

“Following God With Your Heart”

Mark 12:28-31; 1 John 4:7-12

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Have you ever seen the show *Bones*? It's based on FBI forensic investigators that solve crimes by examining human remains. The main characters are Special Agent Booth, who's always empathetic and understanding, and a woman named Dr. Brennan who is extremely logical. So much so, that she's constitutionally incapable of showing any emotion whatsoever. She's all about facts. She's brilliant, consistent, and reliable. But maybe not the kind of person you want asking questions of a family who's lost a loved one. Probably not the kind of person you want to just go out for a beer with or watch a Browns game with.

That lack of emotion is a part of a lot of people; sometimes we have such a stiff upper lip attitude we have a hard time expressing joy or sadness, like the guy who was just impassive at his own wife's funeral. He said, "Well, it was just her time," and he showed about as much emotion as you would ordering a burrito at *Chipotle*.

I think God wants us to be free and transparent, not to have to repress our emotions. It's interesting that Jesus says the greatest commandment is not to *know* God, or to *obey* God; it's to *love* God with our whole heart.

Now, love isn't *only* an emotion. In the Bible, love is more than that. It's not just a friendly feeling toward your buddy, or an erotic feeling toward your lover, or a patriotic feeling toward your country. Biblical love is an action, a commitment to seek the good for another person. Sometimes the feelings come first, sometimes the actions, but love is fundamentally a commitment that pushes us to act lovingly toward someone else. Jesus is saying, in order for our spiritual lives to come alive, we have to love God with our whole heart, our feelings and our actions, and we have to show love for our neighbor.

God knows our happiness doesn't come from gratifying ourselves. It comes from pursuing him. It happens when we put him first, when we love him with all we've got. We were made for love. A love that doesn't put us first, not focusing on ourselves, but on loving God and others. You do that, and you will be happy.

We're in a brief summer sermon series is on the Four Hs, or on following God with our head, heart, hands, and habits. That's the balanced life, because we have to follow Jesus in these four ways. If we do that, then we're getting a balanced diet, not trying to just live on desserts. So last week, I talked about loving God with our head, and this week I want to focus on the heart. God is the source of love, he's the model of love, and he tells us to love, too.

I think we see that in the passage we read this morning from 1 John. Let's look at some lessons that come out of this passage and our other readings for this morning.

First, to follow Jesus, we have to experience God's love ourselves.

Think of the most loving person you know; you might say they're the most loving person you've ever known, but you'd never say they *are* love. No matter what the quality or extent of their love, only for God is love his essential character. John says "God *is* love" (vv. 7, 8). That's an

absolute statement. And John also says “love comes from God.” That’s the thing: God empowers us to love. When we trust Jesus, we enter into his love, his life, and we can give that to others.

Even before we believe, before we love God, he has already loved us and promise blessing for us. We love, because he first loved us. Earlier in 1 John from the passage we read this morning, John writes,

“How great is the 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)

“This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another.” (1 John 3:11)

“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.” (1 John 3:16)

The Lord could have told us, “If you live up to what I’m commanding you, then I’ll be with you.” The focus for John is not on how worthy God’s people are. The point is that God always acts first. He always shows his love first. Grace isn’t something we do to earn God’s love, it’s God’s undeserved love for us. Our love is a response to the prior action of God, a god who loved us so much he sent his Son to die so he wouldn’t have to lose us.

You can’t give what you don’t have. Sometimes this is hard for us, because sometimes we don’t feel worthy of love. From the time we’re little, we get a lot of messages that we’re not lovable, or that we’re going to have to earn it in order to get it. Parents who shamed us or never showed up at the baseball game, the times we didn’t get chosen for the team, spouses who betrayed us, friends who left us, we get a lot of messages we’re not lovable. That makes it hard to receive God’s love. You can’t really love anyone, yourself, God, or anyone else, until you have first experienced love. Like John says, “We love because he first loved us.”

I think there are things we can do to better experience this love. We can read the Bible, because it’s a story about how much God loves you. Have you heard what BIBLE stands for? “Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth.” I like that, but it’s even more than a set of instructions, it’s a huge love letter, a story about how God would rather die than lose you. So read it and put your name in it wherever you can. Like when you read John 3:16, I put my name: “For God so loved Randy that he gave his only begotten son, that if Randy should believe in him, Randy will not die but have eternal life.” Read it with your name in it, and realize how much God loves you.

Another way to experience God’s love is to look back and see all the ways God has blessed and taken care of me. Sometimes by journaling, or looking at photos of the people he’s given you. Sometimes it’s through a retreat like Tres Dias, or maybe a course like ALPHA. Another way to experience God’s love is through prayer. Take time in silence to meditate and hear God’s affirmation. Hear his voice saying, “You are my beloved child, and I am well pleased with you.”

The first step in following Jesus with our heart is to experience how much God loves us, and take some time to open ourselves up to experience that.

Second, to follow Jesus, we have to worship him passionately with our whole heart.

In the movie, *Grease*, Danny is a greaser who falls in love with Sandy, a girl who's visiting Southern California from Australia. They have a summer romance, and then Sandy has to go home. But when Danny returns to school for his senior year, he's shocked to see Sandy, because her family has changed their plans and decided to stay. He's excited to see her, but his friends are all watching. So he clicks into cool mode, and he jokes around and tries to act like he doesn't care. Danny loves Sandy, but he's too cool to show emotion, so he almost ends up wrecking their relationship. Sometimes, our relationship with Jesus grows cold because we're afraid to express our devotion.

I know, we're Presbyterians. But the God who created the universe loves you so much that he died for you, and sometimes our reaction is just, "That's nice." I'm not saying you should be rolling in the aisles. (Although a group of us from our church has gotten to go on short term mission in Mexico and worshiped with brothers and sisters there who loved to dance during worship! And that's okay!)

I'm just saying we should come to God with our hearts, and not just our heads. When I really focus on God and not on what people around me are thinking, that's what God wants. That's why sometimes I close my eyes during a song, because it helps me focus on God. You can listen to music that opens you up to God. You can focus on the words of the hymns we sing in worship, or maybe arrive for worship a few minutes early and read the hymns we're going to sing in the service, because they wonderfully express our faith and have the power to grab us. We follow Jesus with our hearts when we experience his love and give it back to him in passionate worship.

And third, to follow Jesus we have to love others like we love ourselves.

Notice this comes last. After we've connected with God and experienced his love, he fills us up so we can give it away. That's what makes our spiritual lives come more fully alive. The apostle John wrote, "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." So when we love someone, you know God better. One of the things it means to love God with our whole heart is to love the things he loves, to hate the things he hates, to let our hearts be broken for the things that break his heart—loneliness, suffering, injustice, poverty. That's one of the things I love about you, because I've seen how much you do this. The way you care for each other is a real reflection of the longsuffering love and care of God.

I have a friend named Steve from my old church who is pastor of Union Church Manila in the Philippines. He was in a motorcycle accident in July, and was paralyzed from the neck down. His wife Michelle told about how people in the church family surrounded her family with love, and prayer, and practical help. People organized prayer chains around the world, they took care of their three young children, they raised money and bought a van, and they refurnished their home back in the U.S. They discovered God in a deeper way in the hospital. Michelle writes,

Yesterday was a sweet day...a group of worship leaders from our home church came to serenade us with a private concert in our hospital room! Ten wonderful souls squeezed into our room to sing songs with us, filling the room with praise. It was all I could do not to weep unreservedly, not because I was sad, but because I was witnessing the beauty of faith lived out: joining in love and hope in a hospital room, life in death, joy in sorrow. While some of those present were known to me, others were not, and that too has been a uniquely moving blessing during this time, to know the love of strangers. We have received many messages, meals and helping hands from people we have never or

barely met, drawn by shared sorrows, or by shared friends, and mostly by shared prayers. I have been deeply moved by this precious love of strangers. Many a Good Samaritan has lifted us and carried us down this road. There are also the strangers-yet-friends down the hall, Mark and Kathy, fellow believers barely known to us, but who joined us in song yesterday, singing with failing lungs and crippled hands, but singing nonetheless. No doubt those voices carried down the hall to cheer many a soul! It was a moving sight!

There's nothing they could do to change the condition of my friend, a quadriplegic lying in a hospital bed, but they could be with them, and when they were, Steve doesn't feel like he's alone. When something like that happens to you, you ask, where's God? For Steve and his family, part of the answer is, God is in the people who come to be with them. And the thing is, the people who came alongside were blessed, too.

Now the key is being balanced. We need to be in balance with the other three Hs. If all we do is heart stuff, we can become one-sided, mushy Christians, vulnerable to every new idea that comes our way. It's why we need heads and hands and habits, too. But for a bunch of us, the H we need to look at is our heart.

A guy in our church talked about that. He told me, "I'd had some bad experiences in church, and when I walked in here, I was feeling hurt. The minute I walked in the door the greeter said, 'Welcome,' and I felt like I'd come home. As soon as I sat down, a guy introduced himself and started a conversation. Then, after church, he invited me to fellowship and showed me around. He invited me to come back, and I ended up finding a home here." He told me, "When I was in pain, fellow Christians reminded me God had a plan for my life. That's why this church means a lot to me."

The thing is, that man didn't need answers, or reasons why being in church is important, or a job to do. Mostly, he needed someone to show him he was loved. He needed to see Jesus in action through another person. And now, he's connected to God's heart, and wants to share that. That's what it is to love God with your whole heart—you experience his love, then you give it away, in here and out there.

So, maybe you want to work on worshiping God with more of your heart, or maybe to come alongside someone, just to be there with them. You can come up for prayer after the service about that if you want.

The Bible is the story about God in passionate pursuit of his people, of you. The proof of God's amazing love is that he came to us in human form, born in a barn, and he says I love you so much I'd rather die than lose you. We get to know this God by getting to know Jesus, the love of God in human form. He has a very big heart.

That's God. Not a Dr. Brennen from *Bones*. Not a set of propositions or rules. Not just a mystic cloud in the sky. God is love. He is passionately in love with you, the apple of his eye. The object of his pursuit is your heart. And when he grabs a hold of you, and you experience how much he loves, you can't help but give it away.