

“Following God With Your Head”

(Luke 2:39-40, Mark 12:28-31,
Rom. 12:1-2)

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One day when our daughter Magalie was little, she came to dinner saying, “Mom, I don’t feel good.” Her forehead and it felt hot, and she was sweaty and weak. Evelyne asked what she had eaten that day. Magalie said “I just ate Halloween candy for lunch, and then had some Reese’s Pieces after school, and some little candy bars after that.” Evelyne made her eat some carrot sticks, and after that she felt better. Eating wrong, our daughter got lightheaded and shaky. Her diet wasn’t balanced, so she felt tired and sick.

It’s the same with our spiritual lives. Sometimes we get out of balance in our spiritual life because we leave something out of our spiritual diet. If we don’t get a good spiritual diet, our spiritual lives will feel anemic and we get shaky.

Sometimes people wonder why they don’t feel the abundant life we talk about. Sometimes the Christian life feels anemic because it’s not balanced. Jesus says that if we love God with everything we’ve got and love our neighbor as ourselves, then we’ll have abundant life. In other words, in order to energize our spiritual lives we have to give God our whole selves, not just a part.

That’s why the Lord has given us four components to our spiritual lives, and I call them the “four Hs.” To live life to the fullest like Jesus intends, we need to follow Jesus with four aspects of who we are, the heart, mind, soul, and strength. I like to think of them with four Hs to help us remember them: our Head, Heart, Hands, and Habits. You can remember that, and these four need to be in balance. If we just follow Jesus with our heart but not the other three, it’s like living on Halloween candy. It might be fun for a while, and it might give you a high, but in a while, you’ll crash. You have to have the other three: Head, Heart, Hands, and Habits in balance. For the next four weeks, we’re looking at what it means to love God, or to follow him, with each of these aspects of who we are.

Our reading from Mark tells about a time when Jesus’ opponents, the spiritual leaders of Israel, were all trying to trap him in his words and find a way to arrest him. One of the scholars came to him and asked him a question. He asked which commandment is the most important.

Whether the scholar was trying to catch Jesus or not, it’s a good question, and it’s one that disciples of a rabbi might have asked. It gives us the opportunity to hear Jesus’ teaching on what’s most important. His answer says, in essence, what’s most important is to love God with everything you’ve got, and then he adds the second statement, it’s to love others in practical ways that shows the love of God.

His answer would have been familiar to the people listening because it’s a quote from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. It is the phrase that begins every worship service in the synagogue. But there was a slight change. When Jesus quotes that verse, he adds the word “mind.” That makes it clear that loving God doesn’t just entail our heart, soul, and strength, what I remember with the words heart, habits, and hands, but also with our heads.

Today, the focus is on following God with our heads, our intellect. Sometimes when we struggle with God or he seems distant, it's tempting to get discouraged or distance ourselves. But we don't have to do that. We can study him and get to know him better. We are called to love and follow Jesus with our minds.

When we follow God with our minds, that helps bring new energy to our spiritual life. I see a couple reasons for that.

First, the more we know about Jesus, the more we experience him.

I'd like you to turn to someone right now and share with them something you've learned about Jesus over time. Go ahead and take thirty seconds and do that right now, if you would...

When we study Jesus and learn about him, we understand him more, and that helps us love him more. When you study the Bible and you realize it is one coherent story, you see that God is guiding all of history, and he will guide your life, too. When you study the arguments for the truth of scripture, your faith gets stronger. When you follow Jesus with your mind by studying the Bible, theology, science, the arts, it helps you experience him more. In fact, honestly study anything in the world, and you see that behind all that is true and good and beautiful, there is God. That's what we call "general revelation." God reveals himself in the way he has made reality. Even more, God reveals himself in Jesus Christ, so when you study him, get to know the way he thinks, find out what's important to him—when you do that, you experience him more.

Second, when you change your mind, you change your life.

In the ancient times people offered sacrifices to the gods, even to the point of offering their own children. Why? Because they believed their well being depended on appeasing the gods that controlled their fate. Your worldview shapes how you live, and it's the same for us. That's why Paul says, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be *transformed* by the renewing of your mind." We are going to be shaped by something. Are you going to be conformed to our culture, or transformed by Jesus?

Everyday the movies, TV, magazines, the Internet, it all shouts the message that the purpose of life is to maximize pleasure, the most important thing is sex, and that buying things will make you happy. The weight of all that is powerful.

Not long ago, the LA Times reported about the principal of Carson High School shut down the school newspaper because students published editorials calling for legalizing marijuana and for greater sexual freedom. Yeah, great idea—greater sexual freedom is just what our culture needs! That'll solve *all* our problems!

If our minds are transformed, then our lives will be transformed, too. I think of John Perkins, the head of Voice of Calvary ministries in Mendenhall Mississippi. He grew up under segregation in the south, he was arrested and beaten and tortured, and he saw his brother murdered. But in studying the Bible carefully, he came to see God cares about reconciliation, and it's helped him to know Jesus better. Studying the Bible helped him to learn God's priorities. Learning about God helped him overcome bitterness at what he suffered, it gave him the power to love his enemies, and it gave him his life's purpose. When we follow Jesus with our minds, we

understand him more, and it changes our minds, and that changes our lives, and that energizes our spiritual lives.

Now, there's one caution. A lot of times, we Presbyterian types love the head stuff. We like the part of the Bible where it says "do everything decently and in order." We have to be careful we don't *only* follow Jesus with our minds. It has to be information that leads to transformation.

In the first class I taught in my former church, a man who had been to seminary sat in the back row, and he piped up, "No, you're wrong. You're forgetting about the J-E-P-D theory of the authorship of the Pentateuch." But that's not being knowledgeable, it's being a know-it-all. It was hard having him as a critique in the back row of class. That's why Paul says in 1 Corinthians that knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. So the *purpose* of the head stuff is to lead to a life fully engaged with God's purposes, to learn what's important to him.

If you want to think like Jesus, you have to get to know him. Maybe one place to start is simply with his names in the Bible. He's called Rabbi, the Christ, the Prince of Peace, Son of God, Son of Man, Bread of Life, Everlasting Father, the Gate, the Good Shepherd, the Bright Morning Star, the Anointed one, the Alpha and the Omega, Mighty God, Lord of Lords, the Lion of Judah, the True Vine, Word of God, Wonderful Counselor, Immanuel, the Holy and Righteous One, and the I Am.

What would it do for your knowledge of him and your relationship with him if you spent time reflecting on and studying those names? Of investigating what those names meant to the people who wrote them down for us in the Bible?

There was a cult run by a guru who put up a sign saying, "Please remove your shoes and minds when you come inside." God doesn't tell us to leave our mind at the door. Sometimes people think that. They think becoming a Christian is just a blind leap of faith. But God is a god of reason, of truth, of coherence, of understanding, of wisdom.

So, how can you follow Jesus with your mind? How can you love him with the brain he has given you? Because when you do, you'll know the strength, purpose, and energy that he came to give us.

Well, to follow God with our minds, our head, we have to decide to pursue the truth. We have to come to God with our minds fully engaged. That's especially important in a time when people believe there's no such thing as objective, absolute truth. As Christians we do believe there is such a thing as truth, and we act on it.

That doesn't mean it's necessarily complicated, and it's not pretentious.

Karl Barth, the great theologian, who wrote thousands of pages of theology. Most of it is very heady stuff. There's a story told about him that in 1962, he came to the US to deliver the Princeton Lectures. When he was there, a reporter asked him, Dr. Barth, would you summarize what the teaching is in your life's work. He said, "Certainly, I can easily do that. I sum it up, 'Jesus loves me! This I know, for the Bible tells me so.'"

Using our heads to get to know God better means getting into his Word, and it means stretching ourselves with big ideas about God. It's worth reading the great minds of the Christian tradition. But that doesn't mean pretention. At the end of the day, it's about knowing the love of Jesus.

We have to bring our minds under the Lordship of Christ. We have to realize we're in a spiritual battle, but we don't fight like the world does, we fight our enemies with truth. God wants every thought in our minds to be taken captive for Christ.

By pursuing Jesus with your mind, through studying Scripture, and reading other books, your spiritual life can be energized. So you don't conformed to the pattern of this world, being pressed into its mold, but are transformed to have the mind of Christ, and because of that your spiritual life is in balance, and it has energy. Sometimes, when you change your mind, you change your life.