and mind than I would ask my sister to live in a pigsty. In this book we will discover how to use our conscious minds to ensure that everything going into and coming out of our hearts is godly. We are in far more control of this process than we ever imagine. This is the crux of the matter. In choosing to love God with all our hearts

we must actively choose to love God with all our minds, creating a residence worthy of the King of Kings.

If this book moves you as much as an inch nearer to Christ it will have been well worth it, but my hope is for much more than that because the transformative power of Christ in a human heart is limitless. Together we can become the oasis of love, transformation, healing and new perspective that the church was always intended to be, and the world so desperately needs.

Reflections

How has your walk with Jesus gone so far?

Looking back on it do you have any regrets?

When has God been the number one thing in your life and when have things and circumstances got in the way of him in your heart?

When has your love for God been truly sacrificial?

Prayer

Father, as we embark on this journey, we open our hearts to you and for you. Fill us we pray with your love and drive out everything that is less than you. Father, you transform people. Continue to transform us now by your love and the power of the Holy Spirit indwelling in us. Let the world look at us and see holiness in action and the deep Love of Jesus in our faces.

The Gospel

*The Gospel is the single most important message
that any human ever hears!*

It is essential that we carry the Gospel in our hearts, because it is absolutely key, not only to salvation but to truly loving God with all our being, and hence to holiness and sanctification. If we don't get the Gospel right, and in its right place, we will never be assured of our salvation and will always live in the wrong sort of fear. The heart that does not really know God's loving and saving grace, and suspects God will not accept them because they are not, or have not been good enough, will always live in anxiety, and will always fear God's rejection and condemnation. That is the very last thing God wants for you. The heart which truly understands the Gospel will also fear, but this fear is totally different, it's a fear of offending their most loved one (the fear of going through Peter-like regret if you like).

I'm sure that if you asked many Christians what the Gospel is they would either point to the four Gospels or not really be able to articulate the Gospel message. I'm also sure that if you asked many people "Do you think God will accept you if you live a good enough life?" or the corollary "Do you think God will reject you if you do not live a good enough life?" they would say yes. But this is the antithesis of the true Gospel! Because the truth is that all of us have sinned and fallen short of God. Not only that, if we break one part of the law, we break it all. So, we all deserve God's condemnation.

Despite this God loves us so much that he sent his precious son, Jesus, to us, fully divine, yet fully sharing in our humanity. He lived a perfect life, yet at the end of it he was scourged, nailed to a cross and tortured to death.

Isaiah predicted this in an amazing passage written roughly 700 years before the actual event. All of the passage is important, but I'm going to highlight just the really important parts, which point to the Gospel. Read these words slowly, let them minister to your soul:

*He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
for the transgression of my people he was punished.
Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,*

*and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.
After he has suffered,
 he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,
 and he will bear their iniquities.
because he poured out his life unto death,
 and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,
 and made intercession for the transgressors.*

excerpts from Isaiah 52:14 – 53:12

Jesus, God's righteous servant, bore our sins on the cross. The Lord has laid all the sins of all who faithfully trust in him on Jesus.

Paul explains how this works:

*But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in trespasses—**it is by grace you have been saved.** And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.** For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

Ephesians 2:4-10

There is absolutely nothing we can do to save ourselves, short of trusting Jesus, and in deep love for him turning away from sin. Salvation has come through faith in Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross, where he bore the punishment for all the sins of all who will trust him.

We are saved by faith in Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross, where he bore the punishment for our sins.

That is the Gospel! If our hearts are not burning within us at this message, and God's amazing, beautiful plan for our salvation, then we really haven't understood it. It is the single most important message that any human ever hears.

Note that Paul says, we are created for good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do, but we are absolutely not saved by those works. They come after salvation by faith in Jesus' death and resurrection. Good works alone get us nowhere. In fact, without faith, it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6) no matter how good those works are. Good works are an inevitable by-product of salvation, but they are never salvation in themselves, in fact good works without faith are the antithesis of the Gospel.

Responses to the Gospel

In response to the Gospel there are three possibilities:

1. The heart rejects or is sadly unaffected by the Gospel.

2. The heart is slightly affected by the Gospel.
3. The heart is fully affected by the Gospel.

(You may like to compare these to the seed in the Parable of the Sower, Mark 4:1-20)

Firstly, the heart which rejects or is unaffected by the Gospel clings helplessly to the law. Legalism is a terrible thing that leads only to death. Legalistic religion brings with it the terrible belief that ‘I can save myself’ and ‘If I am good enough God will accept me’. When you live in Religion you can never know for sure that you are saved, because you never know what “good enough” looks like. The Gospel frees us from Religion and grants those who through faith trust in Jesus’ work, full assurance that we belong to God both now and eternally.

We definitely aren't good enough, but we have a saviour who definitely is!

Secondly, the heart which grasps the Gospel, but without deep loving fear of God, will end up taking sin lightly. But sin is a terrible thing – our sin is what nailed Jesus to the cross! It is a fine balancing act pivoting on loving God with all our hearts. While this person is free from Religion, they are going on sinning so grace may all the more abound (Romans 6:1)! They are not showing the family traits of deep, sacrificial love for God flowing into obedience and holiness.

Thirdly, the heart which grasps the Gospel with deep love for God is in balance. It shuns sin for its terrible effect and offence to God. It does not take sin lightly, but it still loves people who are living with sin and temptation and does not condemn, because it knows legalism is a dead end. Yes, it lovingly warns about the harmful effects of sin, but it knows that it dares not cast the first stone.

Later we will look at how to respond when Satan tries to undermine the Gospel by pushing us back towards trying to save ourselves by works.

Reflections

Which of the three options in the section above most closely describes your response to the Gospel?

Have you ever tried to keep a law, such as obeying a speed limit or avoiding covetousness? How did you get on?

Do you hold the belief that if you are good enough God will accept you? How would you know if you have lived a good enough life?

Do you think that you may not be good enough and God may reject you?

Do you know that you are not good enough, but that Jesus is good enough?

How can you help people to see their sin and need for forgiveness, without making them feel rejected?

Prayer

Thank you, Jesus, that you were pierced for our transgressions and the punishment we deserve was on you. Father, thank you for the indescribable gift of Jesus. Fill our hearts with assurance of your love and salvation. Remove from us even the suspicion that we can save ourselves, and fill us with love, gratitude and faith in the amazing salvation which comes through faith in Jesus and his redeeming work on the cross. Drive the Gospel into our hearts daily, so we fully love you and shun the twin mistakes of either legalism or taking sin lightly.

True Repentance

Every field of study has its technical terms. If I buy a house, I employ a solicitor who translates my wishes into legal-speak, transmits them to the vendor's solicitor, who translates them back into English for the vendor. In Christianity one of our technical terms is *Repentance*. It is not simple to unpack. It is more than deep sorrow for the offence of our sin towards God, or turning the other way, or turning away from sin, though all those things are part of it. The problem is that sin has no respect for the penitent.

Sin and temptation will come after you time and again, like alcohol seeking out an alcoholic.

For repentance to be genuine it needs to stick and be life changing. It therefore needs to be, I think, a turning of heart, from past loves and comforts to the unadulterated love for God. It comes about through the work of the Holy Spirit calling you into ever-deeper faith in the redeeming work of Jesus on the cross and in his resurrection. Repentance without that full love for God can never stick. In this sense the Gospel is Repentance but until you unpack the technical term *Repentance*, that concept has little meaning. We'll have a lot more to say about making repentance stick, fighting temptation and ruling over sin in Chapter 5.

But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.

Genesis 4:7

Reflections

Think about times you have tried to repent in your own strength. How did you get on?

Have you ever met the person who became the “love of your life”? How did your behaviour change when they came into your life?

Prayer

Father, we thank you so very much for the Gospel of Grace. We are utterly dependent on you for our salvation. Grow faith and love in our hearts so that in fully loving you we fully and permanently turn away from sin and idolatry. We thank you that if we slip up, we have

an advocate in your precious son. May we bring joy to heaven as true repentant love for you sinks into our hearts and out into our lives.

Truly loving God is not Easy for Everyone

There are some people who come to faith and immediately the love of God shines through. But for many, if not most, of us, the first thing to acknowledge is that from the outside, truly loving God can be extremely difficult and may appear impossible even to the otherwise mature believer. If we are going to fulfil this greatest commandment, we're going to have to understand our hearts and be willing to change. Call it heart surgery if you will, though it's a lot less complex and painful than real heart surgery. The good news is that God is in this sense The Heart Surgeon and is more than willing and able to help us and loves to be to be part of this process. Deep change is indeed possible and only takes active willingness, honesty and practice on our part.

Let's pray with the Psalmist:

*Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me*

Psalm 51:10

So that:

The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.

Deuteronomy 30:6

The second thing to note is that our love for God is in response to God's love for us.

Before we can properly outwardly love God back, we need to get into our hearts and minds the amazing extent of God's love for us. He loves us so much that he was prepared, in his son, to come to earth in human form, live a perfect life, and even though he was despised, scorned and rejected he still loved us so much that he went to the cross and bares our sins, so we might be forgiven for our wrongdoing and alienation of God.

The Father loves you with the same love he has for Jesus:

Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

John 17:2

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

1 John 4:9-10

Paul prayed:

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know

this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Ephesians 3:17-19

Let those words minister to your heart now and start praying them for yourself, all those around you and all with whom you come into contact.

Love is God's character. He adopted us as his children. Love is our family trait:

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

1 John 3:1

Reflections

What would a pure heart look like?

Where would God be in a pure heart?

Can you remember a time when God's love has particularly touched your heart?

Spend some time meditating on God's love for you, maybe using the words from Ephesians 3, above. Let that love reach deeply into your heart.

Prayer

Father, thank you for loving us so very much. We are deeply sorry for the times we have failed to love you. Please fill our hearts with your love and with love for you. Assure the deepest parts of our souls of your love. Then please turn our lives around so we love you with every fibre of our being. Keep your love overflowing through us so the world in seeing us sees your love given to us in your precious son.

Loving God with all our Hearts is Essential

To avoid disaster, the wise person must build their house on the rock of putting Jesus' words into practice, and so the Christian must do what Jesus said, and learn to love the Lord with all their heart. Not only is this the first and greatest commandment but all the law and the prophets hang from it (Matthew 22:37-40). That is, this law is foundational. You cannot properly and consistently keep any moral law without this one firmly in place. It is the thing that stops legalism: we do not keep God's laws because they are law or even because they perfectly reflect God's moral character (although these things are true) we keep God's moral laws because we love God with every fibre of our being.

Keeping the law without loving God is just religious legalism and that leads to death:

Whoever keeps the whole law yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

James 2:10

The wages of sin is death ...

Romans 6:23

We cannot save ourselves. We certainly cannot save ourselves by keeping the law. Have you ever desired something that was not yours? Then you broke Commandment 10, and hence the whole of the law.

We cannot be saved by observing the law. Instead, we are saved by grace: by the “imputed righteousness” freely given by faith which enables us to trust in Jesus’ redeeming work on the cross, and by the Father’s stamp of the acceptability of Jesus’ sacrifice in His resurrection.

... but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 6:23

We must build our Christian lives not on the Ten Commandments but on Loving God with all our hearts and because we love God with all our hearts we keep his commandments. How ludicrous it is to have the ten commandments on the walls of our schools before love for God is written on the pupils’ hearts. We can easily raise a generation under legalism and condemnation, knowing they have failed God, without knowing the loving gift of grace by faith in the redeemer, which is the key to permanent change and deep, lasting repentance.

We cannot love God with all our soul, strength and minds until his love is fully in our hearts, and we love him in return with all our hearts. Nor can we properly love our neighbour as ourselves. Have you ever tried to minister to an extremely needy person who just “sucked you dry” of all your love, time and resources? That’s why we need God’s love to be filling us and overflowing from us. Jesus points out these things are the foundation of the law. We cannot, for example, live without covetousness, unless God is fully in our hearts, driving out the covetousness that would happily make its home there.

God’s moral commandments reach both ways. They reach forwards from the foundational principle of loving God with all our hearts, and they point us backwards to that principle, because without loving God with all our hearts we find that we can no more keep the commandments than we can commit suicide by holding our breath! (Do not try this, take it from me you are unlikely to succeed but may pass out.) With true love for God filling our hearts his commandments are a joy not a burden. Later we will discover the joy of searching out and obeying Jesus’ commands.

Reflections

Why do you think Jesus said all the law and the prophets are based on loving God with all our hearts?

Think of some of the things you loved when you were younger, and things you love now. What changed?

Think about a time when you have failed to keep God's commandments. What would you change about yourself in order to do better next time?

If you were to spend eternity with someone, who would you choose and why?

Prayer

Father we can't properly love our neighbour as ourselves until we first truly love you. Lead us to love you more, moment by moment. Fill us with yourself as our greatest treasure and passion, so that in truly and fully loving you, everything loving about you flows into and through our hearts. Fill us with your holiness, as in love for you we seek your kingdom and your righteousness. May we keep all of your moral commandments and do so not just because they are commandments or are your will or even because they reflect the beauty of your character, but primarily because of our ever-deepening love for you. Thank you for the amazing hope of eternity spent in the presence of our greatest love.

Our Relationship with God Gives us our Purpose

When it was clear that my mum was dying, my dad, who was a pragmatic man and former engineer, said "I don't know what to do." My response to him was simply "You don't have to do anything Dad, you just have to be."

At that time Dad's purpose was just to walk with Mum as she passed into eternity. His purpose was simply to "be" with her and he continued to walk with her and was with her at the end.

We were created by God, for God, for deep loving relationship with God. God's love for us and our love for God is what creates that relationship. Our overarching purpose is our relationship with God. Our job is to love God, everything else is secondary, so do it with all your heart!

Our relationship with God is the one thing that nobody can take away from us. It is also the one thing that reaches from the present into eternity. It is the one thing that we take into eternity when we leave this life. It is therefore a very real target for the enemy who can be very subtle. The enemy will try one of two things. The first is to convince us that we have no purpose. Maybe we are very young, or very old, or disabled or depressed and we're trying to find a purpose for our lives. If we have no other purpose, then our loving relationship with God is our purpose and because of that God has plans and purposeful things for us to do. Never listen to the enemy whispering "you're useless" or "you have no purpose." God never says that! You have a very great purpose! Even if loving God only overflows into praying for someone in need, that can make an amazing difference both to that person and to you.

The second attack of the enemy is to make you fixate on secondary purposes in your life. For example your job, your ministry, a book you are writing, your motorbike, teaching, a relationship, worrying about your children etc. Some of these are important, but they are

all, at best, secondary purposes. Do not fixate on them, or they will become idols. They all come second to your primary purpose, your loving relationship with God.

‘Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.’

Matthew 10:37

Henry Ford said, on the key to life:

“The whole secret of a successful life is to find out what is one’s destiny to do, and then to do it.”

The Christian’s destiny is to love God in eternity. My advice is, start now!

Reflections

Does your relationship with God make you feel purposeful?

What do you feel your purpose/purposes are?

Prayer

Father, we were made by you, for you and for relationship with you. Enable us to see that relationship and loving you as our primary purpose and even though our secondary purposes can be important, help us to keep them in perspective. Encourage us to focus on the one thing that is truly important.

Our Relationship with God gives us our Identity

The 2020s has been the decade of identity. Suddenly everyone had to add gender pronouns to their email signatures. However, in God's kingdom our identity comes only from our relationship with him.

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Galatians 3:26-29

We identify only as Children of God. I honestly do not care about your past, your denomination, your sexuality, your trans/sis status, your pronouns, your politics. What I do care about deeply is your future, whether or not you are a Child of God, adopted into His family and loving Him with all your heart. That does not mean that we don't have to deal with past sins, mistakes and hurts. With God's help, we certainly do have to do that. But when we are a new creation, the old has gone and the new has come. Our lives are now on a different trajectory. Satan will remind you of your past (you can remind him of his future!). Sometimes he will even use Christians to do that. Focus on loving God, everything else will fall into place. Your identity is no longer in your past. Your identity is in your eternal future as a Child of God.

Reflections

How have you identified in the past?

I really don't like it when people describe my son as a Coeliac. He's a man of God who happens to have Coeliac's Disease. What ways have people tried to label your identity? How can you break free of that?

I like to identify as a motorcyclist. Is that a good thing?

Prayer

Father, thank you that our eternal identity is as children of God. Thank you that in you there is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, prostitute or self-righteous pharisee. Thank you for the amazing fact that because of your love and grace we are all one in Christ Jesus.

Chapter 2 - Loving God

Firstly, a warning. We must not sacrificially love God in order that we will be rewarded. That's just loving God for our own benefit and is trying to live by religion and not by grace. When you are not rewarded, then the disappointment in your heart will tell you what you are really feeling. Instead, you must love God for his sake alone – because he is God – because he first loved you – because he gave everything needed to redeem and adopt you by giving himself in Jesus on the cross. Any good husband knows, when his wife asks why he loves her, the right answer is “because I do.” So, it is with our love for God. He is worthy of all our love for his own sake.

We love God Because He First Loved us

Broken relationships work both ways. When our ancestors sinned and lost the intimacy of their daily walk with God, their hearts, and by extension our hearts were broken, but what we don't often consider is the fact that God's heart was broken too.

Can you feel the cry of God's heart as he called out to Adam: “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9)? Like a parent desperately searching for lost children.

Due to his sinless holiness and humanity's sin, God and humanity were now incompatible. God's heart was so broken that a hugely painful and expensive plan would have to be put in place if ever we were to be brought back into relationship. There was nothing that humanity could do. This plan was all of God and his incredible love for us. God had a You-shaped hole in his heart and getting You back

into it was going to be costly. Not everyone was going to go back into God's heart because love requires choice and not everyone will choose to love him. Nevertheless, once completed God's plan would be available to everyone who by faith calls on him.

We rarely stop to ponder the fall from God's point of view. His loving relationship with literally billions of people was broken through the actions of just two people. God was sold-out for an apple, for the kind of knowledge of good and evil we were never meant to have. Losing one person is heart-braking. Losing everyone is indescribable. So, remember, whatever your loss, whatever your grief, God more than understands.

Just as God was heart-broken, equally, humanity is heart-broken. We are all born with a God-shaped hole in our hearts. We lost our best and most precious relationship. We just don't realise it. Just as someone born with an arm missing may feel that they are perfectly normal, until they look at people who have two arms, so we do not feel the need for a loving relationship with God until we look through the lens of the Bible. It is only when we put God back in his place, fully in our hearts, that we begin to be truly complete and normal as we were meant to be.

How do we Know that we are Loved?

Have you ever felt that you are not loved? I'm sure everyone has at some point in their lives. Let's use a parable as a thought experiment¹:

You wake up with a start in the middle of the night. Your room is ablaze; you start choking on the smoke. The smoke also fills your eyes and tears start to flow both from the panic for your life and your body trying to clear the smoke from your eyes. In your heart you know this is it; you're unlikely to escape this. In fear you cry out to the Lord. Suddenly the door bursts open and someone who loves you very dearly rushes in. With superhuman strength they pick you up and carry you out of the building to safety. You are unscathed. However later you discover that your rescuer was terribly maimed by the flames.

Reflections

Let me ask you a question. How would you feel when you saw them?

Would you ever doubt that you are incredibly loved?

What would you feel towards them?

What would their scars signify to you?

¹ Some readers may have experienced something like this. If that is you, then I'm sorry, I do not intend to rake up past hurts or trauma. This is just a thought experiment to help us see how very much we are loved.

How would you respond if someone mocked them because of their scars?

Prayer

Father, please help us to get our hearts and minds around the depth of your love for us. As we look on Jesus, we realise how very costly our salvation was and how very much we are loved. May we always treasure Jesus, our saviour, in our hearts and in return for your love, love you unreservedly, with our whole being.

Responding to God's Love for us

Now let me take you back just over two thousand years to a locked room where a man appeared and asked a disciple called Thomas to touch the holes where nails had pierced him and to put his hand in the side pierced by a spear. Those scars tell us what love and sacrifice really look like. How should we respond?

*His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being
and his form marred beyond human likeness*

Isaiah 52:14

He was pierced for our transgressions

Isaiah 53: 5

We love because he first loved us.

1 John 4:19

God is a bit like the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. His heart is broken by the son's rejection yet is filled with joy by his

return. He sets aside all dignity and decorum and rushes out to greet him, and of course, celebration ensues.

There is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

Luke 15:10

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Ephesians 3:16-19

Getting God's extraordinary love from our head to our hearts is the start of us fully loving God in response. If you feel you need to do more work on this then I strongly recommend Francis Chan and Mercy Gordon's book. Knowing we are so deeply loved by God frees us to love God back, which in itself makes obedience a joy.

*Oh, the deep, deep love of Jesus—
Vast, unmeasured, boundless, free—
Rolling as a mighty ocean
In its fullness over me!
Underneath me, all around me
Is the current of His love—*

*Leading onward, leading homeward
To His glorious rest above.*

S. Trevor Francis

Reflections

Have you ever felt unsure of God's love for you? Why was that?

When have you most felt God's love for you in your heart?

Meditate on the fact that God had a <You> shaped hole in his heart.

Prayer

Father thank you for your unfathomable, wide, long, high and deep love. Thank you that in and through your son you paid the price to bring us back into relationship with you. Thank you that you reconciled us to yourself and adopted us as your children, so we may have the infinite privilege of calling you Father. It means so much to us that we can call you Father and be adopted into your family. Keep us ever aware, in our hearts and minds that we are not our own, we were bought at a great price and keep us aware in our hearts of the full extent of your love for us.

Loving God Starts with a Choice

True love, sacrificial *agape* love, is a choice. Love without choice would be meaningless. When people get married, they promise, not that they do love each other (well I certainly hope they do!), but that they choose to love one another, sacrificially, come what may. That decision to love will be tested many times during any marriage.

Love is a choice to put another first in our heart, and our love for God starts with the heart. If God is not fully in our heart, how could we possibly love him with all our mind, soul or strength?

Don't worry if this seems a bit foreign at the moment, we'll come to ways of achieving life transforming love for God soon. Just bear in mind that *agape* love is transformational:

Jen Wilkin (Wilkin, 2018) writes: "When we devote heart, soul, mind and strength to loving him, we perceive ourselves rightly - no room for pride or self-exaltation – which prepares us to love our neighbour freely. Rightly perceiving ourselves to be the unworthy recipients of the *agape* of God, we become willing to love our neighbour in spite of himself because God first loved us in spite of ourselves. We do not wait to feel love; rather, we will ourselves to act in love whether we feel it or not. *Agape* transcends our feelings."²

Reflections

Think of a time when loving someone was easy. Why was it so easy?

Now contrast that with a time you have chosen to love someone even though you did not feel loving towards them.

² Taken from *In His Image* by Jen Wilkin, Copyright © 2018, p38. Used by permission of Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, IL 60187, www.crossway.org.

Reflect on a time you have chosen not to love God. What have you learned about yourself? How would you change in future?

Prayer

Thank you, Father, that you gave us free will so we could choose to love you sacrificially, to put you above everything else in our hearts, and we could choose to reject sin and idols. Help us to observe the actions and thoughts of our hearts. Make us conscious of our idols, our sin and our hypocrisy. Fill our hearts with your presence and with love for you and help us to drive out everything from our hearts that is ungodly. Help us to commit to loving you more than anything. May you be our ultimate possession and our very great reward.

All your Heart

God's greatest commandment is deliberately not half-hearted. As we shall see there can be no place in our hearts for God and <insert name of your favourite idol here>. Like Jesus' words on the love of money, no one can serve two masters – you have to love one or the other. There is a reason for this. If we hold God and sin in our hearts at the same time, we will not be able to overcome sin, and sometimes that will shine through, because we must serve one or the other and we cannot do both at the same time. We are called to be holy as God is holy and as we will see later that holiness is only possible if we wholeheartedly and sacrificially love God. If we wholeheartedly and sacrificially love God, then that must overflow into our minds, bodies and souls and into wholeheartedly and sacrificially loving other people.

Afterall, God loves us with all His heart! Jesus did not tithe his blood for us!

Reflections

What have you held in your heart that is competing for space with God?

What would it look like if you loved God with all your heart, leaving no space for sin or idolatry?

Are you prepared to give up the temporary pleasures of sin for the permanent joy of God in your heart?

“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

Jim Elliot

Prayer

Father, teach us and lead us to love you with all our hearts.

Do we Have a Heart Problem?

All sin reveals a heart problem. Something is fundamentally wrong in our priorities – sometimes we choose sin over God, and because love is a choice, in that moment, we'd rather love the sin than God. When that happens, we get a little bit of the Peter experience and we feel like we're a million miles from where we're supposed to be.

Reflections

How must Peter have felt when the cock crowed and he realised that he had denied Jesus three times?

Think about a time you have failed the Lord. Why do you think that happened? What were the root causes? What could you do differently next time?

Think about times you have sacrificially obeyed the Lord. How does that make you feel?

Prayer

Father, please help us to reflect on our failures. Show us the true state of our hearts. Fill us with love for you.

The Heart is Incredibly Deceitful

Jeremiah warns us that the heart is incredibly deceitful.

The heart is deceitful above all things

and beyond cure.

Who can understand it?

Jeremiah 17:9

Perhaps you've experienced something like this: I used to think that there was nothing I wouldn't gladly give up for the Lord. Then one day someone broke into my shed and stole my bicycles. I put in an insurance claim, but as the weeks rolled by, and the claim took

time to come through, I became increasingly impatient and angry. It turned out that those bikes meant a lot more to me than my deceitful heart had ever allowed me to know. I had thought that there was nothing more important to me than God, but in reality, I was deluding myself, and God had to remove those bikes to expose my self-deceit.

Whilst the heart is indeed deceitful, it sometimes leaks information. Later on, we will look at that, so we learn to catch our hearts in their deceptions.

Reflections

When have you noticed a disconnect between what you think is in your heart and the reality of your own thoughts, words and actions?

What does that teach you?

Ask God to reveal to you everywhere where your heart is being dishonest or deceiving you.

Prayer

Father, show me daily where I am deceived. Help me to listen critically to my outputs of thoughts and words so I can see the gaps between what I think my heart is telling me and what is really in my heart.

What's in my Heart?

We must examine ourselves closely and honestly, being aware of how deceitful our hearts can be. For some their heart is full of the love of money or power or control. Others are controlled by alcohol, gambling or drugs. For many it is lust through use of pornography, fornication or even use of literature to fire a lustful imagination. But for others it can be too much of any good thing. For example, it is possible to love people or things too much. That may be a relationship or a possession like a house or car. It is possible to be driven and controlled by a need for love and acceptance from certain people. These things are idols; they take up residence in our hearts and get in the way of wholeheartedly loving God.

In working through the reflections below, I realised that I often think about motorbikes. Motorcycling has become my favourite hobby and I can spend hours looking through the bikes for sale on the internet. They need to be replaced in my heart by a better love.

Reflections

Is anything apart from God controlling your behaviour (like my love for motorbikes above)?

Where do you turn if you are stressed or upset? How do you feel about that?

What things do you think about by default?

What things would you most hate to lose?

Prayer

Father, please show us anything in our hearts that is not from you. Please fill us with love for you so nothing we love compares to you and you become our greatest treasure.

Dealing With Unforgiveness

Just as we cannot love the Lord and money at the same time, we cannot fully love the Lord and harbour unforgiveness in our hearts. Unforgiveness rots our love for the Lord. It also hands to the unforgiven person, a power over us they probably never wanted. Unforgiveness lingers in our thinking robbing better thoughts from our minds.

Remember, God loves justice, so you will eventually get all the justice you need and deserve. We are poor judges; we never know all of the facts. God knows all the facts and judges perfectly. It's never an excuse but the abused often become abusers themselves. Where would any of us be without God's love and grace? So, try with all your being to be like Jesus to those who have wronged you, show love and compassion and work on yourself to forgive from the heart. Unforgiveness takes control of our minds. It keeps coming back at us, welling up as anger and resentment and preventing us from loving God with all our minds.

Reflections

Can you think of a time when you held unforgiveness in your heart? What happened in your mind while that was going on?

Is there someone you are finding it hard to forgive? Try praying for them.

Prayers

Father, please deal with and forgive any unforgiveness in my heart. I hand any feelings I have of anger, hurt or shame to you, knowing I don't deserve your forgiveness, but you have forgiven me anyway. Help me to forgive from the bottom of my heart and most importantly fill the place where there was unforgiveness with your presence and love for you.

How do I Know What my Idols are?

Our idols are our “ultimate things”: although our hearts can be deceitful, we can discover our idols because, if they are threatened or taken away, they make us feel extremely anxious or angry. They are anything in our heart that is competing for the place of God as our ultimate thing. We need to observe, not listen to our hearts. For example, sometimes when we or our idols are threatened, we can catch ourselves responding negatively or angrily. That is our hearts leaking information, telling us that we have a problem. Use your gift of consciousness to consciously observe the thoughts in your mind and the words coming out of your mouth. Look for a disconnect with what your heart is saying.

'What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come – sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness,

envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.'

Mark 7:20-23

Sometimes our idols consume our thinking, unforgiveness for example, often does. Because we are created in the image of God who is conscious, we're gifted with consciousness. We know what we think about, and we can change what we choose to think about. What things do you think about most? How would you respond if those things were threatened or taken away? Could those things be your idols?

Another thing to notice about our idols is that, except for a short period of time, they never satisfy. We are always left wanting for more. What are the things you have sought after in your life that were not ultimately satisfying? Could those have been idols?

Exercise – Help to Identify Possible Idols

Find some time to be alone with the Lord. Sit quietly and focus your heart and mind solely on Him. Just enjoy His presence and love. Now notice any thoughts that come into your head. They are the things that are competing for your time with God. Set them aside and refocus on God. Those thoughts could well be idols. If it's something like "I have to pick up the kids in 10 minutes" then obviously that's an obligation not an idol. If it's something like "What motorbike would you like to buy next Greg?" that's definitely an idol.

Avoid Acquiring Idols

It is very easy to acquire idols without being consciously aware of them. Many years ago a friend became very interested in homeopathy, eventually it totally took over her career and her life. One night in a dream she saw a scroll being lowered from heaven with the word Homeopathy on it. She woke up and threw away all of her homeopathy books and equipment. She was fortunate. God pointed out her idol. Everyone needs to be on their guard against this. Self-awareness is a great gatekeeper against idols. Check your heart and mind regularly. Watch out for idols, they can creep up on you and sit between your heart and God.

Reflections

What things do you think about most today? (As I reflect on this question, I realise that I currently think most about writing this book. That helps me to realise that I must be very careful not to turn writing this book into an idol!)

What things have occupied your mind in the past?

How would you respond if those things were threatened or taken away?

Could those things be your idols? Are they competing with God for space in your heart?

How would you respond if you were threatened?

What changes when you love God more than you love yourself?

Prayer

Father, please expose to us the idols of our hearts. Show us anything at all that gets in the way of us fully loving you. Drive out fear from our hearts because perfect love drives out fear. Help us to change our thinking so that we think less of ourselves and think of you above all. May unforgiveness never get in the way of our love for you. Fill our hearts with love for you and drive out all sin and idols.

What do our Hearts Reveal About us?

Although they are deceitful, our hearts leak information all the time. Do not listen to your heart's words – listen carefully to your heart's actions. In particular, reflect on your thoughts and listen to what comes out of your mouth and out of other people's mouths.

“But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.”

Matthew 15:18-19

For example, if you have road rage at someone, what does that tell you about your heart? Are you loving your neighbour as yourself? Does it really matter that you were held up for a few seconds to convenience someone else?

If someone is mad at you, can you forgive them because they are demonstrating what is in their heart. Yes, it's not nice but their heart

is leaking information to you that on reflection they'd probably rather that you didn't know. Show them love and compassion, they are probably venting much deeper problems in your direction.

The heart full of Jesus and the Holy Spirit is going to be full of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, gentleness and self-control. So, listen to yourself – if your heart is not expressing these things you need to take a step back and ask God to fill your heart again.

Reflections

Think about a time when your heart and thoughts, words or actions have been out of sync.

How could you recognise that and fix things if it happened again in the future?

Prayer

Father, help us to listen to and reflect on the actual outputs of our hearts. Keep us aware that our hearts can be deceitful. Replace any sin or idols in our hearts with love for you and the Holy Spirit so that the fruit of the Holy Spirit overflows in our lives. Wipe away the love for self that exposes itself in fear and fill us instead with love for you and those around us.

The Power of Words

God formed everything by speaking. Words are very powerful things. For some people an unkind word can live with, shape and

haunt them for the rest of their lives. We need to free ourselves from words that have negatively affected us. Pray that you would see yourself through the lens of God's love for you and be freed from every unkind word that has taken up residence in your heart. Remember God knows you with infinite depth and intimacy, and in comparison, even our parents do not know us at all. Remember that those words often hurt because they contain one thread of truth and two threads of lies. Your heart needs to be rid of them so God can occupy the space they took up. Jesus is the truth! Ask Him to show you how wonderful he thinks you are and how very beautiful you are when you are filled with love for him. Avoid outward appearance – go for inward beauty of heart!

Sometimes we say things that are taken the wrong way. We need to be quick to recognise those times and to seek forgiveness.

Equally a kind word, or even something as simple as a smile, can shape our self-image positively forever. It is essential that our words, actions and even looks are always kind and constructive. These are all the overflow of our hearts. A friend told me of a time when he was at his deepest and lowest ebb. One evening he went out on his bicycle and after some miles passed a farm, where a lady crossed the road in front of him. This was actually very unusual because she was dressed in a beautiful full evening dress but with her wellies on her feet, and she was wheeling a wheelbarrow full of manure. She smiled at him with such beautiful a smile that it sustains him to this day. What a metaphor for Jesus, joyfully wheeling all our sin away!

Reflections

Have you ever said something to someone and later regretted it?

When have you been deeply affected by someone saying a kind and loving word to you?

Think of a time when you have been affected by an unkind word. If that is still affecting you how could you seek release from that curse?

Think of times you may have spoken unkind words. How could you show repentance for those times? How could you have said the same things in a loving and constructive way instead?

Prayer

Father, please heal us from every unkind word we have ever received into our hearts. Forgive us the times we have been unkind and help us to put things right. May we never speak destructive words into someone else's heart. Help us to turn around negative comments into positive and constructive words that feed the hearts of those around us.

The Character of True Disciples

Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and, in your name, perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!

Matthew 7:22-23

There is no doubt that everyone is in God's heart, but the reverse is not true. We are born out of relationship with God, so the human heart is initially alienated from God. Nevertheless, the name of Jesus carries spiritual power. We will see great works carried out by people who Jesus does not know intimately. The key word in this passage is **γινώσκω** (*ginōskō*), which denotes an intimate personal relationship, not just an intellectual one. Despite their outward actions these people lack a true loving relationship with Jesus. Sometimes you can see that – for example, great Christian “leaders” who are poor servants. Personally, I always say that the greatest sign of a leader is that you see them with a tea-towel or wearing Marigolds, serving in a kitchen as everywhere else. Even that is not enough. It is possible to serve religiously, but that’s not how grace works. We serve because we are bondservants of The Servant (Isaiah 42:1-4), we love the Lord with all our hearts so are grateful, loving servants.

Even the greatest of saints will come to the end of their lives on earth and wish that they had loved the Lord more. Like Schindler realising that he could have sold his car to save ten more lives, we will realise that we could have loved the Lord more deeply and longer. No doubt that will be our greatest regret.

Time to put that right.

Reflections

Do you serve the Lord because you feel it is your duty?

Do you serve the Lord because love for him compels you to serve?

Do you love the Lord just because you love him?

Prayer

Father, servanthood is our highest calling. Help us to serve out of a heart full of love for you. May we be people who have a deep loving knowledge of you our Maker, Redeemer and Empower-er. Wipe away feelings that we should serve because it is our duty and fill us with joyful, loving, heartfelt service, that at the end of our days on earth you may say to us “Well done good and faithful servant”.

Chapter 3 - The God-Shaped Hole in the Human Heart

Can Anything Really Satisfy us?

One thing is for sure; idols can never satisfy. The heart which craves money will never be filled by money. The heart which lusts will never be satisfied: the next object of lust will come along soon. The heart which is sated by drugs, alcohol, or gambling is on a slippery slope to imprisonment in addiction. The only cure for addiction I know of is to replace the addiction with a greater love.

Consider Solomon's pursuit of satisfaction through wisdom, pleasure, work, and wealth—all ending with "meaningless, a chasing after the wind."

He concluded that meaning is found only in God.

Saint Augustine also gave us a clue:

"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1.1.

But how can we achieve this satisfaction in God?

Reflections

Where have you tried to find satisfaction? How did that go?

What do you turn to when you feel stressed or unhappy?

Prayer

Father, our hearts are indeed restless until they find rest in you. We were made for relationship with you, and only your presence can satisfy the deepest desires of our hearts. We choose to love you with all our hearts. Fill us with overwhelming love for you in our hearts. May that overwhelming love for you drive out our addictions and anything in which we try to find satisfaction apart from you.

Why Everyone has a Jesus-Shaped Hole in Their Heart

I wonder if you've ever lost someone very dear to you. It can feel like they left a hole in your heart in the shape of that person.

We are told in the early chapters of Genesis that we were made by God for fellowship and relationship with God. Sadly, after humanity sinned that relationship was broken. That broken relationship leaves behind a hole of grief both in our hearts and in God's heart. Our need for God and his place in our heart remains. Sin broke humanity's intimate personal relationship with God, leaving us all with a God shaped hole in our hearts. Before we know God, we can't put our finger on it, but we feel that something is missing. To mask the pain, we try filling our hearts with anything we can, but it never works (just like putting the square shape into the star shaped hole in a child's shape-sorter toy – it can never properly fill the hole.) Before Jesus is in our hearts, absolutely nothing we put there seems to ultimately and permanently satisfy.

Reflections

When have you felt furthest from God?

When have you felt closest to God?

Can you commit to drawing closer to God in your heart every day?

Prayer

Father there are no words to describe the pain of a broken relationship, let alone humanity's broken relationship with you. Thank you that you never stopped loving me and you pursued me until I believed and came spiritually alive in you. I have a God-shaped hole in my heart that only you can fill. Nothing else I've put in my heart has ultimately satisfied, only you can do that, so I ask you now, to fill the God-shaped hole in my heart, fill me to overflowing and keep filling me with your presence and love for you, that I may love you with all my heart.

What Happens When God Fills Your Heart?

If God were to completely and exclusively fill that hole in our hearts, we would again have a sense of completeness. We would be back in that perfect relationship which is the only thing that can truly satisfy us. Our heart is like that child's shape-sorter, not with a star-shaped hole, but with a Jesus-shaped hole. Only placing Jesus there will truly satisfy or make us complete. He is the only thing that properly fits that hole, nothing else will satisfy. We were never intended for life without God in our hearts. With God in his rightful place in our hearts peace with God comes. We can truly enjoy him as our Father. Deep joy comes. As his exclusive presence in our

hearts begins to drive out sin, unforgiveness and idols, a walk towards true personal holiness is in progress.

A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.

Luke 6:45

Reflections

What has to happen so God can fill your heart?

How much do you want God to fill your heart?

How much do you want to love God?

Will you love God sacrificially?

Prayer

Lord, we all have a hole in our heart that can only be filled by you. Only you can satisfy. Forgive us for the times we have had anything in our hearts in the place of you. Come and take your rightful place in our hearts, filling us and overflowing your love into this otherwise lost world. May we know the deep joy and satisfaction of having our hearts filled with and by and for you. Drive out all other desires and lead us on the path to holiness. Let us store up good in our hearts, that we may bring out good things.

Back to Normality

The loving two-way relationship between humanity and God was God's intended normal for us. For a human being, not having God in our heart is not-normal, not what we were intended for and has disastrous consequences. Consider the record of sin in Genesis. Firstly, there is covetousness for something outside God's boundaries (apple). Then there is the actual disobedient eating of the forbidden fruit. Then there is the acquisition of something explicitly denied us, deliberately for our own good (knowledge of good and evil). Next comes hiding from God and attempts to cover shame. Then Adam tries to blame his wife and God for what he has done! The next recorded sin is murder. It is amazing how quickly things escalate out of control.

Reflections

When we are back in relationship with God we're back to normality – back to the state that we were designed to live in. How should that change our relationship with sin?

How do you feel about being adopted as a child of God?

How does that make you feel about your relationship with Jesus?

Prayer

Father we were made for intimate fellowship with you, and though we wandered far away you called us back into that relationship. Thank you for never forsaking us and always loving us. Help us to

feel the joy of normality, being back in the deep, loving two-way relationship with you that we were always meant to have.

What to do

We often tell new believers to invite Jesus into their hearts. But that's not enough. Jesus must absolutely, overwhelmingly fill our hearts. He must be our ultimate thing, our most treasured possession. Compared to him filling our hearts, our sins and idols are useless, unsatisfying and meaningless. If we are to become the people we were designed to be, we need to constantly ask Jesus, not only into our hearts but to fill the Jesus-shaped hole in our hearts. That relationship with Jesus, filling our hearts, needs to become our ultimate possession.

We sometimes emphasise repentance to new believers and people we are witnessing to as part of the Gospel message. It is all too easy to be harsh with those whose sins and temptations are different from our own. As we'll see both holiness and true, lasting repentance are not possible unless we love God more than the things we're repenting of. So, I ask you to be patient, gentle and kind to yourself and others, and to work with the Holy Spirit, who inspires love for God in our hearts, to bring about that true and lasting repentance. Yes, repentance is a vital part of the Gospel message, but I want to make sure it is viable, true and lasting. Simply showing remorse and turning from sin is not enough. Sin will always be calling us back. We need something much greater than sin filling our hearts, and the only thing that will achieve that is the overwhelming presence of God Himself.

Reflections

When you came to faith, how did Jesus impact your heart? How did you get on in the fight against sin?

What practical steps can you take to love God more and more day by day?

Prayer

Father, we need something much greater than sin filling our hearts, and the only thing that will achieve that is the overwhelming presence of your love being reflected back as love for you. Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you overcame sin and death so we could be adopted us back into the Father's family. We cannot be Christians on our own. We need you filling our hearts and making us the people we were always meant to be.

What to Expect

If you're addicted to drugs (even nicotine, caffeine or sugar) you will know the rush of having your desires met, followed by the emptiness when the drug runs out. God filling our hearts is not at all like that. Loving God is about giving us a secure base, a solid foundation which does not shift. The security of our place in Christ, ultimately brings peace and peace brings joy and inner contentment. Some may describe him as an anchor for the soul. Jesus takes away our anxieties as in faith we cast our cares on him. He enables us to learn contentment and to endure the most difficult circumstances.

*You will keep in perfect peace
those whose minds are steadfast,
because they trust in you.*

Isaiah 26:3 - NKJV

Filling our hearts with love for God enables us to overcome sin, because compared to him all sin is worthless. Jesus is our greatest treasure. We love those he loves (everyone around us – regardless of their temptations and sins) and hate what he hates (sin that binds people away from spiritual life). We become overwhelmed by the love Jesus showed us by going to the cross for us and shocked at our sin which caused him to be nailed to the cross.

True holiness is achievable only when we are loving God with all our hearts. If we have anything less than God, then sin and idolatry will reside in our hearts too, and personal holiness will be a distant mirage. Slowly we become the image of Jesus in this world. As we open our hearts increasingly to God, we are more fillable by the Holy Spirit. As he increasingly indwells and fills our hearts, love for God drives away everything that stands in competition with him.

Reflections

Have you ever been addicted to something (even caffeine or sugar)? How did your behaviour change when you couldn't get it?

What would happen if you had an unlimited supply of that thing?

(I've heard it said that new workers in the Cadbury's chocolate factory near Birmingham were allowed to eat as much chocolate as they liked. After a few weeks they never wanted to eat chocolate ever again. Not all addictions are the same!)

What would happen if God was the ultimate thing in your heart and you had an infinite supply of God?

Prayer

Father, we're all addicted to something. Please free us from our addictions by becoming our greatest love. Drive out anything else in our hearts that is not you or from you, so that we may become the people we were always intended to be. People who in the deepest sense know our God. Give us the steadiness and fruit that having you in our hearts brings.

Father, help us to see sin from your perspective. Please fill us with deep Godly sorrow for our sin. We need your help hour by hour, so we grow in love for you and that love drives out any residual desire for sin or idols. Help us to control our minds and point them towards love for you when we are tempted. We often lead ourselves into temptation. Teach us to watch over our minds to actively lead ourselves out of temptation by refocusing on you.

How to Make Lasting Change

Unless we love God with all our hearts, sin will certainly bite us again and again.

“Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it”

Genesis 4:7

We may think we can overcome sin on our own, but sooner or later our idols and old habits resurface. We can't cover them up by ourselves except for a short time. We simply can't rule over sin unless we have a greater treasure than sin in our hearts.

So, make God your ultimate possession. Ask him hour by hour, even moment by moment, not just into your heart but to fill your heart. Choose to love him with all your heart so there is no space left for sin. He will not share your heart with another. Look to him to be your satisfaction. Guard your heart so you never look for satisfaction elsewhere.

That doesn't mean that we don't love our families and those around us, or that we don't enjoy good things. It just means that those things are not our ultimate things. If we lose them, then like Job we can still say "*The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.*" (Job 1:21) because we have something of far greater value than anything the world has to offer. We sometimes grieve, but not as the world grieves.

'Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.'

Jesus isn't saying that we shouldn't love our families deeply, we should! But Jesus must be our greatest love.

We can be like Horatio Spafford who lost his four daughters in a shipwreck, yet in response wrote the hymn "When Peace Like a River".

*When peace like a river attendeth my way,
when sorrows like sea billows roll;
whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
"It is well, it is well with my soul."*

Horatio Spafford

I very much doubt anyone could write that, unless they had something even greater than their dear children in their heart. One to whose eternal love we can trust even our children's eternal future.

Although, in this life we will never be perfect, we can use that love for God filling our hearts to drive out sin and drive away temptation. Our full desire is for God and nothing else to occupy our hearts. We don't want to sin because that would compromise our most precious love. As we will see shortly, we do that by loving God with all our minds and actively using our God-given super-power Consciousness.

Reflections

Have you ever tried to change yourself, or something about yourself in your own strength? How did you get on?

Have you ever tried regular exercise? How did that make you feel?

Have you (or do you know someone who has) ever tried to overcome an addiction? How did that go?

Prayers

Father our hearts are indeed restless until they find rest in you as our ultimate possession and the answer for our deepest needs. Help us to experience the depth of your love for us every day and to respond in boundless love for you. Teach us to love others well as a result of loving you with all our being.

Thank you, Father, that you will not share our hearts with another.

Chapter 4 - Loving God With all our Minds

The heart and mind are linked. You could never imagine someone's mind producing beautiful loving words and actions if their heart was full of sin, anger and unforgiveness. The holy mind is driven by a clean heart to think holy, beautiful thoughts.

*In the battle against sin,
consciousness is your super-power.*

We are privileged to be conscious beings. We are conscious because we are made in the image of our conscious creator God. When it comes to controlling our minds and fighting sin, consciousness is our super-power. Consciousness makes us consciously aware of our own thoughts, and that changes everything. We are free to choose and change what we think about, and we are free to choose and change what we love. We can choose to love sacrificially – that is what makes love so amazing and special.

We can make conscious choices even in choosing the things we think about. We can think of joyous things or things that make us angry or things that arouse lust and covetousness. It's our choice. We can also choose to think about God and his Word. We can think about good and noble things. We can choose to ruminate on temptations, and we can choose to refocus our minds on God himself. It's all our conscious choice.

Bad things like anger and unforgiveness will come after our mind-space time and again, but we can choose not to let those thoughts fester. We can choose, for example, to pray about them and move on. Like Paul, take it to the Lord in prayer three times, then move on when you find His grace is sufficient! Choose not to let those thoughts control your mind. You are in control, when it comes to your thoughts, you are the “responsible adult in the room”.

When it comes to your thoughts, you are the responsible adult in the room!

Satan may try, but does not have ultimate control of our minds. Sinful thoughts like lust, anger or unforgiveness will try time and again to control our minds. But, and this is such a great gift, we get to choose what to do with our minds, moment by moment. We choose to give our minds over to considering good and beautiful things, to rejoicing and to the loving direction of the Holy Spirit.

“Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

Philippians 4:8

Paul describes this as taking every thought captive for Christ:

“We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”

2 Corinthians 10:5

What Paul is saying is “You must be the responsible adult in the room of your mind!”. You must stay aware of what you are thinking and allow yourself to think about, measuring your thoughts by the standards of Christ. Later on, we will look at the task of mining Jesus’ commands from his words, which I hope you will find to be an amazingly joyous activity.

As we act responsibly and take control of the attacks on our minds, due to bad thoughts popping into our heads, they become less frequent, and less effective:

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

James 4:7-8

In loving God with all our hearts, we are also choosing to love him with all our minds. Consciousness is our human super-power. We not only think, but we are aware of our thinking and can choose to change our thoughts. So, we consciously control our thoughts and direct them in ways of blessing, consciously choosing to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Refusing to hate people. Choosing to seek the fruit of the Holy Spirit and to keep

Jesus, our most cherished possession at the very forefront of our minds and thinking.

James (4:7-8) is calling us double-minded. Our minds can have one foot in the camp of holiness and one in the camp of sinfulness. We must not live like that. When we are tempted, we must control our minds, quickly rejecting sin and choosing to love Jesus above everything. We must use our consciousness to monitor our thoughts and “take captive” every ungodly thought that pops into our head. Refuse to allow it headspace and refocus your mind and heart ideally on Jesus (if you are doing a safety critical task focus on that!). Ask God to fill your heart with His presence and to drive out every ungodly thought and temptation.

Of course, if we do sin we have an advocate, but we were are called to holiness not to sin. To be like Jesus. To be holy because he is holy. He is the very source of holiness, and we cannot be holy unless he is fully present in our hearts and minds, driving out every bad thought and every temptation.

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Romans 12:2

As a practical application, we can use our consciousness to catch ourselves and refocus our minds when we are thinking about ourselves too much.

Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus

Hebrews 3:1

He must increase, but I must decrease.

John 3:30 KJV

Reflections

Have the thoughts of your heart ever overspilled through your mouth, bypassing your mind? (I'm thinking about, for example, anger overspilling, perhaps as rage towards someone, while your mind is quietly saying "you're going to regret this!"). How could you react differently in the future?

Think about the things that tend to occupy your mind. Which thoughts are godly, and which are ungodly. Practice setting an alarm in your mind to prompt you to change when you are thinking ungodly thoughts.

Think about the good things that you love to think about or meditate about (perhaps, jot down a list of things you are thankful for). Maybe they could be a good refuge for your mind when ungodly thoughts are assailing you.

*You will keep in perfect peace
those whose minds are steadfast,
because they trust in you.*

Isaiah 26:3

Would it be a mistake to love God so you get rewarded?

Prayer

Thank you, Father, that you made us in your image and because you are conscious, so we have the conscious ability to monitor and control our own minds. We give our minds to you now, to be instruments of holiness. May our minds be like a compass always pointing back to you when we are knocked off course. We want our hearts and minds to be completely clean, a place where your Spirit is delighted to dwell. Help us to monitor our own thoughts and to reject any thought that is unworthy of you.

Heart, Mind and Words

'The things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts – murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person.'

Matthew 15: 18-20

The Mind as a Filter for Words

When I was in 5th grade (year 6 in the UK) my teacher told me that I was the oldest boy in the school and the stupidest! Help in releasing me from that curse came from another teacher who had worked out all of the maths lessons for the year, put each lesson in a file, and let the children work at their own pace. I was able to fly and had objective evidence that my stupidity was actually limited! Had that not happened I could have been constrained to a life where I

believed I am stupid. That teacher also taught me music and provided the soundtrack of my childhood.

Words are incredibly powerful things. Consider how everything came to be. God said ... and it was. Now every word we say to someone else has the possibility of being taken to heart. Sometimes in incredibly destructive ways. We must be extremely careful with our words. The human soul is very fragile against the power of words. Some peoples' lives are twisted or diminished or destroyed by a few words.

There is an episode of "Dr Who" where the Doctor says he will destroy the prime minister using only a few words. He then whispers to a journalist "She looks a bit tired, doesn't she?"

Just as words can tear us down and destroy us, they can also build us up and even save us.

*A gentle answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger.*

Proverbs 15:1

Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

James 3:5-6

Love for God flows out of your heart through your mind, out of your mouth and into the hearts of your hearers. So let your words be few and unbelievably kind.

Reflections

Has anyone ever said something negative to you or about you that you have taken to heart and allowed to limit or control you?

Ask God now to free you from those words so that you see yourself as the amazing, fully loved, freed man or woman of God that you are.

Think about something positive someone has said to or about you. How has that affected your life and self-image?

Think about how you can answer someone with whom you profoundly disagree, in a way that reflects God's love and kindness.

Is there anyone you need to apologise to in order to break the curse of an unkind word you have said?

Prayer

Father, please free us from every unkind and limiting word that has ever been said to us. These words do not come from you and do not reflect your limitless love for us. They have constrained us for far too long. May our hearts rejoice in all that you are making us to be, and the limitless possibilities of a heart, mind and soul filled by you and for you.

Father, we ask your forgiveness for every unkind word we have ever said. Our words have limited and diminished people who you love deeply. Fill us, when we speak, with words that build people up and never limit or tear them down.

Chapter 5 - True Lasting Repentance

Why Love for God Comes Before Lasting Repentance

If we think we've repented but don't fully love God, then our sin will eventually resurface. Lots of people will have the experience of having a sin found out then claiming to be truly sorry and to have repented, only for that sin to resurface sometime later. The sin is still in their hearts. But if love for God is our ultimate possession and he is filling our hearts, then sin won't stand much of a chance:

Take the woman caught in adultery in John 8. She was facing being stoned to death by an angry mob. Jesus intervened and showed them the hypocrisy in their hearts. Imagine how she felt seeing her accusers melt away. How must she have felt about Jesus? I think she must have loved him very much indeed. Jesus came to save her, not to condemn her. So now she was ready to hear his message "go now and leave your life of sin". She was able to truly repent because she had found a love of much greater value than her sin.

Reflections

Have you ever thought that you have repented from a sin, only for that sin to bite you again later?

What can you do to replace sinful behaviour and thoughts with something better?

Prayer

Father, forgive us when our repentance is shallow and incomplete. It must be terrible for you to see people you love returning to the thing you hate the most. Father, we need something, better than sin in our hearts, and only you will satisfy. We long for holiness yet on our own cannot get anywhere near it. Fill us with love for you, indeed we choose to love you with all our hearts, so sin will have nowhere in our hearts to hide.

Why we Sometimes get Repentance Wrong

Repentance isn't as simple as turning a car around and going the other way. Nor is it merely showing true remorse for the offence that sin is to our holy, holy, holy God. We must find a way to never look back too.

We often fail to see the Bible through the lens of Jesus. Our calls to repentance are not always in love at all. (I've heard people say that telling someone to repent is the most loving thing we can do – but that's just our hearts deceiving us – we need to give more practical and loving advice and support.) Repentance without *a priori* love for God is doomed to failure. We should be saying “Choose to replace the love of sin with love for God in your heart”. That's what leads to lasting repentance. If God is truly the ultimate thing in our hearts:

1. Sin will never have value to us in comparison to God. Sin and idols must be expelled from our hearts and be replaced with deep love for God.

2. We will be unshakable. We have something in our hearts which nobody can ever take away. It will be impossible to threaten us.

One day some colleagues went go-carting. The men were totally destroyed by a young woman who worked in the office who beat them all, winning all her races. The following day I heard them talking about it. One of them said “Yes but she’s one of those born-again Christians, she’s completely fearless, she believes that if she dies, she goes straight into the presence of Jesus!” I guess that when the non-Christians around us start witnessing for us we’ve really made it as a Christian!

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear.

1 John 4:18

Reflections

Are there any sins that you still hold dear? How can you leave them behind and never look back?

Can you think of any fearless Christians in your friendship circle? Ask them how they feel about Jesus.

Prayers

Father may I fearlessly and fully repent, choosing to love you with all my heart, soul, mind and strength. May my fearless love for you be so strong that people who don’t know about you talk about it.

Help us to control our minds so we are always pointing forwards to you and never looking back to sin.

Father, we've often failed. Though we think we've repented, our hearts deceive us, and sin often comes back. Fill our hearts with such love for you that love for sin is eclipsed and driven out. We choose to love you with that sacrificial love. May our desire for you be so much greater than any desire for sin that people around us begin to notice your presence in us.

How to Obtain Deep, Lasting Repentance

You cannot properly repent and at the same time harbour sin in your heart. You need something bigger and better there to drive sin out. God is the only thing that will truly satisfy your heart. Ask him to continuously fill the God-shaped hole in your heart and be your one ultimate thing, so that everything else will fade into insignificance in comparison. For some this is a process and can feel like climbing a ladder as love for God overwhelms one thing at a time, be it lust, control, self-loathing etc.

*Above all else, guard your heart,
for everything you do flows from it.*

Proverbs 4:23

Reflections

What would it mean in practical terms for you to "guard your heart"?

If you genuinely repented of something, how could you make sure that the sin did not come back to bite you again?

Prayer

Father, our repentance has sometimes been half-hearted. We recognise that half-hearted is nowhere near good enough. Help us to create a permanent clean space in our hearts for your Holy Spirit to dwell. We all have a God-shaped hole in our hearts. Father, please fill that with your presence and prompt us to always love you with all our hearts. Nudge us when our thinking is less than godly and restore us moment by moment into that perfect relationship where you are our deepest desire and meet our deepest needs.

Don't let Your Heart Deceive you

Our hearts are deceitful. If we listen to our hearts they will lie to us. Instead, we must keep on listening not to what our hearts are telling us, but what they are saying in terms of our thoughts and the words that come out of our mouths. Is there something on our mind a lot of the time? Is that becoming an ultimate thing? Did we just say something unkind? Where did that come from? Our hearts will tell us "It's fine I love God with all my heart." But our outputs (thoughts, words and actions) can contradict that, and it is those outputs that tell us what is really going on in our hearts.

We need to develop self-discipline in our thought lives. Is something bugging us? We need to stop thinking about that and think

about our treasure in heaven. Now we do have to think about the things that bug us some time. I suggest just limiting that time. Set a five- or ten-minute timer and after that reset your heart and mind back to godly things. Ask Jesus to completely fill your heart again, then perhaps find a Bible verse you love and meditate on that.

Reflections

Have you ever been able to stop your thoughts in their tracks and refocus your mind on something else?

What thing is most worrying you at the moment? Try limiting the headspace and time you give it.

Prayer

Lord our hearts are indeed deceitful, and it is easy for us to delude ourselves. Open the eyes of our hearts so we can see ourselves as we really are. Help us to listen to our thoughts and words so we know what our hearts are really hiding. Give us new hearts of flesh, filled with your presence and Spirit so that love overflows us and fills the world.

Lord, we recognise that our repentance can be half-hearted. Help us not to withhold anything from you, but to love you continuously with all our hearts. As we embrace you in our hearts, empower us to repent fully. Grant us full, lasting and effective repentance, replacing sin and idols in our hearts with love for you. When we are

tempted reset our hearts to you alone. Set a compass in our hearts that always points to heaven.

Fighting Temptation. Your Super-Power: Consciousness

Job gives us a great clue about avoiding temptation. What he says is metaphorical so we will need to unpack it a little:

*I made a covenant with my eyes
not to look lustfully at a young woman.*

Job 31:1

Job is not literally saying he has made a covenant with his eyes. Our eyes do not choose what we look at. Our conscious minds do. Note that he is not saying he will never look at a woman, rather that he will never look at her with lust in his heart. Job's metaphor is all about the heart, mind and consciousness working together, so if lust raises its ugly, tempting head, his consciousness chooses to cut in and redirect and restrain his mind.

Consciousness means we are consciously aware of our thoughts. Not only that, but our minds are aware of temptation before we sin. That gives us a chance to intervene. We are consciously aware of our thoughts, so we can consciously turn our hearts and minds back to God. When tempted we need to refill our hearts with love for God. Temptation should drive us to our knees, asking God for His loving presence in our hearts to drive out temptation, sin and idolatry. We need to be asking to be filled with a deep love for God that is so much more valuable to us than sin.

Not only that, but we can consciously choose to love, even very unlovely people. How much more should we choose to love the one who is the very personification of love.

We pray in the Lord's prayer "lead us not into temptation", however we have our own part to play. How often do we ruminate on temptation rather than actively rejecting it and choosing to repoint our hearts and minds heavenwards?

James' words are sobering:

When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

James 1: 13-15

Choose to nip your temptations in the bud!

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you.

James 4:7-8

Reflections

Have you ever thought about how you can rule over sin (Genesis 4:7)?

When have you tried to fight temptation using your own willpower?
How did you get on?

The next time you feel tempted, use the super-power of your consciousness. Turn your mind to God, never turn to sin.

Ask God to fill your heart with love for him way above and beyond anything sin and temptation have to offer.

Rejoice in His presence in your life and heart.

Prayer

Father the world has nothing to offer us that is remotely close to the value of knowing you. You are our very great reward. Forgive us when we allow our minds to focus on anything sinful rather than on you. Help us to take responsibility for leading ourselves away from temptation. Prompt us when tempted to turn to you, seeking your love and to love you with all our hearts. Drive out any desire in our hearts for anything less than you.

Chapter 6 – The Joy of Discovering Jesus’ Commands

Loving obedience to Jesus is a crucial mark of a disciple. It is therefore extremely important to understand what Jesus’ commands actually are. I hope that you will find great joy in searching them out and carefully following Jesus’ teaching.

We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. Whoever says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.

1 John 2:3-6

Jesus not only fulfils the law, but he also gives us God’s perspective on the law. From that perspective following the letter of the law is worthless legalism, but following the spirit of the law is what pleases God, and we do that because we’re adopted in his family and out of reverent love for him.

For example, when Jesus says, “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matthew 5:28), he is not just telling us that adultery is wrong but that even harbouring lust in our hearts is wrong. Jesus always gets to the heart of the matter! Looking at the image of a woman lustfully is no excuse either (just in case you are confused over Jesus’ view on pornography). In fact, all covetousness starts in the heart, and I really hope that his book has given you the tools to nip that in the bud!

Covering all of Jesus' commands would be the subject of another book, and I hope that now I've told you, that you enjoy finding them in the gospels and Revelation. Let me help you to identify them and then we will run through a few of them, looking at them through the lens of loving God with all our hearts.

Identifying and Inferring Jesus' Commands

Jesus' commands seem to come in two flavours. Direct commands and inferred commands. His commands can be inferred from several different types of saying where the command is implied. For example, we can infer some commands through the parables, though sometimes some meditation is required. These commands flow throughout the gospel messages.

Explicit Commands

Jesus' explicit commands cover off many areas such as love and relationships, prayer and spiritual life, following him, humility and service, worship and fasting, witness and mission, worry and trust, sin and temptation, reconciliation and conflict.

Then there are commands which are warnings against things such as hypocrisy and religious pride, causing others to sin, greed, legalism, spiritual blindness, hardness of heart, unfaithfulness and unprepared living, seeking status or recognition, anger and unforgiveness.

Sometimes these commands come with a reason:

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

John 13:34-35

If we fail to love each other as Christians, the world will deduce quite the wrong thing about us.

Inferred Commands

Inferred commands come in several categories. We have to use our minds to infer them correctly. For example,³ one inferred command would be to make sure you have your wedding clothes on (Matthew 22:1-14). Meditating on this you may realise that Jesus is talking of an inward clothing rather than actual wedding clothes. Remember to apply common sense, we are not to bind and throw non-believers out into darkness, nor should our eyes be gouged out, Jesus sometimes uses hyperbolae and metaphor!

When Jesus says, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?” (Matthew 22:18), clearly, we can imply a command against hypocrisy.

When Jesus says, “You are in error because you do not know the scriptures or the power of God.” (Matthew 22:29) we are in effect commanded to study the scriptures, so we do not fall into the same

³ I chose Matthew 22 at random for this exercise which is rather interesting when you consider Matthew 22:34-40!

trap that the Sadducees have fallen into. Not only that, but we are effectively commanded to meditate on the power of God. (That will do our faith the world of good!).

Another example occurs in the Beatitudes:

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.*

Matthew 5:5

Jesus isn't merely suggesting that we hunger and thirst for righteousness. It's an implied command.

Finally, there are commands which we can infer from conditional promises, but let's face it, we must treat them as commands:

"If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

John 15:5

Jesus isn't suggesting that we might like to remain in him. We can safely treat this as a command. He's telling us, "Remain in me!"

Please take time to do the reflection below regularly. I'm sure you will find amazing joy in seeking out and lovingly obeying Jesus' commands, particularly the ones you have to seek out and infer.

Mining the Bible for treasures is a wonderful pastime. You may find the book Digging Deeper by Nigel Beynon and Andrew Sach (Beynon & Sach, 2005) helpful in doing this.

Reflections

Search for Jesus' commands in the gospels and Revelation. Maybe start with a small section and reflect on all of the direct and indirect or implied commands.

Pray those commands into your heart, so you will obey Jesus through love and never through legalism.

Prayer

Lord, please walk with us and open the scriptures to us, so we may learn and do your will. May our hearts burn with joy at discovering and living out your will in our lives.

Chapter 7 - Fruit

Some new Perspectives

In his life on earth Jesus turned the world's order upside-down. In his kingdom the first are last, the last first, the greatest is servant of all. Salvation comes not from violence but from his outpouring of love by suffering at Calvary. Enemies are loved and persecutors prayed for. Hypocrisy is exposed. The hungry fed and the weak cared for.

Jesus came to save, not to condemn. He was full of grace and love and the only things he hated were hypocrisy, religion and sin. He was particularly scornful of those who cause others to sin.

As I will explain later, Jesus is radically pro-choice, because choice is the essential component of sacrificial love. God loves a cheerful giver – he loves us doing what is right in his eyes for no other reason than that we love him.

Jesus is adamantly opposed to religion. Doing things to try to earn God's favour is a dark cul-de-sac which opposes the Gospel. We do what is right because we love him, and we love him because, well we love him. (Okay we also love him because he first loved us, but that's beside this particular point!)

So, in this topsy-turvy world where we love God and his ways above all things, where the first are last and the last are first and where we love and pray for our enemies, we have some new perspectives. Like Jesus, we don't condemn people, we love people. Even those

who have different temptations and worldviews to us. We don't try to force them into our mould, but rather we do encourage them to love the Lord with all their hearts, knowing that the Lord's full presence in the heart is incompatible with darkness. Knowing also that a heart filled with love for God and indwelled by the Holy Spirit is a transformative super-power. We don't have to point out the speck of dust in the eyes of other people. We do have to lead them into deeper relationship with God and let that relationship with God transform them.

Consciousness is Your Super-Power

We are made in the image of God who is himself conscious. Consciousness means not only that we think, but that we are aware of what we are thinking. This gives us the ability to disbelieve and reject thoughts that come into our minds, to critique them even from someone else's point of view and most importantly to consciously stop thinking about something and start thinking about something else. This is something of a muscle – most effective when regularly practiced! If I say to you “Don't think about elephants!” it is actually quite difficult not to think about elephants, until our minds are taken up by a different thought. If you Love the Lord with all Your Heart, what would you rather think about? If you still find this difficult, then when bad thoughts pop into your head, try reading your Bible for a while.

Consciousness lets us choose to focus on loving God, rather than focusing on something bad in our minds. Consciousness allows us to choose to be aware of our thoughts and not to allow sin or bad

thoughts to dwell in our hearts, and to choose to love God and use that love for God to drive out our sin and idolatry.

Consciousness is what allows you to be the “Responsible adult in the room” of your mind. Thoughts and temptations will pop into your mind, but you are the ultimate controller of your thoughts: you choose whether to ruminate on temptation or to fix your mind on Jesus. It’s your decision. As for me, I choose Jesus. Love is a choice.

Now some brief words of warning: If you are doing a task that is safety critical, like driving a car, you should be using your full conscious mind to do that; focusing on safety, driving responsibly, actively identifying hazards and adjusting your speed and position accordingly! If a bad thought pops into your head or you find your mind drifting off the task, refocus on the task. God will still be there at a more appropriate time for you to focus on him.

As you start to consciously take charge of your thoughts and rejecting sinful and idolatrous ideas which pop into your mind, you may well experience withdrawal symptoms where the dopamine hit you used to get from certain thoughts and behaviours no longer happens. Like all withdrawal symptoms, hang on in there. Pray. Focus on God. You will get over it. You are making space in your mind and heart for loving God, so be encouraged.

Thoughts pop into our heads all the time. The one which is trying to derail the Gospel is “You’re not good enough!...”. Remember – that thought has a strand of truth and a strand of lies. Push back on your

thoughts: "...true! But Jesus is good enough! And that is all that matters!"

Living Under Grace

Because we live under grace and not under law, we must fight against hard hearted legalism which is anti-grace. The love we have for God in our hearts needs to overflow so that we uphold the truth in love with deep loving kindness. Legalism often pushes blame onto innocent victims of circumstance, when true blame lies with those who cause sin and temptation.

With this in mind, we should tell our sons to have hearts so full of love for God that they never look lustfully at a woman. We tell our children never to dare to put another person into a situation where that person may be tempted to sin. We tell them we must never use another person for our own sexual gratification. We tell them to get their value from Jesus' love for them and from loving God, and not from anyone else.

Reflection

I've noticed that much of the blame for society's ills is placed squarely on women, when from God's perspective the real problem is revealed to be the behaviour and hypocrisy of men. (If you need a clue, we're back in John 8.) If we are loving God with all our hearts, then how should the grace of God be expressed through us?

The Fear of the Lord

Loving God with all our hearts gives us a new perspective on The Fear of the Lord. When God is 100% in our hearts, and loved with all our hearts, minds, soul and strength, we never want to compromise that love. We never want him to share our hearts with sin or with an idol. We fear nothing more than losing any part of him in our hearts. Sin has lost its hold on our minds. True wisdom has come.

Money

If Jesus is filling our hearts and is our ultimate possession, driving out all idols, then what about our money? We are not our own, we were bought at a price. Our money becomes a kingdom resource. Never in a legalistic way, but we are freed to share and give generously.

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

2 Corinthians 9:6-7

The love of money is a powerful idol. We need to be sure that we are always loving God infinitely more than we love our bank accounts.

'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and

vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.'

Matthew 6:19-21

Power and Position

People often seek out the idols of Power and Position. Not so the person whose greatest love is the Lord.

What then of our position? How do we become the greatest in the Kingdom? By becoming the least and servant of all. We are Christ's blood-bought possession. Like the prodigal son we would be grateful to be servants in the father's house though we are much more than that. In fact, "servant" is the highest title of any follower, a title given to Moses, Job and Jesus himself and claimed by the likes of Paul, Timothy and Peter. For God to call you his servant is high praise indeed. Have your tea-towel and Marigolds at the ready!

Remember we are all servants of Jesus therefore we are all leaders. You can choose to start displaying leadership right now by choosing to serve.

True leadership is sacrificial service and sacrificial service, like love is a choice! Don't wait to be called – you've already been called!

You may need wisdom and direction about how and where you serve, but in some capacity you can serve straight away.

Reflections

There is no such thing in the New Testament as a church leader who is not a servant. Every servant of Jesus expresses leadership. Women serve wonderfully in my church. Is there a false dichotomy between leadership and servanthood in your church? If so, how could that be addressed?

Although we should all serve in some capacity, are there any areas where it would not be appropriate for you to serve in? (Hint: remember outreach is an away game, avoid areas where you know you have a weakness.)

Prayer

Lord, you humbled yourself and became obedient even unto death on a cross. Help us to set aside anything and everything that is not either you or from you. Fill our hearts with overflowing love for you. Be the one thing we covet the most and the one thing we most fear losing. Help us to actively turn away from sin, idols and anything that separates us, and to embrace, love and serve you and those around us with all our hearts.

As an encouragement to you, consider the Lord's promises to the exiles from Jeremiah:

You will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity.”

Jeremiah 29:12-14

Bible

If you love God with every fibre of your being, you can't help but love his Word.

All Scripture is God breathed – breathed out by the Holy Spirit for us. It's there to give us knowledge, wisdom and understanding, to equip us for every good work. It ministers from God's heart to our hearts and the more we love God the deeper into our hearts his word can permeate. We search the scriptures to find him.

Take the person in Psalm 1 who meditates on God's Law night and day. In the moral law parts of scripture, we see a picture of God's moral character. The moral law is the way it is because that's the way God is! So, this person meditating on the law is like someone who finds themselves in a hotel room miles away from home one night and looks into their purse or wallet and takes out a photograph of their spouse, so they may look deeply into their most loved one's face.

All scripture is like that. Have you ever phoned an answer machine just so you can hear your loved one's voice? As we love God more that voice becomes ever more precious.

Read your Bible slowly. Meditate on it. Let it minister to your heart as a love letter from someone who loves you more than you can ever imagine. Try reading it out loud, slowly, or writing it down. Try to read it like you are trying to explain it to someone.

Look out for the joy of finding Jesus in the Old Testament, like Zechariah's vision of Joshua the high priest (Zechariah 3:1-5). I still remember my joy as a young Christian of finding Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22.

Watch out for Jesus' commands hidden in the New Testament and note how you feel when you find them! (Chapter 6 of this book can help with this.)

Use the Bible Gently

In handling the Bible, remember that Jesus came to save and to serve, not to condemn, so we must never use the Bible to hurt or harm someone else. If someone's lifestyle is out of line with your interpretation of the Bible, you're unlikely to fix that, and any attempt will most likely cause alienation. Let your love for Jesus and those around you shine through. Only the work of the Spirit is going to change people, growing love for God is the most effective cause for deep lasting change. If someone loves Jesus with all their heart, sin will have little value to them, so be kind, gentle and loving. Speak the truth to build loving relationships. Never use rebuke in a way that undermines anyone else. Work on learning to disagree with love. We're all different. We can't possibly agree on everything.

We all have a worldview and – let's face it, only God has a perfect worldview. Only God judges perfectly.

Just a warning: The Bible can be a terrible idol. If you think your theology is better than anyone else's, think again because pride over superior theology stinks. God opposes the proud but give grace to the humble. Only God has perfect theology.

Reflections

Can you think of a time when meditating on the Bible has restored your soul?

How can you use scripture to heal other people?

Prayer

Lord, thank you that you breathed out all scripture because of your deep love for us. Help us not just to read, but to meditate daily on your Word and to hear and love your voice. Help us to grow in love for you and in loving reverence to your Word. Help us to speak out your Word to tell of your love and compassion and bless those around us. Teach us to disagree in deep love and respect and to learn that often we may not actually be right.

Using the Bible to Reflect on What we Have Learned

Watch out for the many places in the Bible where what you have learned in this book resonates. For example:

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

Colossians 3:5-10

Look at how Paul is applying the ideas in this book: Note how bad things are being “put to death”. In your new self, you are using your consciousness to exclude them from your being, which is being renewed in the image of God. You are now part of the Father’s family, and you are expressing the family traits.

If you want to take this further spend some time in 1 John in the light of this book. An example could be to consider:

God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

1 John 1:5-7

Reflections

Given the two passages from Colossians and 1 John above, what should our conscious minds be doing so we continue to “walk in the light”? What are the effects on us when we use our minds to do these things?

It is Better to be Righteous Than to be Right

You can be right but obnoxious. It is much better to lose an argument and be right with God than to win the argument and offend God. Winning an argument proves nothing, except that you are good at winning arguments. Everyone has a worldview, it is the lens through which we see our lives, and that worldview is incredibly useful because it stops us having to think about everything deeply all the time. Unfortunately, our worldview also contains all our unconscious biases and prejudices. Absolutely nobody (except Jesus) has a perfect worldview. Jesus often turns our worldview upside down, for example, “You want to become the greatest then become the least”, “You want to hate your enemies, but you must love and pray for them”. Now, no two people are the same, and no two people have the same worldview, so when we talk to anyone else, we both have different worldviews, and we both think we are right! Arguments are inevitable! One of the key skills here is to disagree in love. Trying to win the argument is NOT the point. We should be working together in loving conversation understand one another, build consensus and to get a combined, better, worldview. The correct worldview is that of Jesus – where righteousness reigns. He IS the truth!

Finally, we tend to align with people who have a similar worldview to us. Remember the value of different worldviews. Diversity of worldview and opinion is indeed important. Disagreement tests, sharpens and enhances our worldview. You think that you are right, because that's what your worldview tells you, but remember to always believe that you may be wrong. Jesus' worldview is what is important. He is the truth. Choose to seek him in love. Your opinion matters little. His righteousness is everything.

Mental health

All of us will suffer some form of mental health battle at some points in our lives. It all goes back to the fall. We were never meant to live separated from the love of God; we are way outside our design parameters. No wonder we all suffer some form of mental anguish sometimes. I am not a mental health expert and what follows is not medical advice, so if in doubt seek help and follow advice from a qualified professional. Having said that, the Bible does have quite a lot to say about mental wellbeing, and loving God with all our hearts puts our lives, concerns and priorities into a new perspective. We are, for example, to love our children, but that love must never be all-consuming. Our all-consuming love and passion is for God. Everything else must exist through that lens and with that priority. We are expected to take control of and responsibility for our minds, and in various places the Bible offers a lot of help.

Anxiety

It is perfectly natural and reasonable to be anxious sometimes. The Lord himself was extremely anxious in Gethsemane. What is not

right is to have anxiety that is shaping your life. If this is happening, you need to seek professional help.

What we do with our anxiety is crucial. Are we going to trust God who loves us so vastly and who we love with all our hearts? Then take Paul's advice:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:6-7

So do what Paul is telling you to do - pray! Ask to experience that Peace of God. Ask God to protect your heart from fear and anxiety. Ask God to point out if you are catastrophising – imagining the worst when it has not happened yet. Hand your anxieties over to God. Let go of them. Let God worry about them; he has broader shoulders than you. Most of the things that we are anxious about never happen. Note all that Paul specifies:

- Prayer
- Petition
- Thanksgiving
- Presenting requests to God

Having done that, pray in that “Peace of God” to guard your heart and mind.

What is the worst that can happen? We put far too much emphasis on the here and now, when an eternity in the divine presence

awaits. I have known families praying for the healing of loved ones with terminal illness, refusing to let go and hand their loved one over to the Lord for his eternal care. The anxiety this caused was unprecedented.

The heart filled with love for God is little concerned for self. If you feel anxious, your anxiety is telling you something about your heart. You may not be able to change your circumstances, but you can change yourself. Ask God to help you reflect and change, obeying Paul's words, so you are not anxious about anything.

Reflections

Meditate on the peace of God, it transcends all understanding, so you could be meditating for a while!

Spend some time meditating on Luke 12:22-32

Anger and Unforgiveness

Unforgiveness rots the soul. It takes away mind-time and heart-space reserved for God. Forgiveness is a gift to the ones you forgive, to God and most importantly to yourself. It is a terrible thing to live in bitterness and unforgiveness. It is a dark hole where unforgiveness will attack your mind and your thinking. If you feel stuck with this, you could start by praying that God will help you to see His love for those you are trying to forgive. Then pray that God will help you see and comprehend his justice. Ask God to show you the depth of his forgiveness and love for you. Then pray for the

person/people you are trying to forgive. In my experience, it is very difficult to pray for someone you have not forgiven.

Remember if you are not able to forgive then your hearts and minds will be bound to the unforgiven person. That is, I think, a particularly nasty kind of idolatry which can be very difficult to recognise. You are giving unforgiveness heart-space reserved for God himself.

Change takes time, prayer, submission to the Spirit, and conscious work on ourselves. It is rarely instantaneous. However, at the end of the day we cannot change other people (though of course God through the Gospel can) we do however have one thing that we CAN change, and that is ourselves.

Something Bad is Occupying my Mind

Whether it is anger, unforgiveness or anxiety, we all go through times where the enemy is taking away space for God in your heart and mind. Here are my suggestions to help you deal with this:

1. Firstly pray. It is really difficult to hold anger or unforgiveness towards someone and to pray for them. By praying you are refocusing on God. Remember you are not a perfect judge. Remember God loves that person too. Try to pray God's love, blessing and presence into them. Imagine them with God occupying all of their heart.
2. Secondly, whatever is bothering you, limit the headspace you give it. Say ok I'm going to actively think about this for ten minutes, after that I'm thinking about something else. Thinking about it for more than ten minutes is unlikely to

help and not limiting the headspace you give it gives it unlimited power over you. Let's reclaim that power and headspace for God.

3. Worship. This refocuses your heart and mind on God.

God's Moral Law

We have seen that the moral law reflects God's moral character. But a second reason for the law is that it is for our own good. It is not difficult to reason that committing murder is not good for anyone! I can think of no cultures where disrespecting your parents is acceptable. Covetousness is only seen as good amongst the super-greedy and look where it is getting them! Having a god (small g) before God is the most indescribable insult to God.

Every loving parent creates rules within which their children are expected to live. These are partly for selfish reasons (not wanting to have to clear up every mess a child can make) but mainly we create rules for our children because we love them and want to set sensible, loving boundaries for them. If I had a river at the end of my garden, I would tell my child not to go near it. I would put up a fence to make accessing the river as difficult as possible. Doing otherwise would be completely irresponsible.

When we were punished as children, we didn't always see that punishment as for our own good, even if it was administered in love. We often take that kind of thing as rejection and herein lies a great danger.

We keep God's moral law because he loves us enough to put it in place for our good, we are to love and respect and lovingly fear him. But because we have taken punishment as rejection in the past, we find it difficult to accept that we sin and yet are not rejected. We can live in the land of grace while our hearts are back under law.

Having read this book I hope that you can reframe that. We obey God's law and Jesus' commands simply because we choose to love him with all our hearts, and without fear of condemnation when we get it wrong.

*No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in him is mine!
Alive in him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach the eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.*

Charles Wesley

The Path to Holiness

Before I began this journey in loving God with all my heart, the path to holiness seemed like a distant dream. Now it at least feels possible. Not that we will get there in this life, but we can choose holiness. Love and consciousness are inextricably linked. Consciousness allows us to monitor our thoughts and to choose to redirect them and to love sacrificially. Consciousness is our super-power gift from God, so we can make every thought, and every decision come under the reign of Jesus, taking every thought captive for the glory of Christ and we can choose to lead our minds quickly away

from temptation. We can consciously choose moment by moment to love God and others sacrificially. Just one more step on the path of holiness and sanctification. This is my prayer for all readers of this work; May the world see holiness working out in your lives.

All Interactions are Useful, Especially the Negative Ones

Some interactions are great. There are people we come into contact with who really feed into our lives, encouraging, mentoring and occasionally even rebuking us.

Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.

Proverbs 27:6 KJV

But sadly, not every interaction is like that. There are indeed “deceitful kisses”. Sometimes we meet people who make us feel truly awful, who for whatever reason set out to demean and discourage us. There are people who are jealous of us, who ridicule us who lie about us and even abuse us. What of those people?

Paul’s “thorn in the flesh – a messenger from Satan” drove him to his knees in prayer where he learned “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”.

Where should we go when we have a negative interaction? Well, we should do as Paul did. Firstly, take it to the Lord in prayer. Ask the Lord to help you to love and forgive the person involved, to understand the underlying causes and brokenness that made them

behave this way, to help you understand why this interaction makes you feel this way, and to make you feel compassion for the other person/people, to feel his love even for them, to know that without his grace you would be even worse than them. You may want to ask the Lord to change them, but actually you need to be working with the Lord to change you, to love him more, to love the loveless and to live in His all-sufficient grace. That may be cold comfort, so here's a hint for dealing with the situation:

*A gentle answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger.*

Proverbs 15:1

Try to step back from the situation. You don't have to respond immediately if at all, and if you really do have to respond, you don't have to do so immediately. Pray for an incredibly gracious response. Remember that if you feel someone is being less than positive towards you: Jesus knows us and we're actually all much worse than whatever anyone has said about us, but Jesus fully loves us all the same. Pray that you will see yourself through the lens of Jesus, not through the lens of any criticism. Remember that you can sometimes take offence (well I certainly can) when absolutely no offence was meant. Often things that offend us have a grain of truth and a thread of lies. That's what makes them so painful and powerful. Ask God to help us use any truth to change ourselves and reject anything that is not true.

C.S. Lewis wrote:

“We ought to give thanks for all fortune: if it is ‘good’ because it is good, if ‘bad’ because it works in us patience, humility, and the contempt of this world and the hope of our eternal country.”

10th August 1948 letter to Don Giovanni Calabria

Negative interactions gift us an opportunity for God to shape us. We get to choose whether that is in a good way or a bad way. We get to choose to love the Lord or to ruminate upon criticism. Which would you rather?

Man’s Disappointments are God’s Appointments

Two things are definitely true. God is good and God is in control.

Do not allow your mind to doubt God’s goodness in any circumstance.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

Romans 8:28-30

Look back on your life and consider your disappointments. How many times has God used those for good? How many times has God not granted your wishes or not answered your prayers for your

own good? Has God taken you to difficult places? How has that changed you? Was it for your good?

Maybe you're in a difficult place now. God has promised never to leave or forsake you. He has not promised that there will be no trials, but he has promised that he will be with you in those trials.

*'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour;*

Isaiah 43:1-3

Avoiding Burn-Out

Jesus' prayer life was foundational to his ministry. He chose moment by moment to love the people around him to His own detriment and the key to keeping going was deep regular communion with his Father. Remember on our own we can do nothing and soon burn-out. Part of the discipline of using our entire being to love God and other people is to spend time recharging with God, just as part of the discipline of owning an electric vehicle is to plug it in

occasionally! When you spend time alone with God, other thoughts will try to intrude. Some will be reasonable and some will be idols knocking on the door of your mind. Practice quietening your mind so you get quality time with God.

Chapter 8 - Conclusion

The Journey We've Taken Together

We began this journey by acknowledging that many of us struggle to love God with all our hearts. We know it's the greatest commandment, the foundation upon which spiritual success, as a disciple of Jesus, rests, yet we often feel a million miles away from achieving this.

Hopefully you now recognise why this is, and are developing the tools to deal with the problem.

Loving God with all our hearts is foundational. Not only is it the foundation of the law and the prophets, it is also foundational for loving God with all our minds, souls and strength. Loving God in the here and now is vitally important as this will flow through to loving God in and throughout eternity.

Loving God is also the foundational response to the Gospel. We can only fully repent and change deeply if love for God is filling our hearts and driving out sin and idols.

What we've discovered

The Broken Relationship which Caused the Problem

As a result of the fall, we are all born with a Jesus-shaped hole in our hearts—a profound emptiness in our inmost being, where our loving, intimate relationship with God should be. This is the spiritual reality of every human soul. We've spent our lives trying to fill

that void with everything imaginable: relationships, possessions, achievements, pleasures, even good things like family or ministry. But nothing fits. Nothing satisfies. Only God can properly fill that hole in our hearts.

Broken relationships work in both directions. God was left with such a terrible hole in his heart that in deep love for us he put into place his costly plan of salvation, so that his relationship with us could be mended.

The Gospel Answer to the Broken Relationship

We've seen that we cannot save ourselves. Only God can do that. Faith in Jesus' redeeming work on the cross and his resurrection is the only pathway back to relationship with God. But be warned, like the Galatians, we will always be tempted into works-based salvation, for example by believing that if we are not good enough God will reject us or believing that our good works can save us.

Good works are a symptom of salvation, never the cause!

We've Learned About our Deceitful Hearts

Your heart will lie to you. It will deceive you and hide your sin and idols from you. But your heart leaks true information through your thoughts, your words, and your reactions. When you're anxious

about losing something, when anger flares up, when you can't stop thinking about something, your heart is leaking information about what is actually going on inside you. Don't listen to what your heart is telling you about yourself, it is deceitful, instead listen critically and constructively to your thoughts, words and actions.

We've Learned how to Identify Our Idols

By thinking about our thoughts, words and actions we can identify the things that get in the way of God's occupation of our hearts. The first step is to listen to what you are thinking, saying and how you are reacting in any situation, as these can reveal the true state of your heart. Never ruminate on temptation, instead actively refocus on God. Practice spending time alone in his presence and watch out for the thoughts that try to distract you by popping into your mind. Be discerning; not all of them are bad but some leak information about idols in your heart which oppose you spending time with the Lord. If your child is interrupting your quiet time, the problem is not your child. If worry is interrupting you then take it to the Lord first and leave it there. If covetousness is interrupting you – well that's definitely an idol.

We've Understood What is Needed for Deep, Lasting Repentance

Repentance isn't just about sorrow or turning our lives around. True lasting repentance only happens when you have something of infinitely greater value than sin in your heart. When God fills your heart as your ultimate treasure, sin loses its power because it can no longer compete for our deepest affection. Without Jesus filling our hearts, sin and idolatry will come back again and again. We have to

take control of our minds, consciously reflecting on our thoughts and words and choosing to point our thoughts away from temptation and towards our first love.

Make this your regular prayer: "Lord Jesus, fill the God-shaped hole in my heart. Be my ultimate possession. By your presence in my heart, drive out all sin, all idols, all lesser loves. I choose to love you sacrificially with all my heart."

Remember, love is a choice, and that's what makes it meaningful and beautiful.

We've Been gifted With Consciousness, a Powerful Tool Which we are Expected to use Actively

In the ongoing battle for our minds, consciousness is your God-given super-power. Because we are made in the image of God who is conscious, you can and should consciously observe your own thoughts, critique them, reject them when necessary, and consciously redirect them towards God. Don't be a passive victim of your thought life. You can choose - moment by moment - what you will think about and what or who you choose to love sacrificially. We can choose never to ruminate on bad or sinful thoughts. We are the "responsible adult in the room of our minds". We can practice catching our thoughts and rejecting anything ungodly. Make every choice a step on the road of holiness.

May we choose to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength. May we choose to take every thought captive for Christ. And may his love overflow from us into this broken,

hurting world that so desperately needs to see the light of Jesus in his people.

Obedience to Jesus

We've seen how obedience to Jesus is a mark of love for him. (The corollary is also true; disobedience indicates a lack of love. John 14:24)

'If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth.'

John 14:15-17

'Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.'

John 14:21

We've seen how to search out Jesus' commands in the gospels and Revelation. We've seen the joy of uncovering commands which are sometimes hidden but implicit in his words.

Final Prayer

Father, I pray that your love would sink deeply into our hearts. May we never doubt that we are fully, completely, eternally loved by you. Fill the God-shaped holes in our hearts with your overwhelming presence moment by moment. Drive out every idol, every sin, every fear. Teach us to love you with all our hearts, sacrificially moment

by moment, thought by thought, choice by choice, day by day. Transform us by the renewing of our minds. Help us to find great joy in seeking out and obeying Jesus' commands. Make us unshakeable in our wholehearted love for you. May that love overflow into the world around us, so that others will see you in us and come to know your transforming love and forgiveness and see holiness in action. We choose now to love you with all our hearts. Fill us, we pray. In Jesus' precious name, Amen.

And Finally ...

As Horatio Spafford said, "The sky not the grave is the goal!". We're going to a wedding. Our bodies will die, but our souls are eternal. God himself is our very great reward. Let us choose to love him with all our hearts, so that we may spend eternity with our greatest love.

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