

Loving God



Loving God

© 1998 Bruce Montroy

All rights reserved.

This Format – December, 2006

DEDICATION

To all those who taught me how to love by their loving example, especially my loving wife Norma Kay!

www.RoyalMountainMinistry.com

RMM@RoyalMountainMinistry.com

Other books available from Royal Mountain Ministry

Winning the Inner War

The Abundant Life

The Law of Rest

Tapping the Power of Denial

The River

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the *New American Standard Bible*, The Lockman Foundation. Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988. Used by permission. Abbreviation, NASB.

Scriptures marked KJV, are taken from the *King James Version* of the Bible. Scriptures marked NIV, are taken from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*, Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Scriptures marked NKJV are from *The Holy Bible, New King James Version*, Copyright 1979, 1980 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

Scripture quotations marked (NLT) are taken from the *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, copyright © 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved.

Contents

Introduction		1
Chapter 1	FALLING IN LOVE	3
Chapter 2	LOVE IS NOURISHING	11
Chapter 3	THE HEART	18
Chapter 4	IDOL-ING THE HEART	26
Chapter 5	LOVING WITH OUR CONSCIENCE	32
Chapter 6	LED INTO LOVE	40
Chapter 7	THE SOUL	47
Chapter 8	SOUL EXCHANGE	55
Chapter 9	THE MIND	62
Chapter 10	TRICKS OF THE MIND	70
Chapter 11	THE STRENGTH	78
Chapter 12	A LOVE THAT HATES	86
Appendix	HOW TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN	93

Introduction

We have been given a treasure map that can help us discover the greatest wealth ever imaginable. Our trek will take us through some pretty scary jungles and even some extremely dry deserts. The opposition we encounter along the way will increase our confidence that the prize is well worth whatever the cost. A guide is available and word has it that the destination can only be reached with His help.

Obviously, from the title of this book, I'm talking about using the Bible to tap into the awesome love of God. Living in the love of God is to dwell in the presence of the healer, the One who is eternal life, the very Source for meeting every imaginable need! What every human being craves is obtainable as we follow the treasure map of God's Word upstream to our point of origin!

Loving God is the way we successfully navigate the dangers and trials on our journey through life. The Holy Spirit, our extraordinary guide, is ready to show us how love can unlock any door, destroy any foe, and invent whatever device we need. We will learn as we travel that loving God is not an achievement but a journey, and the details of the trip will continually compete for our time and attention. Some of love's enemies wear friendly faces. If we could only have an experience, take a treatment, do something that would freeze us in time — keep us loving God to the max. But, alas, the call to love Him with all of our resources — body, soul and spirit —

continually calls us up higher!

Intimacy with the Almighty is not religion. The trust that love provides will allow us to crawl out of the fig trees of hiding and calm the noise of performing. Failures will be dealt with the way lovers solve insurmountable problems. Love lubricates life! The watch word of religion is “how am I doing?” The song of lovers of God is “Our God is an awesome God!” Religion seems to be competing with the whole world — loving God results in being the servant of all. Religion carefully counts out the tithe — love gives all only to find that the cup is continually refilled!

My goal is that we would gain a greater understanding of how God meant for us to operate for maximum enjoyment and success in life; that we would jump into the waters of life; that we would drink deep of the elixir of heaven until the joy of the Lord bubbles forth continually from our innermost being! I long for us to be so blest in this earthly sphere that we will be adequately prepared to live with Christ Jesus throughout eternity as well as be a light to those who want out of the darkness that fills so many lives! Some men love darkness because their deeds are evil. Others desperately want out of their ruts of failure. Oh that our love feasts would give off the fragrance of Christ, from life to life for those seeking answers!

Because God is love and we are made in His likeness and image, doesn't it stand to reason that the most important ingredient for success in every area of life, spiritually as well as physically, involves love? If the stream flowing from His throne is love, then to swim upstream to enjoy His presence, will require greater mastery with this response called love. And who, pray tell, should be expected to take the Gospel of God's love and hope to a lost and dying world: The hurting, unloved, wounded victims of Satan's awful war with heaven, or the recipients of God's glorious grace? Let's perfect our swimming so we can transport others into the river of hope!

Because Love created our bodies as well as our world, to live in health will require a proper balance or flow of love. An imbalance or twist of love (i.e., selfishness, pride, self-hatred, etc.) will result not only in fractured friendships, but in impaired health and diminished enjoyment of life. The quest for deep happiness and refreshing relationships with others must therefore be tied into receiving and living in the love of God. That is what this book is all about.

The Psalmist entices us with the words, *Deep calls unto deep*. May the deep wellspring of God's eternal love call you deeper. May your hunger and thirst for Him never be quenched, but be satisfied daily!

Chapter 1

Falling in Love

And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.

Mark 12:30

John is sitting in Algebra class, minding his own business, when all of a sudden, his life is changed forever. A new girl walks into class! She is so beautiful, he drops his pencil, and his eyes pop out! He's instantly in love. For this awesome creature he would swim the widest sea! He would wrestle the savage beast of the darkest jungle! Yes!

Is this love? What if this newcomer turns and her eyes lock on to John's and she too is smitten with waves of feelings of romance for John? What if she is seated right next to him and they spend the remainder of class staring into each others eyes? It's all over! So much for studies and education.

Let's change the story just a tad and say she has a big hunk for a boyfriend and is totally turned off by drooling John. Would it still be love at first sight? Does one-sided romance qualify for "real" love? Frustration maybe, but not true love.

Hollywood has tried to get us to believe in a brand of love called romance. Is it real? Is it possible for two people to have a chance encounter and know within a few minutes that they truly love the other person and can commit their entire life to them? Every once in a while we hear testimonies from lovebirds who suffered from "love-at-first-sight" and their marriage and their love has weathered the storms of time.

There is a relationship between the love humans can have for each

other and the kind of love a person can have for God. To say, as in the verse above, “Love God with all your heart...” we might be tempted to excuse this command as some kind of religious duty. That makes it much safer because everyone knows religion is personal and its a rather simple thing to say, “Yes, I love the Lord.” But, if loving God is like loving a friend, a child, or a parent, then we can measure it. And if we can measure our love for God, we can determine if we truly do love Him with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. And, maybe, just maybe we can fall in love with the most awesome One in the entire universe — the One who made us by love, out of love and to love! The Bible says that “God is love.” It’s not just that God loves, He is love! Because He IS love, then everything He does is from and for love! Do you think most people have two different kinds of love in mind — one for humans and a different kind of love for God? Maybe you caught yourself living in two different worlds — one that is physical, where people and things exist, and an almost unreal world where spiritual things exist. I think religion, in the worse sense of the word, seeks to divide our thinking this way.

The Apostle John seemed to think that love for God was made out of the same stuff that humans can have for each other. He writes *...the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen* (1 John 4:20). There is a correlation between the love we are called on to give to God, and that which we can have for fellow human beings. He went on to say *...if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us* (1 John 4:12). Notice in particular the words **love is perfected in us.**

What is it that we mortals find so intoxicating about romantic love? Could it be that the part of us that is made in the image of God seeks love, even as “God is love”? And, apparently, human love was designed to be a tutor, and instructor to teach us how to love God!

Falling in love is a term we use to describe the emotional response we experience when "romance" appears. Kids jumping rope chant *First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the baby in a baby carriage!* Even children know that romance is suppose to result in commitment. Deep, loving, same-sex relationships were never intended by the Lord to go toward physical intimacy, but His design did include special commitment. The unique bond David and Jonathan experienced was a picture of spiritual intimacy that a believer can have for God. Just because love in particular relationships is non-physical does not mean it is less enduring or powerful. Real love produces commitment, involvement, risk taking —

with God or with our fellow humans!

Romantic love that leads to marriage is merely one expression that deep love takes. Life-long friendships are also an expression of strong love. And the unique, special feelings we experience for someone who has so much in common with us is likewise a byproduct of love. Perhaps the feelings that super close friends experience are most typical of what our love for God should be. He's the One who knows us best, and the One with whom we should have the most in common!

How do we fall in love? The first thing is usually physical sight, but though outward beauty can catch the attention, this does not necessarily lead to a sense of love. Actions are as important as attractiveness, maybe even more so. This week, Princess Diana was killed in an auto accident in Paris. The media has arisen to the occasion with video coverage of many high points of her life. Two things stood out as I watched the coverage. This celebrity of international acclaim was sometimes attractive, and sometimes rather common in physical appearance. However, as the media reviewed her compassion for the victims of poverty, AIDS and land mines, she took on a far greater beauty. Her acts of compassion literally called for a love response in return.

Loving actions can trigger love. Is this not the law of sowing and reaping at its finest? Boy meets girl. Girl gives boy a certain "look." This donation to the boy's ego fund triggers an internal response. Boy's countenance reflects girl's contribution. Girl perceives boy's response as having possibilities. This triggers further exchanges and a level of interest is generated. Depending upon a great many conditions, not excluding chemical concentrations, the couple may experience what the world of romance deems "falling in love." From a distance, there is an air of mystery, an elixir that intoxicates — one of life's marvels. But what took place up close was a series of exchanges: the law of sowing and reaping!

Give and take, the law of sowing and reaping, investments, these are components of falling in love. This happens continually on the big screen, and it can happen between a human and the God who is love! We can fall in love with our fantastic Heavenly Father! We might see Him in His creation or His creatures and find Him irresistible. We may realize He's looking at us. Our soul can feel His penetrating, loving gaze. As we give back to Him loving attention, we sense He draws nearer. Soon our emotions are triggered.

What are some ways that we can give "love signals" back to God? Is

not this worship? Is plain old kindness the starting place of love? You are walking down the aisle at the grocery store and your eyes meet those of a perfect stranger. They smile, you smile. This simple exchange is the very basic beginning for a relationship. What if you smile at someone and they stare back at you like you weren't even there? So much for that relationship. Makes you feel invisible! Even the most casual human to human encounter requires the basic building block of kindness. You give, they give; they give, you give.

When you are aware that God has intervened in your life and given you a blessing — be it a beautiful sunset or a needed parking place — the loving thing to do is to return a smile, a glance of kindness that says “thank You!” What do you think will take place when you do this?

Being drawn deeper into love calls for commitment. Intimacy has as its goal abandonment, surrender, oneness! Be one with the Almighty? He might ask us to go to a cross as He did His only Son! If we become too vulnerable, He might exploit us by asking us to give up every penny and join a monastery or become a missionary where deadly snakes roam! For the one caught in the torrent of love, the response is, “So what!”

Lovers are always making subtle “reality checks” as to the commitment of their loved one. The give and take of both parties is all part of the love exchange. An absence of taking is as rude as a lack of giving. Humans do both and so with loving God — we both must give and we both must take!

Wives can make statements that lead their husbands to believe that they are asking for something that is almost impossible. Experience will show that the little lady is only doing a reality check on her husband's love and commitment. She is not saying “Go out and get this for me to prove your love for me,” but rather she is looking for his investment of love and commitment. Do you care? Would you do the impossible for me if you could? The proper response of the husband will give her security in the relationship. He lets her know that she is number one in his heart, pocketbook, time schedule, etc. Mature love finds many ways of rewarding the other person when they pass the “commitment check.”

Occasionally I think back to the Fall of 1961 when I fell in love with my wife to be, Norma Kay Spohr. We sat next to each other in Senior English class in high school. We both were outgoing and began making small talk. I can't remember how soon it was before we began flirting with each other, but there we were, paying more attention to each other than

Miss Delap's diagnosis of student English problems. Maybe that's why my grammar is stunted?

Passing notes back and forth somehow led to meeting at our lockers, lunch, and finally dating. It took almost six months before I got the courage to tell Norma that I loved her, but when I did, it was like the dam of emotions broke. The puppy love turned into a full grown pooch! At any stage in our growth together, either of us could have stunted the relationship by busying ourselves with other things — like many couples do after they are married!

I'm hoping this true-life example of falling in love will help us reflect on the exciting process of entering into a deeper relationship with our awesome God. Not that we need to bog down with the mechanics of falling in love, but that we can intensify our love relationship with Jesus anytime we invest more of ourselves! We can pass Him a note by writing out a short prayer of adoration. We can whisper to Him any time, anywhere, and tell Him how much we need Him, how fantastic His care for us is, and how He's more than enough. The more we give Him our affection, the faster our emotional involvement propels us deeper into His overwhelming presence!

Our text for this study on loving God, Mark 12:30,31, is not a cold command from the Lord, asking for robot-like compliance ... "Yes Master...I love You" (spoken in a monotone voice). Rather, I see it as a note passed to us by the One who made us. He took the first step, like I had to be the first to tell my wife-to-be that I loved her. Actually, to break the ice, I told her I "wuvved" her (hey, this was a big step back then!).

When you first read how much God so-o-o-o loved you, what was your response? When you ponder the Scripture that says He wants to do exceeding, abundantly above all that you ask Him, doesn't it release more confidence in your heart for your relationship? Doesn't that confidence produce more love in return? Surely you've felt the surge in your emotions as you've given Abba verbal love and affection. You may have felt the opposite when you think He's holding out on you. It becomes strangely difficult to pray and praise when we think that we're putting more into our relationship than He is! Lovers work through these times.

Falling in love with God is more than a game of romance — it's the very purpose of life! Falling in love with our triune Father, Son and Holy Spirit is not to be mistaken for Hollywood "fantasy." When we're commanded to love Him with all our heart, mind, soul and strength —

ALL — it suggests to me a love that includes every fiber of our being and that is vastly greater than anything ever portrayed on the silver screen. Human relationships are training wheels for the eternal, ultimately real romance! Divine romance! A bride (church) head over heels in love with her indescribably awesome groom (Jesus)! Hollywood can give us bad examples — the Scriptures are our script! Are you ready?

Love is Nourishing

So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church,

Ephesians 5:28,29

Does Jesus love His bride? Of course, but what does that mean? If Jesus is our example for how we are to live, then, how does He love? We should be able to see what He does and imitate Him. Ponder the verses above. What two things does Jesus specifically do for His bride? He *nourishes and cherishes* her. What do you think each of these means?

We spend our entire life nourishing and cherishing our own flesh, which Paul says is the opposite of hating our self. If the flip side of hating is loving, then we could turn Paul's statement into a definition of love. Using Ephesians 5:28,29, we can come up with a very practical definition of what it means to love someone:

Love means to nourish — give that which causes maximum growth — and cherish — consider very valuable!

Now consider the second greatest commandment...

One of the teachers of religious law was standing there listening to the discussion. He realized that Jesus had

answered well, so he asked, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" Jesus replied, "The most important commandment is this: 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.' The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these." Mark 12:28-31 nlt

We can take our definition of love and use it to paraphrase the second greatest commandment:

Treat your neighbor in such a way as to help them grow into their maximum potential and feel valuable.

How can we "nourish and cherish" our neighbor as our self? Just to loosen up your creative juices, let's say an angel appears to you and says, "What could I whisper to your neighbor to have them do to show you that they love you?" Depending on who your neighbor is, this could be pretty weird. But, for the sake of this example, try to think of some things you would like your neighbor do for and to you, to show that God has touched their life with His love. You knew this was where we were heading, didn't you... now turn this around and consider several things you could do to and for your neighbor to show them you love them with God's love.

We can use the Ephesians 5:28,29 definition of "loving" and rewrite the greatest commandment:

To love God with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength is to nourish Him and cherish Him as the most valuable entity in our lives.

Now let's go back to Mark 12:30, and say we're to nourish and cherish God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength? How can we nourish God? Does God eat food? Look at Numbers 28:2 and tell me if there is such a thing as "God food." If so, what is it?

Command the sons of Israel and say to them, "You shall be careful to present My offering, My food for My

offerings by fire, of a soothing aroma to Me, at their appointed time.”

Psalm 50:12-14 tells us the kind of food God prefers:

If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is Mine, and all it contains. Shall I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of male goats? Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving and pay your vows to the Most High;

And consider...

... Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. Hebrews 13:15

The writer of Hebrews is stating that our audible praise is an offering or sacrifice to God. What we say with our mouth can be a delightful meal for Abba! I wonder if He likes the meals we serve Him?

We are fruit trees, God's orchard, and as our husbandman, He expects fruit from us — love-fruit — praise! This picture was used by Yahweh in the Old Testament. God called Israel His vineyard that wouldn't produce fruit!

What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones? Isaiah 5:4

Bearing fruit is why we were created! We are not supposed to do this on our own, but in cooperation with the Holy Spirit. Notice how important this is to Jesus...

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. {2} He cuts off every branch that doesn't produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more. {3} You have already been pruned for greater fruitfulness by the

message I have given you. {4} Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful apart from me. {5} Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. {6} Anyone who parts from me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned. {7} But if you stay joined to me and my words remain in you, you may ask any request you like, and it will be granted! {8} My true disciples produce much fruit. This brings great glory to my Father. John 15:1-8 NLT

Jesus gives a prerequisite in this passage for having our prayers answered. What is it? Abiding in Him and in His Word. What could this mean other than spending much time with Him, pondering His Word? Consider young lovers. They want to “abide” with each other constantly. It’s not always possible to be together with the one you love because of school, work or other demands on your time — but it’s totally different with Jesus! We can take Him with us wherever we go! We can talk to Him any time, all the time, about everything. To abide in Jesus is to demonstrate our love for Him by cherishing His presence. As a kid might say — we just want to “hang out” with Him!

Try this on for size. Soak in the Scriptures until you sense God’s love rising up inside you — just like the sap rises inside a tree. Draw in His peace and hope. In His presence is fullness of joy, so let His joy begin to rise. As you sense the least little bit of love, joy, peace or hope stirring inside you, release it toward the Father in praise. You’re soaking in His Word, just like Psalm One describes, and the fruit of your lips is praise. This brings glory to God.

As you practice this more and more (and it’s called Bible meditation, by the way), you will find your praise spilling over in front of others. This is called witnessing! Instead of forcing your convictions on unresponsive listeners, this overflow of joy will be attractive. They may not understand it, but it will give off the fragrance of Christ. If those around you ask what’s happened to you — bingo! — there’s your supernatural chance to witness!

All of this is divine food! God eats it up! Because we know this gives Him pleasure, and because we love Him with all of our heart, mind, soul

and strength, we will seek to live this way! Guess who gets the most from this kind of living!

*We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. **God is love**, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. 1 John 4:16*

Doesn't it stand to reason that because God **is** love, love would have some part in nourishing Him, not that He needs nourishment to survive, but that His love requires love? Love needs an object to love that will receive that love. Maybe you've had this happen. You are feeling the need to spend some quality time with someone you love (a parent, a friend, your mate), and they are too busy or too preoccupied and you end up frustrated. I'm not suggesting that our perfect God ever gets frustrated, but He is looking for those who will love and worship Him. Look at John 4:23. Are you interested in applying for this position?

But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers.

As a rancher raises sheep for his purposes, so God calls us His sheep. We were made for His benefit, to give Him pleasure! Our praise, if forced or hollow, could be likened to eating the cereal box instead of the cereal. If we go to church and sing songs, but our heart is somewhere else, then our fruit, our offering, is worthless — just sounds, no love. Is God raising sheep for a purpose or are we just a hobby?

“Taking nourishment” has three main parts: (1) eating, (2) ingesting (storing the food as an energy source — fat!), and (3) using the energy. If loving means nourishing, then perhaps we need this three step process in loving relationships. This is more than mere “warm feelings” toward others. It starts with giving “soul” nourishment in a form that is palatable and tasteful. Nourishment may be healthy, but if the smell of the vegetables turns off the recipient, they may be hesitant to consume them. Our efforts to love others may be righteous all together, but if they are not put forth in such a manner as to be recognizable as valuable, our meal of love will be left on the plate!

How do we know if someone is receiving our “nourishment”? Their body language and verbal responses will tell us if we’re getting through. Are they pulling away from us or do they appear to enjoy our company? When we offer cherishing words (kind, complimentary, thoughtful words), are they received or spit back at us? Do you see the person pondering your gifts of encouragement?

Is our love making an impact? Is there the appearance of calmness such as follows a good meal? No one jumps from the table and runs off unless required to do so. The properly nourished soul relaxes and soaks in the post-meal fellowship. This is the stuff great relationships are made of. This bonding produces an openness where deep reflections take place, lofty goals are shared, and a sense of connectedness results. Nourishing and cherishing goes through this cycle, producing growth and intimacy, be it with one’s close friends or their God!

Have you sensed the Lord being pleased with your fellowship during your quiet times? To say this in another way, the first part of the nourishing process is that of feelings (or in this example, taste); the second is actual content. To love someone or nourish them would require an expression of love followed by the substance of love. Saying, "I love you" and demonstrating corresponding body language, would be two parts of the first line of evidence. If I said "I love you" but had contempt or hatred on my face, it would be hard for you to believe me.

We can say all sorts of things, but our body language will almost always tell what we’re really feeling inside. So we have three aspects of loving others: our words, our countenance (feelings and resulting body language), and our actions.

For a parent to tell a child that they love them as their angry countenance screams, "Liar!", is to make any subsequent acts unpalatable. The child will go away from the encounter feeling unloved, regardless of the words or actions. After the superficial feelings of the moment pass and the parent calms down, the truth of the matter is that there is indeed a deep love for the child, but the nourishment has been missed because of the lack of proper corresponding body language.

The other side of this is when a wolf in sheep's clothing seduces a fair young maiden. He pours on all the credibility he can muster to get the victim to open up for supposed nourishment, only to find that his intent is taking, not giving. In every relationship, it will become very clear if you’re “being nice” to selfishly get something or if you have genuine love.

To love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, therefore has three parts: words, feelings and substance. Or, we could say love has a *conversation, countenance* and *corresponding actions*. Of these three areas, which is the easiest for you to give God? Which is the hardest?

The goal of love is not just to give, but for the gift to be received, assimilated and produce the desired fruit. The crop is the return on the investment; sowing the seed only begins the process. In too many relationships (including that with God), people only bother themselves with what they think is “their part” — sowing the seed. Never mind if the tokens of appreciation are discarded because they are not seen as valuable by the “soil.” We would be quick to call a farmer ignorant who indiscriminately scattered his seed on rock-hard soil, but we may turn right around and do the same with vital relationships in our life.

Is our seed being received by our mate? Our close friends? Our children? Our God? Are we farming in such a way as to maximize our crop? Are we fishing in a manner that will catch fish? Are our relationships producing the kind of return that is ultimately nourishing us so that we can perpetuate the process? The farmer who wastes his seed on bad soil will one day be in want and have no one to blame but himself. Are our investments in relationships both nourishing as well as desirable? Are our love-gifts to our Heavenly Father producing the benefits our soul requires? Is our body language, our positions in worship, in agreement with our words? Are our corresponding actions “nourishing” our relationship with God?

The Heart

And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.

Mark 12:30

What is the "heart"? It's not just the organ tucked away in our chest that pumps blood. Songs and slogans depict the heart as the source of warm, passionate feelings: "I love you with all my heart." Everyone understands that this phrase doesn't mean, "I love you with all of my blood pump." When we say we invite Jesus into our heart, we know it's somewhere special. This is a part of our person, a division of our being. We could say our heart is a part or pillar of our personality.

Here are two different pictures of the heart:

And I shall give them one heart, and shall put a new spirit within them. And I shall take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh. Ezekiel 11:19

But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God. Romans 2:29

What do you think the Lord meant with the terms "heart of stone" and "heart of flesh"? Maybe you've met someone who you would be tempted to say had a heart of stone — English teacher? Maybe your boss? The heart of flesh would describe the person you fell in love with — the one

who thought you were able to walk on water!

What do you think it means for the Spirit to circumcise our hearts? Would this not be changing someone from the mean boss into the kind, loving person?

For Ezekiel, the heart was the part of the person that responded to God. When the Jews shut Yahweh out of their lives, they were described as having a heart of stone. Friends and family members can do this to each other. Feelings get hurt, so the natural thing to do is to protect the area of feelings (the heart), and shut out the one who is perceived as causing the hurt! I've heard tell of someone saying they considered a wayward son as "dead." Talk about a heard heart!

Do you know of someone who has hardened their heart toward God? If so, what do you think they were trying to accomplish? Maybe they were trying to quiet guilt feelings. Did it work? Perhaps they were upset with God because they felt He didn't answer a vital prayer. I'll bet they weren't very happy, were they? Stone-hearted people are not much fun hanging around!

Paul (in Romans 2:29, above), like Ezekiel, compares the heart to a spiritual organ, capable of interaction with God. When Paul adds the words *and his praise is not from men, but from God* he lets us in on a little secret — what our heart is craving, God can give us! The heart can try to draw its requirements from flesh and blood or from the Master. Only one kind of praise works! People are stingy with praise; God gives praise based on how we give it.

Another thing our heart can do is cling to Yahweh:

*...that you may love Yahweh your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may **cling to Him**, for He is your life and the length of your days. Deuteronomy 30:20 NKJ*

The call is to intimacy, dependance and obedience. The picture "cling" paints in my mind is that of a small child clinging to mamma's leg. If a child is scared, the grip tightens. What I feel the Father is saying is that we will cling to something — people, possessions, fantasies — He wants us to cling to Him! When the pressures of life arise, what do you cling to? You may not have realize it, but what you turn to first shows

where your heart is centered.

Also consider that our heart is the source of life, both physically as well as spiritually:

Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life. Proverbs 4:23

This term “springs of life” includes health and healing as well as the fun things that make life enjoyable. Happy people have a healthy heart. They enjoy life. Scientific evidence points to a very strong link between the heart (emotions) and physical health. When our heart is trained in doing loving things, it’s healthier. That’s what this verse is saying — watch over your heart — insist that your inner responses be the kind that provide the greatest return.

A recent promotional campaign put a picture of a heart on certain foods that were supposed to be good for your heart. Perhaps we should have them paint one on our Bible — loving God is good for your heart! Cling to Him, it’s good for your health!

Notice what Jesus had to say about the heart (Matthew 12:34):

You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.

The way we can determine what’s filling our heart is to listen to our mouth! Like a glass full of liquid, when shaken, whatever fills the glass comes out! And life sure has a way of shaking us, doesn’t it! What comes out of your mouth the most? Praise and thanksgiving I hope!

The heart is the doorway to the deeper part of ourselves that the Bible calls the “secrets of the heart,” and psychology calls, the subconscious mind. The main pathway through the heart into the secret recesses of our personality appears to be through what we meditate on — what we ponder and mull over. Somehow our mental musings are monitored by our subconscious mind and after a while the mind’s conclusions are believed as fact. When the Word says, “As a man thinks in his heart, so he is” (Proverbs 23:7), it is telling us that our subconscious mind will actually make us into the person that our heart’s musing fancy us to be — good or

bad!

Jesus linked this connection of our heart to who we actually are this way:

But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man. Matthew 15:18-20

When evil is allowed to soak inside us, evil is what we become. When God's Word is given the place of prominence in our heart, we are changed from glory to glory (2 Corinthians 3:18). I think that what we value slips quicker into our secret inner self. We may want to be a gracious, loving Christian and yet find it very hard to become one. Why? Possibly because we value the rough and tough take-charge personality that our society highly values. We can't fool our subconscious mind — we may delude it, but what we value, what we ponder, what we highly esteem we become! What Jesus was getting at in the verse above is that the evil we manifest is merely what we hatched in our heart!

My son, give attention to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. Do not let them depart from your sight; keep them in the midst of your heart. Proverbs 4:20,21

What do you think it means to “incline” your heart to the words of Scripture? We might hear someone say, “I’ll do that if I’m so inclined.” If they get the “want-to” they’ll do such-and-such. Getting the “want-to” is the key to the tapping the heart’s great power. We can talk our inner self into just about anything. Tom Sawyer talked his friends into wanting to do his chores. We can talk our inner self into jumping into the deep water of joyful service of our King! Whining can be replaced with positive talk that agrees with the promises of God! We can paint inner pictures of the success and blessings He holds out to the one who orders his conversation aright! What our mind values, our subconscious mind (secret place of the heart) will create!

Have you ever become aware of something that was hidden in your subconscious mind? Sometimes dreams reveal what's deep inside us. And, as I said previously, when the glass of our life is shaken, the inner contents are revealed. You might explode in anger and be shocked at your own over-reaction, but upon reflection, you have to admit, you stuffed the stuff! What our Lord wants for us is to systematically replace the inner junk with genuine love for our Heavenly Father. We can redecorate our deep inner house. We can have a yard sale and then go on a shopping spree and obtain all new furniture — all new fixtures! We can purposely transform our jungle into a garden!

Whatever the heart is, we're to love Father God with all of it and we're to keep it full of His Word! We could conclude that this verse means, "keep a fond affection for God's Word." How do we keep affection or esteem for something? By putting value on the opinions of those we hang around with. And, this is the biggest way, by our inner talk. We can talk ourselves into or out of blessings! We can get ourselves really excited or get so tired that we can't lift a finger to change. Our inner chat is the most powerful force on this planet. What your heart chats about will come out of your mouth, and James chapter three says that this release of your faith can literally create or destroy!

Why else do you think the enemy of your soul wants to fill your heart with evil? It was said of Ananias, "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit...?" (Acts 5:3). If we allow the prince of darkness to deluge our hearts, unchecked, he can run us around and get us to do whatever he wants! Jesus said that it is what comes out of our heart that defiles us, not what goes into our heart. So, to be tempted is not a sin — allowing the devil's trash to linger in our heart is the beginning of the sin! Like a small, smoldering cigarette butt thrown into dry grass, the enemy's words thrown into our mind can quickly produce a raging fire!

How can we build affection for God's Word? Tell our self continually the value of it! Paint pictures that show the power of it! Preach our inner self excited! What can we do to fill our heart with more love toward our awesome God? Start describing how awesome He is! Rehearse how tremendous His grace is that sought us and bought us! Ponder the price He paid to set us free!

We can tap into the power of sowing and reaping by using our mouth to speaking positive words about someone or something that we want to build love toward. We must do this not only with our God, but also with

our enemies. We can love anyone with Christ's love when we order our inner conversation according to the Word. Plant positive pictures, create positive results! Loose encouraging, loving words about others, receive a crop of love and acceptance back! Plant love for Yahweh, receive more love than you can contain!

And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Colossians 3:12

We might paraphrase this verse to mean that we are to “really get into developing patience, gentleness, humility, kindness and compassion.” Don't have a detached sense of kindness, but allow your innermost being to get involved — let the feelings of kindness be part of your motivation. Draw strength and energy from the feelings of compassion. The author of Colossians is prodding us to see value in these traits so that we will invest time in developing ourselves in these areas.

Ask the Lord to give you some steps you can take to increase your heart's level of patience, gentleness, humility, kindness and compassion.

If our personality could be likened to a fireplace, the heart would be the fire. It's capable of producing constructive warmth and enjoyment, or destructive passions. Our heart is the target of both the Holy Spirit and our archenemy, Satan. Though the heart doesn't necessarily make the final decisions in life, it greatly influences all of our decisions. The heart's responses provide the substance that makes life enjoyable, provides the glue that causes harmful habits to stick, or triggers depression.

Passions of the heart separate us from robots. The absence of positive feelings makes relationships and everyday tasks boring and stifling. It seems that everyone, even the most mechanical, emotionless person seeks something to flirt with — something for their heart to love! It may be something as artificial as two-dimensional sports played out on a TV screen, or as involved as computing in cyberspace, or as intriguing as hunting and fishing. I think that if you follow everyone around long enough, you will find something that they reach for to give their heart a buzz. And, if I'm right, this will prove that they are capable of loving with their heart, and therefore responsible for developing deep love for God — with all of their heart!

A practical diagnosis of depression is that someone has “lost heart.” Nothing is enjoyable, everything is bleak, passion is all gone. The depressed person is considered cured when they get some life back into their heart. Can depression be lifted on purpose? If a person allows their heart to be distracted from the objects of frustration, I believe that their depression can begin to lift, at least temporarily. When their focus turns back to that which causes pain, the dark cloud will come in like the fog at the seashore.

Animals have been used successfully to distract depressed persons because they can reach out and grab the heart. Puppies demand that we love them! Kittens call to our heart's emotions. We can allow our heart to be captured by cute, warm things or by scary, immobilizing monsters! What our mind focuses on will snag our heart's emotional responses. It becomes very important, therefore, to limit what our mind has to put up with. Focus on sad situations and your heart will begin manifesting sad emotions. Focus on lustful things, and the heart will race with lust.

I think we all know about this power of distraction and use it to develop emotions on purpose. We may feel the need for a little romantic zing in life, so we reach for a love story. Perhaps we feel the desire to release some anger, so we turn to the wrestling channel (I don't think so)! Our heart may long for some answers to life's mysteries...sure enough, there are murder mysteries or sci fi distractions that will produce just the right emotional response!

Our mind can lead our heart around on a leash! What Jesus is calling for is that we use our mind's heart-directing power to generate feelings that will propel us deeper into the heart of God! Once our emotions get hooked on our awesome Heavenly Father, faith takes it from there and begins to fit everything together, working for our success!

**Work that you love is not work at all, rather it's
a self-renewing, energy-enhancing, purpose-
giving pastime!**

Try an experiment this week. Use the power of your mind to shift your focus when you catch yukky feelings arising. Did it work? Were you able to control your heart with your mind?

Then try to do this with Father God. Paint a mental picture that will

generate feelings of warmth, love and compassion toward Him. Describe your experiment to a friend.

Idol-ing the Heart

Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts, and have put right before their faces the stumbling block of their iniquity. Should I be consulted by them at all?

Ezekiel 14:3

Our heart is quite some engine! Zealous emotions can propel otherwise sane individuals to do unthinkable things, such as sacrifice their children to the god Molech in Old Testament days. Times haven't changed much, for even in our "Christian" era, I have known of women who, worshipping security and "a relationship," have sacrificed their children to an abusive stepfather. Men have been traditionally more prone to sacrifice their children for career goals, pastimes (sports) and other self-centered activities. Just follow a person around, male or female, and you will soon discover what has their heart, what gets their zeal!

People will do for love what they will never do for money. Love will make a way to solve virtually any problem. Love keeps seeking an answer for the one it loves. It keeps knocking, asking. It will even pay the ultimate price — sacrificing self for the object of its love. So, guess what the archenemy of humans goes after to get people to do what they would otherwise not do...love!

The prophet Ezekiel was greatly disturbed by the abominations his countrymen had turned to rather than serve Yahweh. He describes their sin as, "They set up their idols in their hearts." What do you think this means? They must have been having "worship services" in their inner sanctuary! Their focus was not on the One true God, but rather on idols, mental images fashioned after their own fancies. Could Christians to commit this sin today? When the Apostle said that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit, is it possible that our temples could be invaded by foreign spirits seeking to distract our devotion from the Living Christ? This sin

could be masked by the fact that the worship or devotion would be internal — hidden from the naked eye. Outward compliance of the idolater could fool the unobservant, while the wise saint would be aware that the flow from the inner sanctuary of the deceived one was polluted. Remember, Jesus said that the flow from the heart was the giveaway!

How does love invade the heart? If we can tap into this secret, perhaps we can not only increase our love and devotion toward the true God, but help others that have been tricked into setting up idols in their hearts! If we could turn this power of love on whenever we wanted to, we could use it to motivate ourselves for great and positive things for the Kingdom of God. Because love stimulates creativity, energy and endurance, we could accomplish so much more in less time. If this skill is transferable, we can help others escape from the temple of doom — idolatry!

Idolatry is a bigger problem today than we realize. Because sneaky idols can be “in the heart,” we fail to detect such things as worshiping form instead of Yahweh; worshiping programs instead of serving the Living God; and even bringing into worship services prejudice, anger, lust, and a clutter mind! You won’t see little gold images hanging from the walls, but you might see smug observers, eyes wide open, disgust on their face, looking around, judging the worshipers as to sincerity, resenting the beat of the music, the length of time they feel required to stand! Can we help these poor souls replace their negative attitudes and somehow encourage them to jump into the flow of living water? I think so.

Our key verse at the start of this chapter says that the Old Testament rascals “put right before their faces the stumbling block of their iniquity.” What we focus on trickles down into our heart. When we “see” value in something, it begins to allocate space in our center of affections. The idolaters of Ezekiel’s day had sensual artwork that stimulated their minds and emotions. Lewd temple prostitutes captured their imaginations and triggered sensual desires. What kinds of pictures is the devil using today to stimulate people to go in the wrong direction? Is it not old traditions? Judgmental thoughts? External comparisons? If so, then when these folks are given something real, something dynamic to compare, they might — just might — come closer to the banks of the stream!

Current anti-smoking advertisements are using this principle in reverse. They are associating gross pictures with tobacco products. They chant a negative phrase about how tobacco effects one’s digestive tract!

The tobacco industry tried for years to get potential customers to mentally associate their product with success and a positive image. Self-worth was a sneaky inner hook they dangled on their line to lure unsuspecting youth toward their “cancer-sticks.” What kinds of visual ads do you think get to people the most, positive or negative? As we read the Bible we see God uses both! There’s a heaven to gain and a hell to shun.

David, the man after God’s heart, used this same principle that advertisers have exploited, only he used it for good. He captured it for us in Psalm 16:8:

I have set Yahweh continually before me; Because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.

The Hebrew word translated “set,” according to Strong’s Concordance, means: “to level, i.e. equalize...by implication to adjust...reckon.” When David set the Lord before him, **he was focusing on a God who was reachable and desirable!** Yahweh was a condescending God, in Whose presence was fullness of joy! This awesome God would one day take upon Himself the form of a servant and be manifest in the flesh. The God Whose ways were far above and beyond ours, humbled Himself and became *Ya-shua* — **I am Savior!** The Psalms paint a picture of a gentle shepherd, a tower of strength, a protective mother hen, a river of abundance, and many more mental images that become metaphors for delight! The Bible has plenty of positive advertising aimed at the heart!

Because of the human capacity to be stimulated by what the mind interprets as desirable, how can we use this ability to trigger both love for God as well as devotion to the process of spiritual maturity? Can we set up images in our heart that will trigger godly responses? Can we use the human susceptibility to visual/mental stimulation for furtherance of our goal of loving Father God more?

An idol is a god of man’s making or design. How do we personalize and maximize our relationship with the true God without creating a god of our own design? The Scriptures are given for this very purpose! As we obey Psalm One and meditate on the Word daily, pictures of God’s promises begin to be etched on our mind and our subconscious! As we encourage this phenomena on purpose with our internally spoken faith and our externally spoken testimony, we strengthen both our resolve as well as our deep inner convictions and desires!

Picture in your heart (your mind's eye), someone who loved you so much that they left all their glory behind, just to rescue you! Christ Jesus, hanging on the tree, is so much more than a religious symbol — His outstretched arms are indicating the extent of His love for you. Someone has conjectured, “Jesus said, ‘I love you this much...’ stretched out His arms and died.” What a comparison. See the idols of the world as a Black Widow spider, biting its new mate and sucking the very life from it, and compare that to Jesus, giving up His life for us.

No wonder Ezekiel was so bamboozled. How could anyone in their right mind trade the Father's love for sick idolatry? The answer has to be that they did not see the love Abba had for them. Their eyes were riveted on physical manifestations — sensual depictions, graphic solicitations. What a caution for us. If we are to grow in our love for Yahweh, then we must be ever vigilant concerning what our mind's eyes and our physical eyes look at. If we, like David, “set” the Lord before us and ponder His great love, we will find even more love and devotion rising inside our hearts. This love, in turn, will energize and propel us through life's mundane, boring spaces, and protect us as we walk through the narrow, dangerous straights, where siren's songs lure and mesmerize!

As we grow in our devotion and intimacy with the God of the impossible, greater manifestations of His power and involvement in our lives will be seen by those less excited that surround us. It is my belief that those tricked into idolatry will be more effected by seeing our demonstrations of the true God's power than by empty arguments of what they should or shouldn't be doing. The book of Romans says that the Gentiles are to make the Jews jealous — imagine, witnessing by dangling our spiritual success in front of a watching world! The idolaters need to see that the real is more desirable than the empty and false! That's our job! We must so enjoy our awesome God that our fruit — delicious, winsome fruit — draws the deceived, delirious, discouraged, depressed, despondent! Didn't God say, “I set before you life and death — chose life!”? That's our assignment! Enjoy!

What's in your heart? Is the engine of your life (your heart) idol-ing on death-bait or revving up on the Life-giver? Is your mental and physical focus making it easier or more difficult to pass the tests of life? Is your mind more skilled at painting pictures of failure and despair or making Bible-promise applications to your present need? Serious questions, right? Take a second and ask yourself this question:

Which is easier for me to focus on:

- Mental pictures of despair?
- Physical distractions?
- Manufactured gods that offer temporary relief?
- The attributes of the One true God revealed in the Bible?

Idols are a “Brand-X” pseudo replacement for the real. How can we know if we have the real thing or a cheap replacement? Is it working? Are you fulfilled? Jesus said that He came for those whose needs were not being met. He came bearing the only cure for sin, not just another sedative. The Christ of God came to take us into an "abundant life" — is that what you're experiencing?

We are tempted to grab for an idol because they are controllable. We can pick them up, modify them, even discard them. For humans who enjoy the rush of being in control, idols offer so much more than a God who sets the rules and demands that we love Him with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength! Have you been tempted to wander off from the God who sets the standards to chase after an illusive deity of your own doing? The New Age influence on our society has fostered much self-service religion. The bottom line is, "Does it work?" Jesus never fails!

Can you see the great danger of idols? We are all sinners in need of a Savior, but the idols that surround us try to hypnotize us with the lie that we're okay. Those who worship the idol of health are not interested in the Lord our Healer. Those who lay their offerings at the feet of the Wall Street gods, turn a deaf ear to the One promising to be our Security. Those intoxicated with the search for thrills, adventure and fun shy away from the Great Servant who came not to be served, but to serve (Matthew 20:28).

Convince a person that all they need is more attention from their husband, wife, children or grandchildren, and there won't be sufficient room left over for Jesus. The notoriety that a past life of sorrow, abuse, addiction or crime affords can diminish the call to take up one's cross and become part of a team — a team of unappreciated workers, almost secluded and forgotten within the ranks of the church. **If our sense of self-worth or identity is found anywhere but being one of His lambs, we will be very susceptible to idolatry!** How we look, what we wear, the

causes we fight for, and a million other distractions can weasel their way in between a soul and their God. Having to be right, demanding to be heard, requiring others to beg for your forgiveness can become an obsession that leaves no time for romance —Divine Romance!

There just isn't enough time to do everything, and our temptation is to put off some things until a more convenient time. Everybody is faced with this daily series of choices. "Should I work on my taxes today or start on the lawn?" "Should I call my friend or do my laundry?" "Should I do my homework or pray?" We typically lean toward the more pleasant activities. At the end of the day we can evaluate what got our prime time attention. Who or what you love the most will get top billing over the long haul. There will be exceptions, but the schedules and routines of life will leave behind a witness to what was first place in our life. Abba Father wants the evidence to clearly point to Him, so on judgment day He can prominently point to you and say, "Well done My faithful servant, enter into My rest! What you sowed, you reap. You put Me first place in your life, now I put you first place in eternal life!"

The sad truth is that when idols clutter our lives, the judgement day picture will be tragic. As the holy fire of God devours all the worldly trash and trinkets, the wicked heart will chain the human soul to that destined to be destroyed. Our choices now will determine the results of judgement day. That's why God longs so for us to love Him with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. Our investment of love today will produce eternal rewards! Selfishness now will result in eternal loss.

Yes, Jesus didn't come for everyone, only those who need Him. If someone can be satisfied with less than Father God's presence and power, and there's not a place in their heart for the true God, then they won't be bothered by Him — either now or eternally!

Why idol your engine when you can supercharge your life with God-manifest-in-the-flesh — Jesus! Why try to live on phoney display fruit when you can enjoy the real? Set life before your eyes! Go for more of the exciting adventure of loving the only true awesome God!

Loving with Our Conscience

The purpose of this command is for people to have love, a love that comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a true faith.

1 Timothy 1:5 ncv

It may not be very popular to talk about the conscience in a day when the word “guilt” is almost considered a cuss word. If evolutionists are right, how come this pesky troublemaker is still hanging around, spoiling our fun? Why hasn't the conscience “evolved” into a hard heart that will allow humans to let spotted owls and other threatened species duke it out in the jungle of survival? Where is that stone-cold logic when you need it?

On one hand, liberals treat the conscience as unnecessary baggage that has outlived its usefulness, but only when it gets in the way of their “if it feels good, do it” motto. Guilt is wrong if it prevents a woman from having control over her body, but OK if used to condemn those who seek to prevent the murder of the unborn. Figure! I’m sure you can come up with many other examples where society is hypocritical concerning the use of guilt.

One of the reasons the immoral segment of our society has been ineffective in eliminating the conscience is that they use it too frequently as a manipulation and motivation tool. Social anarchists appeal to the conscience with twisted logic. “Loyalty,” a moral matter of conscience, is a main motivator for mobsters, anti-government revolutionaries, and weirdo gurus! It’s almost humorous how inmates incarcerated for crimes committed with virtually no conscience carry on about their neglected rights, trying to hook the tender conscience of “straight” society. “It’s not right” is conscience talk. So where’s evolution when you need it?

The heart is where our conscience lives:

...in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them. Romans 2:15

This verse is saying that when the non-Jewish person is having a moral conscience attack, they are affirming the universal validity of God's righteous law as a built-in component of the human heart. Similar to ROM memory built into computers, so God has endowed every human with a conscience. The conscience can be warped and even seared or shut down, but few ever become so detached that they can commit a crime and nonchalantly embrace law enforcement officials that are seeking to arrest them. We call such conscience-less individuals sociopaths or psychotics. There is only one response to suchlike— institutionalize them! People who have no sense of right or wrong (moral considerations) are dangerous to themselves and to society!

Because our conscience is linked to our heart, it can energize our love for the Lord our God. And because the conscience is a living part of us, it can be nurtured. We can feed it! We can shape it! We can mold our conscience like a master gardener, into a thing of beauty that gives peace, rest and refreshment as well as pleasure to our God!

WE CAN INSTRUCT OUR CONSCIENCE:

But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith (1 Timothy 1:4).

When the heart has been filled with proper knowledge, it can make conscience-calls that please God. For instance, we tend to cultivate our conscience based on what we "feel" is right or wrong, which can be tainted. If we were raised that eating meat is wrong because animals are our friends, then we will probably assume that everybody is wrong for eating meat. What if we train ourselves that it's wrong to go more than an hour without telling Jesus that we love Him? Our conscience would then be useful as a continual nudge to enhance our love for God.

Can Christians drink alcoholic beverages? In Europe, the conscience of the Christian has been shaped differently than in America where prohibition helped fashion the conscience of conservatives. Who is right? Is it a matter where cultural input makes the final decision? For many fundamental believers, conscience in this issue is considered to be on the same level as the inspired canon. This is conscience instruction. If you have questions on this issue, read 1 Corinthians 10:23-33 and ask the Lord to apply it to you.

Many in our society have been raised in homes where the adults “live together” without the covenant of marriage. No one seems to give it a second thought until they become a Christian and God’s standards are taught. Such instruction, if received in their heart, will refurbish their conscience. Their desire to please Father God, out of love, will take the new information into account and they will respond accordingly.

Sometimes our conscience has to go through a revision when we leave the naive "zone" of youth and enter into adulthood. Modesty and appropriate behavior between the sexes goes through a shift when a couple marries. Most people can make this adjustment, though the transition can be a bit awkward. For some, the difficulty adapting is hampered by an overactive conscience. They will need to be instructed by Genesis 2:25 and Hebrews 13:4! Time can help polish the conscience.

Similar to this is how we relate intimately with our Heavenly Father. If one's childhood programmed their conscience with aloof, harsh, demanding visions of God, it will be hard for the adult to enter into the intimacy expounded in most charismatic circles. Verbal pictures and forms of worship that bring faith into everyday life are shunned as being inappropriate and the conscience stonewalls against intimacy! I've talked to people who felt that dancing in church services (as a form of worship) was wrong, even though dancing is a biblical expression of joy. Why were they adamant against something that has Scriptural precedent? Their conscience said it was wrong. End of discussion.

The list could go on with traditions that slip down into the conscience and invalidate the Word of God (Mark 7:13). Perhaps one of the loftiest and most religious traditions that hinders people from loving God with all their heart is: “God is too busy and my problems are too insignificant.” The conscience so trained says that ‘It’s just not right to bother God with trivial details of life—like God could be too busy! His omnipotent “all power” encompasses even the microscopic activities of every atom as well

as the secrets of our hearts. Have you ever felt like God must be too busy to bother with little old you? Do you think that some problems are too small to bother God with? Just reading these questions no doubt answers them for you in the negative.

The lofty thought that our mundane aspects of life are too inconsequential for God, will keep part of our heart from loving Him. Imagine, a tradition that keeps God out of the small, but everyday aspects of our life! What kind of a friendship is that? If God knew when Sarah laughed in her heart, I think He both knows the small details of our lives, and He also desires to love us in each one! What a joke that a God who know the number of hairs on our head is too busy to talk to the one living under them!

If we are to be *taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ* (2 Corinthians 10:5), then God is saying He wants to be a part of everything we do, even to being consulted concerning every thought we have! The poorly trained conscience may protest against being so intimate with God, but detailed involvement is necessary for close relationships. Soaking in such verses as Proverbs 3:4,5 can help renew our heart's conscience: *Trust in Yahweh with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.* Notice the word "all." A good nickname for serious believers would be "I-lean."

To love God with all our heart will necessitate our conscience being brought up to speed with how God feels about such things as anger, lust, unforgiveness and complaining. Treating the outcasts of the world in an unkind fashion may not violate our conscience because "they deserve it," but as we come across verses like Matthew 25:40 *...Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me,* we can gain a new perspective. We can retrain our conscience with the Word of God:

You have been Christians a long time now, and you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again the basic things a beginner must learn about the Scriptures. You are like babies who drink only milk and cannot eat solid food. And a person who is living on milk isn't very far along in the Christian life and doesn't know much about doing what is right. Solid food is for

those who are mature, who have trained themselves to recognize the difference between right and wrong and then do what is right. Hebrews 5:12-14 nlt

When society says it's time for us to do our own thing, a Cross-trained heart will keep us on the narrow road. When brother Know-it-all informs us of God's will for our spare time, our Holy Spirit enriched conscience will allow us the luxury of turning a deaf ear. When the preacher is trying desperately to motivate the underactive to get involved and the devil seeks to use the sermon as a billy club to harass the overworked, the good conscience allows the remarks to float away towards their intended target.

Allowing our conscience to be refurbished by loving Father God will help minimize false guilt! The renewed conscience response of asking, "Father, does this apply to me," prevents hardening of the heart as well as spiritual paranoia!

The person not walking in faith has a defiled conscience... *To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled* (Titus 1:15). How do we clean our conscience? In the Old Testament people gave God gifts and sacrifices in an attempt to cleanse their conscience, but these things were unable to provide inner purity (*gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience*—Hebrews 9:9). Today, we might be tempted to try to cleanse our soiled conscience with tithing, praying longer, reading the Bible, etc., but there is only one cure to the heart's sin problem: *how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?* (Hebrews 9:14).

If you are trying to refurbish a tainted conscience and you are a Christian, you will need to use the same cure the sinner uses when he becomes a believer—the blood of Jesus! Our temptation is to wander away from faith to good works, to muffle the groaning of a conscience out of joint. Not only will the hustle of “good works” fail, moreover they will leave us frustrated and Satan will use our “vain” efforts to convince us to throw in the towel because “we must have committed the unpardonable sin—after all, our conscience is still whining even after all the hard work we put forth. God must be really mad at us!” No, our conscience will

respond to the proper cure—soul soap—the blood of Jesus, applied by faith along with the confession of our sin:

but if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:7-9

Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Hebrews 10:22

HERE'S THE KEY!

To love Father God with my conscience means first and foremost that when I feel any, even the slightest ripple in my soul, I run to Him with it! I lay the whole matter out before Him and surrender it to Him. Is there anything that needs to be repented of? “Father, I repent!” Is there anything I need to do differently in the future? “I submit, Father, to Your decision!” But quickly, after submitting the twinge of conscience to Abba, I resist the devil, the accuser, lest my conscience be sidetracked by the enemy! Then with lightning speed, I pull my Heavenly Father into the area of concern with praise and thanksgiving. What I have discovered is that our foe frequently tries to trick us into false guilt. However, when we turn immediately to Abba, what the accuser meant for evil is turned into good! If every "false guilt" assault, as well as valid charges, were met with submission, devil-resistance, and drawing near to God in praise, our conscience would soon be strong and embolden!

When we renew our conscience with the Word of God, it sends a message of love to Him. When every tremor in our conscience is submitted to Abba, it says loud and clear that we love and trust Him. Our conscience can bring us closer to God, and it can also give us more to talk to Him about! Ask Father God questions when your conscience acts up, and you will learn much!

If there are any doubts in your mind concerning your salvation, please read the appendix in the back of this book. Reach out to a prayer partner and cement this relationship with the Living God!

— *Keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith.* 1 Timothy 1:19

Led into Love

*And may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of
God and into the steadfastness of Christ.*

2 Thessalonians 3:5

In the New Testament, when the title “Lord” is used, it usually refers to the Lord Jesus Christ. In the verse above, we could paraphrase it to read, “May Jesus direct or lead your hearts into Father God’s love, that you might be as loving as Jesus.” The Son of God wants to direct us as deeply into Abba’s love as He is. He came to show us the Father. He is the way, the only way to the Father.

Jesus can show us how every other path in life leads to despair while revealing how the way into Father God is full of grace and life. Another way of saying this is that there are do’s and don’t’s, positives and negatives. He wants us to get hooked on love and then He uses love to keep us on track until we finish the race.

How did you feel when you first got Saved? Did you have a sense that you were loved? Forgiven? Generally, there is a peace that accompanies our initial encounter with Christ, and this becomes a guideline to help keep us on track. Similar to this is how a couple falls in love and enjoys something that is virtually intoxicating. Their emotional love is exhilarating and can be a like a mental photograph to remind them of the “good old days.” The frustration that results when the couple realizes that they have “lost” the honeymoon romance can propel them to take action to restore their first love. *But I have this against you, that you have left your first love* (Revelation 2:4). Our heavenly Bridegroom wants us to stay “newlyweds.” He longs for our heavenly honeymoon to last

forever!

We are led deeper into the love of God when we have something to compare. An example is how a diet Coke tastes sweet until you eat a piece of real candy. M&M's have a way of letting you know what real sweet is supposed to be! As we compare the love our awesome God gives us to the best humans can give us, it should draw us deeper into His eternal arms! The power of comparison can lead us out from shallow relationships and worldly habits that drain us when we hold them up against the love standard given by Jesus. He loved us so much that He gave! He became poor that we might become rich. Deadly habits demand more and more of our time, resources and energy and result in bondage. Jesus says, "Draw My life, My abundant life, and give it freely to others!" The deadly drains us, the godly fills us. The wicked response sucks inward, like a black hole, not allowing any life to escape. The godly response flows outward with abundant life, healing, saving, and filling others.

Too many people are content to coast down the broad road that leads to hell because the only "religious" experience they have as a comparison is boring time being held captive in stifling Sunday School. Mean disciplinarians gave the impression that God would be most pleased if they were starched and sealed in plastic! The glitter and beckoning of a nasty world is hard to say no to when compared to the prodigal son's brother found dwelling in cold churches—stay at home and work your fingers to the bone! It will be hard to sell today's youth on a Jesus the disciples tried to make, as they sought to chase away the noisy children. Prim and proper disciples of today who offer a safe version of Jesus, one devoid of spontaneous zeal, give our culture little of value for comparison.

Our comparisons can shift. Take for instance the story of the prodigal son. Staying at home, doing hard work had a hard time competing with the sparkling lure of good times in the old town! But, how did the comparison shift as selfishness squeezed the life from the prodigal. The three squares and the warm bed of home had a different "glamour" when compared with stinky pigs, empty pockets and a growling stomach! The power of comparison comes down to one question—Are you happy? So, Mr. Fast-tracker, is the glitz meeting all your needs? Jesus said He didn't come for the healthy, a picture of those who say that the glitzy, worldly lifestyle is meeting all their needs. The Lord came for those who found life to be desperately inadequate!

Reading the book of Ecclesiastes recently, I was again reminded how

futile everything in life is. Wealth has a diminishing return. Material possessions enslave us with demands of maintenance as the spirit of mammon cries “More, more!” Even close friendships seem destined to hit an invisible barrier where their return wanes. Marital love is supposed to grow to the caliber of Christ’s for His church (Ephesians 5:32), but its path takes love’s pilgrims through some valleys of distraction—raising children, vocations, extended family, recreational pursuits, etc.

For espousal love to continue to grow, a price will have to be paid, critical choices will demand that lesser things be denied. A call to come deeper into the marriage relationship has price tags all over the place, but the reward of true intimacy has the lure of hidden treasure! Likewise, going deeper in Abba’s love has the obvious cost of discipleship, but when compared to the cost of selfishness, maybe it’s not so great after all.

For the one with an ear to hear God’s call to come deeper (Psalm 42:7), dissatisfaction and restlessness are valuable motivations! A prayer from the wise would be, “Father, please make everything empty and boring that would attempt to lure me away from being lost in Your love.” Frustration becomes a friend that nudges us back onto the center of the path. Negative emotions can become the guardrail that bump us back into the main flow of life. It may be hard to imagine that the “good life” of laying around on yachts, feasting on the luxuries of the world could produce negative emotions. But chemical addictions, greed and suicide statistics point the serious observer toward the inevitable conclusion that there is much more to really living—selfishness kills!

*As a loving hind and a graceful doe, let her breasts
satisfy you at all times; **be exhilarated always with her
love.** Proverbs 5:19*

This interesting proverb reveals how to keep the sparkle alive in marriage. The context is Proverbs 5:18... *Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth...* To “rejoice” in one’s mate is to learn to focus on that which is praiseworthy, enjoyable, refreshing, and deny or overlook that which would take us in the opposite direction. To be exhilarated with love means we must abandon our self to love—pay a price to go deeper into love—take risks—make it a priority! Very practically, this means quickly dismissing all charges against our lover, and chasing away anything producing irritation or fear concerning our

lover.

Listening to a marriage enrichment tape recently, the speaker suggested that every time a man or woman has a sensual temptation thought, if they will recall their mate and some enjoyable experience from the past they can redirect the negative energy into constructive! Picture this: the devil tries to lure you into the lurid and every time you just celebrate your prize mate God gave you! The negative pull will serve to lead you deeper into love with your partner!

The word “exhilarated” in Proverbs 5:10 seems to be a strange word for the Lord to use. Isn't the Bible supposed to be stuffy? But the power of comparison is what the Spirit is teaching us. A marriage full of zest and excitement is the strongest deterrent to an affair. When the most fun relationship in the world, the most exhilarating and spontaneous time is found with your covenant partner, the lure of the lascivious is lessened. True unconditional love of a high quality marriage outshines the conditional attraction of an illicit relationship that demands that the participants always be on good behavior.

Transfer this concept to our heavenly Husband. The Holy Spirit wants to lead us deeper into the love of God. What does He use?

Bless Yahweh, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits; Who pardons all your iniquities; Who heals all your diseases; Who redeems your life from the pit; Who crowns you with loving-kindness and compassion; Who satisfies your years with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle. Psalm 103:2-5

God has a pile of perks! We're reminded to not forget His benefits! Pondering the blessings the Lord affords will generate more delight. When we realize that our loving Heavenly Father's treasures are unlimited and ever new, we'll awake each morning with the thoughts running through our mind, "What exciting things do You have in store for me today, Father?" The above passage dangles some of these goodies out in front of us—obtainable, renewable resources, free for the faith-ing! Healing! Forgiveness! Pit-deliverance! Loving-kindness! Compassion! Satisfaction! Renewed youth! Which of these things has the greatest appeal to you? How about all of them!

Some well-meaning religious folks will be quick to tell us that we should not love God for what He does for us. Their idea of real faith is sitting quietly in church once a week for an hour (not a minute more). To ask God for anything personal is to make Him trite, common, mundane. I think some folks are more "religious" than the Bible! When you ponder such promises as "Seek first the kingdom of God...and He will give you all the things you need," or "He gives us all things richly to enjoy," or "When our ways please Him He gives us the desires of our heart," isn't it hard to believe the distortion that the God of the Bible is stoic, rigid, demanding, uncaring and un-passionate?

God is alive! He is vibrant with more excitement than He created! This world of thrilling discoveries is merely His hobby shop! So, give way to His tugs, His fresh, adventurous solicitations. He will ask us to take risks, trust Him with blind abandonment. Chase after Him, caring not where He leads, singing new songs, the kind lovers invent while under the influence of their heady wine. *For me to **live** is Christ!* Someone, experiencing this "lover's delight," wrote "Jesus, You're all the world to me, my life, my joy, my all. You are my strength from day to day, without you I would fall."

Jesus told a love-starved woman one day that her five failed marriages and even her present illicit relationship, would neither keep her from God's best, nor would it provide what she was desperately thirsting for. Jesus used the term "living water" in conjunction with the truth that Father God is seeking a relationship with those who will worship Him in spirit and truth. She was hungry for what no man could give her. The ability to turn a head, or be thought desirable, was unable to invade her inner chambers. Her emptiness, in spite of many "romantic" encounters, made her a willing candidate for something more. Another woman, a younger damsel, lacking her experience, might be tempted to believe that all she needed was the love of a good man. Can you recall a time in your life when you were desperately seeking the wrong thing in the wrong places?

Would to God we learn quicker and before we accumulate needless scars, that nothing, absolutely nothing, satisfies like Jesus. All we need is His love! If only our heart would lead us to the Sole Satisfier — if only we would put on the Lord Jesus Christ, we would not make provision for the flesh and its lusts.

Jesus, You're more than life to me!

The Soul

*And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your **soul**, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.*

Mark 12:30

If we are to love God with all of our soul, maybe we need to define what our soul is. Many of our English words come from the root Greek word translated “soul” in Mark 12:30. From psychology to psychic, our words are trying to pin down that invisible part of humans that is commonly rendered “soul.” The New American Standard Bible translators rendered *psuchay*: everyone (1), heart (2), heartily (1), life (36), lives (7), mind (1), minds (1), person (1), persons (3), soul (33), souls (14), suspense (1), and thing (1). As you can see, one of the more common uses of the word is “life.” Let’s put that meaning into the theme verse of this study:

and you shall love the Lord your God with all your...life...

Perhaps the Lord Jesus wanted us to grasp that God desires our love from every part of our being — our essence, our everyday behavior, our common activities as well as at special times such as church services. There is to be no mundane time or place where our love for Abba does not factor in, or modify our behavior. Our ever-present God desires us to recognize His presence at all times and in all places! In His presence is fullness of joy and because He walks and talks with us, we can have joy unspeakable and be full of glory — what a life!

We are told in Hebrews 10:38, that God has a soul: *But My righteous one shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back, **My soul** has no pleasure in him.* Maybe we could paraphrase this verse to say, “If we shrink back

from walking in faith, God’s “life” has no pleasure in us.” Doesn’t sound very pleasant!

Here is an interesting way Jesus used this Greek word *psuchay*... *He who has found his **life** shall lose it, and he who has lost his **life** for My sake shall find it* (Matthew 10:39). Jesus is asking that we love God with that which most folks fight to keep: our reputation, our pleasures, our free time, our opinions, etc. What is it we humans seek so desperately? Why is it so hard to let go and let God? This sobering verse reminds us that the self-centered life is a dead end street. Insisting on having our own way will guarantee we experience just the opposite. And factoring this usage of our word for soul back into Mark 12:30, provides much understanding: **“Love the Lord your God with all that you hold dear — your reputation, your opinions, your finances, your free time, your thoughts, etc.** To love Him with all your soul, then, is to love God with everything you have and are!

If our soul is a part of our personality, then what we cling to as our “life” or what we consider dear or valuable becomes a part of our personality. That’s why we are commanded to set our affections on the things of God: *Set your **affection** on things above, not on things on the earth* (Colossians 3:2 KJV). Some folks say “we are what we eat,” but I see this concept saying **“we become what we value!”** Love God with everything you value. Think very seriously for a minute. What do you value the very most in your life? Is the Lord in the very center of this?

For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. Philippians 3:18,19

The life-focus of wicked people is on that which gives them pleasure. The verse above says that the enemies of the cross literally worship their feelings. They bow down before emotions. The scary thing is that all the devil has to do to lead them around by the nose (or belly, KJV), is to hook them on sensations. It seems that our society is in mad pursuit of every and any zingy feeling and thrill. If “really living” is “feeling good,” then anything that is perceived as hindering good feelings is avoided by worldly people. Even what may be for their best will be shunned if they

even kind of think, perhaps, maybe it might not be enjoyable!

It doesn't take a lot of brilliance to deduce that man's relentless pursuit of happiness, wealth and fame, isn't working. All of the hollow endeavors fail to fill the empty vacuum left by our refusal to love God with all of our soul! To give Abba our love is to receive back a hundredfold from Him (the law of sowing and reaping) and this love becomes a river of pleasure ensuing from our inner most being...our soul!

Why do so many people miss this astounding truth? They obviously don't believe that God can or will give us as good as quality of "stuff" as we can provide for our self. Perhaps these folks have been fed a lie that God steals our kids, puts sickness on us to teach us, and wants us poor. I believe that every person wants what only God can give, but the deceiver told us that we'd never find our heart's fulfillment in God! We are pumped full of lies about the One who loved us so much He gave us His only begotten Son! It's crazy to think that the One who promised us love that goes beyond understanding and joy unspeakable can't outdo the temporal, fickle, expensive, short-sighted flesh.

The Psalmist said of Yahweh, *Who only doeth wondrous things...* (Psalm 72:18 KJV). The Scriptures tell us that the loving Creator wants to give us the desires of our heart (Psalm 37:4), and prosper us in every way (3 John 1:2). Our Heavenly Father wants us to say continuously that He delights in the prosperity of His children (Psalm 35:27). Read through the Word of God and take note of how the awesome Father spoiled His kids: Abraham was the wealthiest man around; God doubled everything the devil stole from Job; David prospered not only financially, but also with a special blessing that his seed would always rule (by the way, David is called *the man after God's heart*); Solomon had people bring him wealth from around the world.

Even the Apostle Paul, who is thought of as suffering so much deprivation, said that he had learned the secret of abounding in blessings even when times were slim! God loves to give good gifts to His children. He wants to fill our inward spring with joy inexpressible and make us full of glory! All He asks is that we allow Him in to our sanctuary; invite Him to dine with us in our temple! Love Him and fellowship with Him and bask in His river of delights.

Try to out give God in the matter of love. Seek Him with all your soul, love Him with everything in you and you will be overwhelmed with His amazing love! You will notice how your inner itching is calmed.

Healing becomes a commonplace thing. Things mean less and relationships become more enjoyable. The deeper you go into God's love, the more you are able to overlook the faults of others, which they will greatly appreciate! Try it! Let your soul love the One it aches for! Sing love songs to Him. See Him in everything you do. Walk with Him and talk with Him.

Here is a little song or poem that came to me.

*Abba, You're awesome!
My soul cries out for You.
I used to think I needed things,
But the itching was for You.
No satisfaction lasted long,
They paled and did wane,
Even though I sought for stuff,
And paid the price of pain,
Since I've turned my soul to seek,
What it really has been craving,
I enjoy life so much more,
And everything You gave me.*

Okey, so it's not the greatest poem to hit the printed page, but can you pick up my heart? We all have some very deep needs and nothing can satisfy us except the one who made us. We had a copy machine one time that insisted we use only genuine toner. We found some cheaper generic toner and took a chance. When we finally called the serviceman to fix our "stupid" machine, his diagnosis was — bad toner! Cheap is not always acceptable! Generic will not always work! The manufacturer knows best — trust Him!

Humans act like God is not present because He is not seen. Yet, if He were to be absent from our universe, there would be utter darkness. What we marvel at in a sunset or coo over when we hold a baby, or take peace from at ocean side or mountain splendor, would all be gone! God is love, and everything lovely exists as an expression of His tremendous love. God is everywhere present, but blind creatures assume that He is aloof, remote, uninvolved, uncaring because they can't "see" Him! Look again. He's standing very close by. Your soul can see Him!

The part of me that sees a powerful new computer beckoning from a department store shelf, calling with covetous tones, is my soul! The soul appreciates, the soul can get hooked. The soul is the target of salesmen's arrows. Its logic is weak, but its admiration ability is tremendous. If the soul is trained to esteem the things eternal (the acts and attributes of God), then its part in the love equation will be extremely profitable.

The new car calls to adventure, speed, luxury! Our soul is tugged at by the call — temptation! What we're not told is that the moment we drive the "new" vehicle off the lot depreciation robs us at the curb! The payment book may beat us home. Inconsiderate shoppers will bang their car doors into our virgin paint! And before the albatross is paid for, we will try to trade it off for another shiny slave master! But our soul is tricked into believing that this is both important and enjoyable! And some people think we're nuts for loving the non-depreciating, ever-new, thrilling Almighty God!

What is the leash for this dynamic personality component called the soul? Words! Our words act like a funnel that forces our attention toward the direction we choose! Inner language becomes a brush that we can use to paint mental pictures that can become very dynamic. The Bible says that without a vision God's people perish. Actually we all have many internal visions. Pictures painted through the years that bind us, limit us and excuse insipid faith that comes so far below the Master's design for us. We must reign in our words! Our mental pictures must get in line with the miracle promises of God's Word!

Without an internal faith-vision of our high calling we will stumble around, grabbing at crumbs, scrapping over scraps, fighting over tokens of affection from stingy people that are likewise beggars on the hunt! If we would only speak God's Word over and over in our minds until the pictures form by the Holy Spirit's power, we could soar easily to the throne where a river of mercy flows freely! All the nourishing and cherishing we could ever hope for is to be found in great abundance at the Master's feet!

The Scriptures tell us that bodily exercise profits only a little, but godliness is profitable for both now as well as in heaven! True godliness is seeing and saying God's Words — then living accordingly! Take for instance the Scripture in Matthew 6:33...

But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and

all these things will be added to you.

What do you think would happen if we went around preaching to our self (in our mind), “I am seeking My Heavenly Father’s Kingdom first and foremost, and He is meeting every need I have.” We could personalize the words from Psalm 37:4 ...I am delighting myself in the Lord, and He is giving me the desires of my heart!” What do you think this practice would do to depression? Because God works by faith, what do you think this would do to our circumstances? And, what do you think this would do to our love-level toward our awesome God?

Soul-talk such as, “Holy Spirit breathe on me,” or “Lord Jesus, come into me now with more of Your awesome power and love,” not only breaks the devil’s snag-line, but more than that, it passes the test of life! Be reminded that every event in life is a part of the big test. There are no small tests!

Just yesterday I was listening to a tape of a very famous preacher teaching on prayer. He said that it was not only a waste of time to ask the Lord to be with us, but that it was unscriptural. Something bothered me with those words. I know the Lord is everywhere present, but why then does He command us to “draw near” to Him (James 4:8). How can you draw nigh to someone who is inside you? What do you think the Holy Spirit intended with these words? Surely our inner talk, our soul-talk needs to be pulling Father God closer. I wouldn’t have minded the preacher’s instruction if he at least would have directed us to use our inner conversation to remind ourselves that Christ is in us — the hope of glory! “Thank You Father for living inside of me, and that Your Spirit is calling me deeper into Your grace and love!”

What is the soul? It’s the “you” that stands at the window, watching life parade by with all its glitz and glitter, yearning to be a part of something special, the whole time, a simple turn would draw your focus to the mysterious prize the parade outside is desperately pursuing! We’re many times like a little prince in his parent’s castle, mesmerized by the carefree ragamuffins laughing and romping in the streets, desperately attempting to drown out the cravings of their empty stomachs!

“Soul, what are you taking your delight in? Is your appetite betraying your loyalty to Yahweh? Is your focus fogging the cold window? Is Someone standing by with empty arms, expecting and awaiting your embrace?”

Soul Exchange

For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?

Matthew 16:26

This verse is a stark reminder that there are two different worlds clamoring for our soul's energies and devotion. An old song said, "Money can't buy me love..." Although some are not too sure of that, there are two different forces pulling on our soul. If we do not gain the proper amount of this world's goods, we will either starve or die of exposure. But don't get too much because the love of this world can replace the love of God.

Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.
1 John 2:15

The test of life is to balance our body's needs with our soul's requirements. Our soul can be tricked into forgetting that summer will pass and winter will come with all of its grasshopper-devastating harshness. Payday's a coming. What we see and feel in this physical world seems so real, we are tempted to forget that we will some day die and then eternity starts! Can we be good little ants and collect soul-need provisions along with meeting our body's boisterous demands? Of course, but it will require a continual reminder that we are not our body; we're just a transitory stranger, destined to claim our heavenly citizenship.

Esau, in the Old Testament, teaches us quite a lesson. His body outshouted his better sense. His soul was suckered into selling his birthright for a helping of stew. What if the hungry hunter had just been pondering the words of the old gospel hymn, “This world is not my home, I’m just a passin’ through...”? He might have had the gumption to tell his belly to shut up, that he was going to die someday, anyway, and that his spiritual heritage was far more important than one meal. If he had read the Bible (which wasn’t written yet) he would have known of Moses who went 80 days without eating, or Jesus who had fasted for forty days. He would have known he could survive even though he missed a good smelling dinner! What a picture he is of the danger of pampering our physical appetites!

Maybe we need to fast occasionally just to let our body know that our soul is the part that is going to last forever — not our body! Had Mr. Esau practiced fasting occasionally, his brother’s high priced meal would have been turned down as unnecessary and very over priced!

Our Esau-alter-ego counterpart needs to occasionally say the opposite of what Jacob’s brother said. Esau’s statement was, "What good will my birthright be to me if I die of hunger?" We need to be saying, “What good will all this physical stuff do me if I lose my eternal soul?” What good will the fleeting victories in a family argument be if I lose my soul? My family? What good will “always being right” and never having to say “I’m sorry” be if I check out with soul impaired? What good is it to save and scrim all your life for retirement if at retirement you have a heart attack and find yourself standing before God? What good will it be if you save your energy and worry about your safety, only to have the Lord accuse you of neglecting His kingdom?

What if I use all my manipulative skills to get the people around me to bow to my “all-knowing, all-seeing” will, and end up losing the game of life which centers around relationships, not in performing perfectly! What if love really is the greatest attribute, and holiness is second or third? What if I spend my life trying to “get” everybody to measure up to my standards and conveniently forget to love them in the process? Could I end up feeling shortchanged at the soul-exchange desk in heaven? “Yo, Soul, do you really think God is going to be impressed with your long list of “should’s and “oughts’s”? Will He dole out medals for those with a death-grip on the control panel of life? Holiness is important, but wasn’t the sin of the Pharisees that they put a greater emphasis on their performance than the worth of their fellow humans?

What is really worth exchanging your soul for, and how do we know if we are being tempted to exchange our soul for worldly junk? Some of the things before us are confusing. How do we know if we are living a healthy lifestyle, enjoying the bounty of the Lord or if we're out of balance? Let's look at what 1 Timothy 6:17 has to say...

Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy.

According to this verse it would be out of balance to not enjoy the blessings God gives you. The phrase "fix their hope on" takes us to another concern — trusting wealth to provide what only God can give. To exchange your soul for wealth is to give mammon (or money) the love and devotion that belongs only to Father God! Can you see the difficulty of living in balance? We are to enjoy the good things God gives us without trusting or hoping in them! The word "supplies" is to balance out the word "conceited." The proud man of possessions assumes that his own hustle got him his wealth, whereas the Spirit-filled believer gives all the credit for his blessings to his mighty Master. The first will exchange his soul for his pride, the second will get to enjoy his God in exchange for his love!

And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt."
Matthew 26:39

Personal safety, reputation, embarrassment, creature comforts, future, family, all were exchanged by Jesus to please His Father. When he got up from His knees in the garden, there was no doubt as to Who or what was first place in His life! This exchange of what He couldn't keep anyway ended up with His getting what He couldn't lose! I have fought to keep what I couldn't keep and failed to surrender instead and thus receive what I couldn't lose! How about you? Me thinks we humans make life a lot harder than we're supposed to!

How did Jesus sort through valid survival concerns and the risks of

seeking to please Father God? It really wasn't a matter for debate — His love made the choice before He ever came to the fork in the road! When we love the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, we're already made our exchange!

Anyone can glibly say, "Lord, I love You," but when the dawn of the new day is bringing crucifixion, it's an entirely different matter to prove your love! To say you love your mate is easy for most emotionally healthy folks. When it comes to allowing them to have the last word in an argument (discussion, excuse me), well, wait just a minute. We fuss and get religious and pious as though we have a right to stand our ground, a right to hold back from the sacrifice of love. How easy is it for you to make the sacrifice of love by letting others have the last word, when appropriate?

Let's say you have a heated disagreement with someone, and you honestly think that you are only about 10% (or less) at fault. How easy is it for you to admit your error (without pointing out their's)? This response calls for a love-motivated crucifixion of self! This cross is truly painful to bear — painful for our frail ego, but I believe it says a lot to Father God about our love and trust in Him. Do you agree? Do we show the Lord we trust Him when we give up our "right" to win an argument? It's for sure we're not trusting in our own power when we "let go" of always having to be in control!

Need we be reminded that in the garden, Jesus' prayer of submission was for the sake of the entire sinful human race? The example our Lord gave us was that the way to repair relationships when the fault is clearly the other person's, is for us to die! We could redo the prayer Jesus offered, and put ourselves in it: "Father, this person is absolutely wrong; they deserve to be punished, yet nevertheless, allow their cup to pass to me." Is that going too far?

I wonder how many family squabbles could be converted into salvation for the future of the relationship if the tug-o-war rope were not dropped, but used to pull the erring one closer in the bond of love? What do you suppose could result if we, the one who is obviously in the right, were to plant our attitudes and rights in the ground, as the seed of corn (see John 12:24)? If human relationships were designed by God to prepare us to love Him through out eternity, then getting along with others is eternally important! If we fail the exchange test with people, we'll be in trouble in eternity!

A picture I've used many times through the years is that of a person walking on a narrow wall. They are struggling to maintain their balance, so every pressure that comes against them will cause them to lean in the opposite direction. When we pull others toward our position, they instinctively pull away from us to maintain their inner balance. When we give love and acceptance to others, they typically react by leaning toward us. I know there are exceptions to this "rule" and there are times when the Father will have us respond in a manner that will surprise us (I think He likes to keep us on our toes!). If, however, we adopt this stance in the 99% of the normal situations of life, we will be overwhelmed by the new depth relationships take! Fights can be eliminated when we assume the demeanor of a supportive friend rather than an adversary or stern parent/boss. Exchanging our "rights" and "right-ness" for the sake of love, will provide great profit. Yes, there is a time for the stern parent/boss reaction, but it will be much more effective if it is the exception rather than the rule.

And the King will answer and say to them, "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me." Matthew 25:40

How can this verse help us do what my previous paragraph suggests? Simple, isn't it — just see Jesus in every situation! He's concerned about everyone, including you. He's concerned about how you treat your enemies because He's working with them right now trying to get them to love you! Imagine, He's pulling them one way, and we smart off and push them away! If we see ourselves in a team with the Holy Spirit, we will be able to exchange our agenda for His! Our failures for His successes!

There is a time to "get in someone's face," but I believe that the **first** line of attack needs to be the Jesus Exchange — my life for you, out of love, doing what I do as unto the Lord. Pulling back from a possible altercation first and praying like crazy will build a vacuum for love to flow into! If we can see the crisis as an opportunity to love God (and His kids, nice ones as well as not so nice ones) by doing nice things (i.e., turning away wrath with a soft answer), I believe it will be easier to avoid a bad soul exchange.

Because Jesus is involved in all of life, and because He linked loving

God with loving our neighbor, we can go no further into the love of God than our attitude and actions toward others. Do you want to go deeper into the love of God? (Of course, why else are you sticking with this study this long?) Then think of the person(s) you have the hardest time loving. See Jesus standing behind them, looking at you to see how you will handle the test of loving this person ‘as unto Jesus.’ Does this make sense? Try it! Do it for your Master!

When we exchange our pride for love, what kinds of things will happen? Will not God shift from resisting us to giving us His amazing grace? Have you ever felt like God was working against you? Maybe He had to because you were walking in pride. First Peter 5:5 says that God will resist us when we walk in pride, and He will give us grace when we humble ourselves. As we simply obey the command to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and our neighbor as our self, there is little room for pride, and thus less of an occasion for God to have to resist us! Where as pride puffs up, love builds up...*Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies* (1 Corinthians 8:1b).

The loving person looks for ways to build others up and quickly gives all the glory to God (out of love), so the law of sowing and reaping is triggered and massive amounts of mercy and grace flow into their life! It may appear as though the loving person leads a charmed life, but in actuality it’s just good farming!

So many of the things our soul craves are found hiding behind loving responses. Everyone needs to love, be loved and feel worthwhile. Take away any one of these essentials and problems quickly arise. From violence and rage to deep depression, we humans will malfunction when our internal craving for acceptance is denied. The simple law, ***Give and you shall receive***, becomes our guide to freedom or our evil taskmaster!

What will you exchange your soul for?

The Mind

*And you shall love the Lord your God
with all your heart, and with all your soul,
and with all your **mind**, and with all your
strength.*

Mark 12:30

We spend most of our life feeding and exercising our mind. Timetables, crossword puzzles, and even “Who Done It?” murder mysteries tax and exercise our brain. The mind, the part of us that accesses the brain, can learn many different languages, recognize thousands of shades of color, isolate myriads of odors. Our mental capacity is what schools center in on to develop.

The mind is that part of us that is looking out at the world through our eyes! It’s the secret place inside where we discuss and ponder. The mind, some say, is made up of intellect, emotions and will. I would like us to consider the mind a little differently. See the mind as a little person sitting at a control panel like Captain Jon Luke Picard, piloting the spaceship Enterprise! Our mind has a screen before it, most times filled with images of stuff that we call reality. Science tells us that though it may look like a solid tree, it is a bunch of atoms consisting mostly of empty space! Funny how solid it feels when our bike careens into it!

At night our mind can play reruns on it’s internal screen, and even coded messages, some of which are scary! When we wake up in the morning, we can sometimes play back the dreams we’ve had, though the image is faint. We talk about these things within our control room as though there were a staff present. These confabs are what’s called thinking! Have you ever felt like your thinking sessions were like a board

meeting?

Maybe there is a staff, an inner crew, poised and ready to guide our ship through asteroids and monsters, seeking new worlds to discover. Who is that over there? On board the Enterprise, one special person is Data, a no-nonsense computer resembling a human. Data is a much needed assistant. We spend so much of our life feeding this guy. He is full to overflowing with trivia, and he isn't bashful about sharing more than we care to hear! He's been accused of being a bore! He's been known to interrupt at the craziest moments. Just as we are about to experience a breakthrough in communication with our sweetheart, Data pops off with some irrelevant comment that changes the whole flow of the moment. I think Data is easily embarrassed. If our facts are not well received, he hides, pouts, and says some pretty inflammatory stuff in the recesses of our control room!

If only we could talk Data into spending more time sitting at the feet of Jesus — LISTENING! He needs to memorize and practice James 1:19 *...be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger*. If we could get Data, that part of us that loves the sense of control that comes from knowledge, to fall in love with “The Truth,” wow! We know God's people perish for a lack of knowledge (Data tells us that enough), we just need our minds to focus more on meaningful knowledge. Some have squandered their resources seeking to determine how many angels could sit on the head of a pin, while deep soul needs went unfulfilled. I think others spend so much time trying to predict the exact time of Christ's return that they don't have enough time to get ready for Him!

First Corinthians 8:1 gives a warning to our minds...

Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.

A humble admission is that it is far too easy for me to allow Data to work for hours on a sermon, and rarely turn to the indwelling Spirit and ask for His input! What's wrong with this picture? It surely can't be peddled as “loving the Lord God with all my mind!” I may need the assistance of someone else onboard this inner ship. What I sense the Lord suggesting to us is that we use the other parts of our personality to ride herd on the “no nonsense” part as well as the “trivia” tyrant. Our heart

must continually encourage our mind to keep Jesus in the picture. We must not turn our mind off — that would be ignorant as well as dangerous, but how about a little cooperation?

The enemy targets the heart for he knows that the heart can quickly and easily overpower the mind! This inner contest of our crew members, each with their weaknesses and strengths, is why the Word calls for every part to be employed in loving God! When the “inner us” (Captain) is about to be pinned down by an emotional temptation, we need the strongman called “strength” to come a running — the will! For when the will is set, neither love nor money can budge a person! A strong enough “will” pays the ultimate sacrifice rather than survive!

The mind is that part of us that makes choices and directs our focus, but it takes orders from our will (strength), and suggestions from the heart. Romans 8:6 in the New American Standard Bible puts the final responsibility on our mind: *For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.* The mind can **set** its focus, therefore, the mind can choose. I'm talking about these four aspects of our personality (heart, soul, mind and strength) as though they are clearly delineated, when in reality, they flow together and act interdependently.

The mind can do some pretty powerful things. Jesus proved this while on the cross. Even through extreme pain, He set His focus on the joy awaiting Him (Hebrews 12:2). Our mind can shift its focus from physical events to the realm of the spirit. We say that the mind can play tricks on a person, meaning that it can venture to a place of unreality. My question is, what is reality? The world we see, or the unseen world of the spirit? What do you think God considers more “real,” His spiritual realm or our physical world? My guess is He'd say the spirit kingdom is eternally more real!

If our standard for judging “reality” is what we see, feel or reason, then much of what the Bible describes is unreal and impossible! Faith chooses to put more confidence in the unseen world of the spirit. The mind of Jesus reached into the heavenlies and appropriated God's grace and joy during His grueling time on the cross! The mind that loves Father God obeys Him by looking this way...

While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

2 Corinthians 4:18

According to the Holy Spirit, which world is more real, our physical world, or the world of the spirit? If the unseen world created this physical world, then to deny what we see and affirm what God says, not only makes more sense, it also is the only way we can show Father God that we love and respect Him. Think about it for a minute. If I say I love the awesome Creator yet discount His Word, His promise to me, am I not reducing Him to a position somewhere below my physical senses? If you were God, would you be very excited about helping someone who thought less of you than their own fickle feelings?

The temptation for the person going through a great difficulty is to place their feelings, their pain, their sensations of despair above the reality of God's presence because the physical yells louder. Though this is common and very understandable, it not only denies the Lord's promises, but it also separates them from His power, because He operates by faith! When we are going through strong temptations, we will either deny God's Word or we'll deny the sensations associated with the temptation! Which response clearly shows Father God that we love Him with all of our mind?

As for you, my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and serve Him with a whole heart and a willing mind; for the Lord searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will reject you forever. 1 Chronicles 28:9

The words *willing mind* and *intent of the thoughts* can give us encouragement. We want to win every struggle and emerge the overwhelming conqueror, yet in reality, every knowledgeable believer realizes that they will slip and fall. In fact, the greater confidence we have in our ability to keep from falling, the greater our risk of falling (1 Corinthians 10:12). In theory, athletes say that how you play the game is more important than if you win. Right. It sounds good because it's true. The end does not justify the means. If you win the game but demonstrated poor sportsmanship, then you have really lost. Our verse above is saying that God knows our inner struggle. He understands how hard it is for us to believe what we can't see over against what we see with our physical eyes

and feel strongly with our emotions.

Does your mind entertain self-justification thoughts when you mess up, or does it declare that without Jesus you can't do anything? When we make excuses for our failures, it's as though we really believe in our innate ability to succeed and we're trying to convince others! The mind that truly loves God will instead quickly repent and acknowledge that only Abba's love and grace is sufficient.

Let's say your four year old is trying to put a puzzle together, but is totally unable to even start. Every effort to try to help is met with an bratty "No! I can do it by myself." How long would it take you to pull back and allow them to go it on their own? Love is not the attribute you're picking up when you hear the "No, I can do it myself." Not only is it not love, such a response will push you back. The mind that pushes God away is in for a rude awakening!

When you crash and are tempted to add depression to your list of failures, will feeling bad show God that your are dependant upon His grace and mercy or that you are self-centered? When the little brat throws a temper tantrum and hurls the puzzle out the window, you will be ready to administer chastisement rather than love and affection. We want a close relationship with our Savior, but if we're pouting because things didn't go our way, He will not condone our misbehavior.

Because Father God knows my thoughts and intents, I will only pass the tests of life when I deny the inner raging of failure and worship Him. Yahweh separates out my feelings from the response of my will. I believe He sees the cluttered mind like a dirty car. We pass the tests of life for how we drive rather than how spotless our car is — especially when we live on such dirty roads! A simple response of, "Father, I messed up again, and I know it's because I was not relying on You...please forgive me... please help me...." will demonstrate our love and dependance on Him. Our mind can do this!

The following verse makes it appear as though there is a separate part of our personality that can direct our mind:

I directed my mind to know, to investigate, and to seek wisdom and an explanation, and to know the evil of folly and the foolishness of madness. Ecclesiastes 7:25

Perhaps our soul or our strength (will) is what tells our mind to concentrate on a particular pastime. The old adage, “Me, myself and I, we three...”, is closer to the truth than we imagined. The Bible is clearly painting a picture of internal interaction. Some call this “self-talk,” I call it preaching to our self. There are times when something inside of me goes on and on: “Get off your duff and start exercising!” Finally, to stop the clamor, my body meanders over to the treadmill and reluctantly begins. Do you prod yourself into action? Is there an inner uprising when the obstinate, lazy part of you throws a rebellious fit? Spiritual maturity is when we encourage the “good guy” to win!

The mind can trigger emotions. If our heart is our emotional response, then what our mind focuses on will cause a reaction in our heart. This is probably why Jesus said that our eye is the light of the whole body (Luke 11:34-36), and the Psalmist would put no worthless things before his eyes (Psalm 101:3). The first epistle of John (2:16) mentions “the lust of the eyes.” In the Old Testament story of Lot (Genesis 13:12 KJV), pitching his tent facing the wicked city of Sodom started the process that pulled him into the den of iniquity.

Our eyes feed information to our brain, to which the devil can add his temptation thoughts. For King David, his eyes, focusing on a neighbor in her Jacuzzi, had additional input from the prince of darkness. All manner of appetites were stirred up within him as he watched. What if he had purposely turned his physical focus from Bathsheba to a copy of the Torah, laying on the top of his desk. Would the change in focus have been strong enough to give him the victor’s edge? What if the king had reached out to a spiritual friend for prayer support during his weakness? Just the shift of focus off of the source of temptation would have give him the winner’s edge! What we focus on will kill us or save us! Stir us for God or arouse us for evil! Watch what you watch! “Mind, be careful what you look at!”

Why do TV producers have their cameras angled in such a way that the mind is teased into desiring to know what lies behind the concealment? Yes, and every makeup company believes the Bible verse, *...man looketh on the outward appearance* (1 Samuel 16:7 KJV). The eyes give information to the mind, and the rest of the team (soul, heart, and strength), join the mind in creating something from the raw materials. To love God with all of our mind therefore, must begin with being careful as to what enters our mind through our eye-gate. Then the mind must perform regular “virus checks” for enemy “bugs” planted to distract,

divide and destroy! What kinds of “eye-traps” and “mind-virus” do you fight most?

*The steadfast of mind Thou wilt keep in perfect peace,
because he trusts in Thee. Isaiah 26:3*

Would not this verse require at least a third member to our inner self? A part that directs the mind? Do you see the progression? Part of me directs my mind on to Yahweh, and the result is peace, an emotional heart response. This part of our personality is what can dig through the files of stored memories of our mind: *Do not call to mind the former things, or ponder things of the past* (Isaiah 43:18). Why? Because the mind that ponders past failures and traumas will produce emotions that will steal, kill and destroy! Don’t make the devils work easier!

The language of Isaiah 43:18 reveals that part of us can bring to the discussion table old information for our mind to ponder. Putting these two verses together, I see that something in our inner council chambers can jump up and demand that our mind shift its focus away from that which will cause damage. Would this be our “new” self? Maybe it is the Holy Spirit prodding our conscience. Regardless of who or what it is, our success at winning the inner war and passing the tests of life depends upon this inner “coach” outshouting and out manipulating the negative forces.

God is well aware of this inner turmoil and He rewards us accordingly:

*I, Yahweh, search the heart, I test the mind, even to
give to each man according to his ways, according to the
results of his deeds. Jeremiah 17:10*

Our outward deeds are the direct result of our inner conclusions. We can't stop the enemy from putting thoughts into our mind, but we will be held responsible for what we do with them: *Thus says Yahweh God, "It will come about on that day, that thoughts will come into your mind, and you will devise an evil plan..."* (Ezekiel 38:10). If we love God with all of our mind, we will demand that the inner council discussions decide in favor our relationship with Him, rather than what Peter did...

But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." Matthew 16:23

We are responsible for what our mind settles in on — we turn the dial! We can change our focus! During the good times, the seasons when the battle is in a lull, stock up provisions for the next wave of harassment! Preach yourself happy!

Tricks of the Mind

*And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your **mind**, and with all your strength.*

Mark 12:30

“Your mind is playing tricks on you!” Perhaps the person who is targeted by such a response is hallucinating or lost in a dream world. We know the mind can be fooled — just ask any magician! We think we see or hear something and then we act accordingly. This aspect of the mind can spark family arguments, destroy longstanding friendships, and even get us locked up in a funny farm! I am continually amazed by people who say I said something in a particular sermon. I will go back and re-listen to the message and I never hear what they heard preached. It’s as though we all look at life through our own special glasses; or should I say hear through our own special filters!

What I want us to consider is how the mind’s ability to go contrary to the mainstream of life can be tapped to help us love the Lord our God with all of our mind. To take the magician’s tricks for an example, let’s say we are fooled by one of a maestro’s slight-of-hand gimmicks. We later learn how the trick was performed. If we ever see the trick again, we will not be fooled because our mind will remind us of how we were deceived before.

I have used this skill while watching scary movies. When I sense terror tippy-toe-ing into my mind, I begin inner chitchat about how the movie was made and how all the cameramen were standing around with the producers, trying to figure out how to fool me into getting scared.

Immediately, my mind gets its point across and the fear subsides. I am once again in control. Yes! All because my trusty old mind told me not to be fooled by what I see or hear.

Ready for a heavy question? “What is reality?” Is reality what we see? Are not the things around us made up of invisible atoms? Like the Bible says:

By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible. Hebrews 11:3

There is a reality that obviously exists apart from what we can see. As Christians, we believe that the spiritual realm is eternal and this 4-dimensional world is temporal, passing:

...while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal. 2 Corinthians 4:18

Because the promises of God are spirit (John 6:63), we know they are eternal and the ultimate reality! Like the magician’s debunked tricks, so we can debunk the devil’s discouraging, derailling antics when we realize with our mind that God is true and our senses are lying to us. The Word says that God is faithful to cleanse us from all unrighteousness as we confess our sin, and that He casts our iniquities away from us as far as the East is from the West. Therefore, when guilt continues to nag us, either we did not confess the right sin, or the accuser of the brethren is playing a trick on us.

Which is more real: God’s Word of promise or the feelings of guilt? If guilt is a problem, take some time to deal with it. We never want to harden our hearts to the Holy Spirit, but to allow the devil to use your conscience as a punching bag is not good. Quiet yourself, submit everything to Father God, resist the devil in Jesus’ name, then ask the Lord if there is some unconfessed sin that is causing the inner problem. As you wait quietly before the Lord, He may reveal a bad attitude, poor seed sown, or some such thing. If so, confess what is appropriate. If needed,

make restitution. Then, when the feelings of guilt pop up, send the trouble-making spirit to the abyss!

Dealing wisely with our feelings is important because of the effect they can have on our love relationship with Father God. If we feel He is upset with us, we will hold back. I know we are not supposed to build our faith on feelings, but feelings have a very big place in relationships. The closer the relationship, the more we listen to our feelings. A wife will say to her husband, “What’s wrong?,” when no one else even has a clue that the old boy is working through some heavy issues. The feelings we have will greatly influence which direction we take: deeper into God or run for the bushes. Emotions can be a very cruel taskmaster. Satan can use the feeling-dominated mind the way a crook would enjoy a parked car left unlocked with the engine running. He doesn’t have to do much work!

Feelings can be like a poison apple slipped to us by the evil dark lord of this world. If we bite into the feelings he gives us, we might be heard to say “I’m bored. I need some excitement. Maybe I need... (fill in the blank with something less than wholesome).” Our foe wants to trick us into filling our mind with his lies until we get a mental picture that distorts reality. Fear and worry can be easily transformed into monsters by a deluded mind. Words from the tempter can go over and over in our mind and finally produce a mental picture that is both deadly as well as unreal. Remember, all he has to do is to trick us into getting our focus off of truth. The devil’s apples may look exceptionally delicious, but they are poisoned. Only the God of the Bible gives us all things to enjoy.

Addictions may be more a mental picture than an actual chemical “need.” The addict sees themselves as a victim, as chained, as a failure or slave. We humans can develop a taste for poison apples to the point where our mind plays the ultimate trick on us — we grow to desire that which will kill us spiritually as well as physically. Such bondage has a little message encoded within it that says, “I really need this!” Somewhere down the line the devil will add something to the inner confusion by saying “I know God doesn’t want me to do this, but He must not like me very much or He would say it’s OK for me to do this.” Our enemy’s goal is to get us to believe that God is trying to keep something good from us, or that He made us with a “need” for something that is wrong.

We won’t be able to love God with all of our mind if our mind is tricked into believing that there is something valuable “out there” that God won’t give us! Small children sometimes tell their parents that they hate

them if they don't get what they want. We call such a child a brat, but the truth is, we can threaten God in the secret place of our heart that we will pull back from Him if He doesn't bless us certain ways. Can you see the two sides of the evil magician's tricks — obvious, outward sin or pulling away because God is supposedly holding out on us!

Now, let's look at this mental ability to become "addicted" from a beneficial angle. What if there was something that didn't appear to be very valuable, but was extremely important. Could we convince our mind to become addicted to it? Sure, we do it all the time. Think for a minute of something you couldn't stand as a kid, but now you are practically addicted to. What brought on the change? Can you think of some steps we could take to make ourselves addicted to that which isn't very appealing to the flesh but that is eternally important? We must see some value in the behavior. We can make up mental games to make almost anything more enjoyable. And, it helps to hang around people with similar likes, standards and goals.

One of the terms used to describe the mind's ability to count something as true when in actuality it is not is called denial. We say that a person is in denial when they insist the relationship is fine while their mate is filing for a divorce! This is classic denial. But what if the person has been fooled into believing that what they see is more real than what the Bible says is eternally true? This happens all the time, doesn't it! People live like there is no God, no hell to miss or heaven to reach.

Can we turn this around and use the power of the mind to go against the currents of life and convince ourselves that the invisible kingdom of God is worth any sacrifice? Can we maneuver our fleshly mind into seeing the unseen? If faith is believing what is invisible (real, but invisible), can we use the power of denial to build our faith?

Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. {17} For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, {18} while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal. 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.

Sure! Instead of losing heart, we can change our focus from the momentary, light afflictions to things that are not seen. Eternal blessings are ours! Paul tells us that God's grace will show us how to use this mental ability in our favor:

*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to **deny** ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age. Titus 2:11,12*

Does ungodliness exist? Sure, but grace tells us that its claims are not authentic! Sin's promises that appear to upstage the Word of God are not real or lasting! There will be no ungodliness in heaven, therefore its claims of fulfillment are false! To believe sin's lies is to be in denial. Does unrighteousness bring lasting happiness, security, or honor? Of course not! Therefore, ungodliness is a lie, a deception, an unreality! When we deny sin, though it pitches a fit, we are actually denying the greatest unreality!

We see this truth working easily for those who know the horrors of alcoholism. Raised by drunks, but with eyes open to the reality behind the pressure to drink, such a young person will not be fooled into chasing after the alcohol crowd. If the child of an alcoholic believes the same lie as their deluded parent, they will follow the path of destruction right behind their drunk parent! If you really believe there's death in the bottle, you won't drink it unless you want to die!

All humans use this ability of the mind to override what appears to be factual at some point or another. When we watch a movie and we want to be entertained, we close down our critical mind. We say, "fool me." Likewise, most everybody has some areas where they haven't learned to use their mind's ability to deny to their advantage. Fear, panic and stress dog our heels occasionally. Our need is to use the mind's ability to deny "facts" and receive the greater truth — "Nothing is impossible for our God; I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me; God is working everything together for my good!" Our Bible-trained mind can take God's grace more seriously than life's stresses!

To love God with all of our mind is to simply use this tremendous ability of our mind to deny everything that tries to push Him out of center stage in our life! For mother Eve, all she needed to do was to deny the snake's input — "You're a liar, you stupid snake!" For King David, when

tempted by Bathsheba's beauty, the need was to deny that this woman had anything more to offer than any one of his wives could provide. Such denial pulls back the magician's shroud and yells — "Gotcha!"

Our body says we're going to die if we don't have some sweets. We deny such a ridiculous claim, and affirm that what we need is more of God — "O taste and see that the Lord is good." I must admit that this one has been a lot harder for me. It's much easier for me to deny the call of asparagus! But, when we're real serious about sticking with a diet, we do deny the call of the calories! We just say no. Can we do with Satan's "sweets" what we do with luring chocolates? You can if you want!

To love God with all of our mind is not that we won't feel the tug toward sin, but rather that we deny its claim. It may take some sobering hog-slopping (remember the prodigal son) to break the spell of the devil's magic, but if we learn that true happiness, security, love, and blessings are only to be found deep in the heart of Father God, we'll win! We can overpower our trickster enemy by renewing our mind daily with the Word of God. His promises are ours for the believing and receiving! Single-minded faith can have whatever it believes, and to stay single-minded only requires the skill of denial! Let God be true and every man a liar! We could add ...and every feeling, thought, impression, or suggestion that goes contrary to the Word of God, is a lie!

The mind can be trained to set emotions aside during a crisis, as witnessed by EMTs, doctors, and other emergency personnel. If they can do this as a vocation, can we not do it out of love for the most awesome, true God? When emotions storm our castle, demanding we take them serious, we can do what every fireman is trained to do — walk right into the fire -- only we can spray God's grace all over the place! Try this mixture of denial and faith the next time everything seems like it's falling apart — shout "Grace, grace" to it! (See Zechariah 4:6,7). Out shout the storms with God's promises! People may think you're crazy, until your mountain moves!

And finally, a very tremendous trick of our mind is its God-given ability to rewrite the past. We know this is possible when we hear our kids retell how we raised them! But the Bible admonishes us to use this ability for the Lord's glory.

that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in

accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. Ephesians 4:22-24

The past is the past and the facts are written down in heaven's archives, but how we perceive it can torment us with a lifetime of should's and wishes that certain things had never happened. Our mind can sort through the rubble with Jesus at our side, as He shows us how truly all things did work together for our good! The Holy Spirit can give us new eyes to see how the swamp can be recycled into peat moss. The mind can be trained to not revel in failure (ours or those of others), but rather see by faith the greater picture of grace!

Think of a diamond. Once a lump of coal. But the humble coal was once living, breathing plants and animals that were trapped beneath tons of rock, dirt and debris. The harsh pressure and heat turned the living, vital organisms into coal and then, extreme pressure forced the organic atoms into a gem of super hardness and beauty. When properly ground and polished, the diamond can fascinate us with the refraction of light from its inner beauty!

Do this with hurts from the past! Force them with the pressure and help of God to pass from death to life. From coal to diamonds! Push out every lie that says your are hindered from future success by past failures. Squeeze darkness out of your life with the power of light. Deny hurts, depression, addictions, lusts, critical thoughts, vile thoughts the right to exist in your mind! Victim? Pile the Word of God on so high that the very concept of being a victim is transformed into a gemstone for Jesus!

The Strength

*And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your **strength**.*

Mark 12:30

What does it mean to love God with all our strength? Is this a reference to using our physical muscles? We know that our unseen spirit can prompt physiological responses, such as raising our hands in worship. Is this what the verse means, worship God with physical responses? Or could this refer to the times when a great emergency takes place and otherwise normal people are able to perform great feats of strength?

To love God with all our strength could include both our actual, physical strength, such as shouting with a loud voice (Psalm 47:1), clapping with our hands (see the same verse), and even dancing (Exodus 15:20). This kind of strength could also include a spiritual passion that will pay a great price to reach a goal. We could paraphrase the verse to say, “What flips your switch? What drives you? What causes you to keep going, remain faithful, pay a price, take a lickin’ and keep on tickin’? Give that to God — offer Him the part of yourself that supercharges you!

Someone could tell us they are really happy, and we might respond, “I wish you'd tell your face!” If I say I love God with all my strength, it would seem that some physical manifestation would be observable. When we “feel something strongly,” it is observable in our bodies. The science of polygraphs, or lie detectors, works off this assumption. Psychology has coined the term “body language” to refer to physical manifestations that

result from what our mind is thinking. So, if my inner person is truly loving Father God, my body should in some way verify it! My “strength” should agree!

The Word says that if I have faith to move mountains but have not love I am empty and unprofitable. Therefore, there are clearly two aspects or arenas where we must be involved if we are to love God with all of our strength: outward and inner; physical and non-physical. Look at James 1:26 & 27. How does this verify what the last paragraph said?

If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. {27} This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

From the verses in James (above), we could say God is not looking for “religious discounts.” He wants more from us. If I just think about doing something loving, but never physically have any corresponding actions, it is meaningless. The picture of wholeness must include inner as well as outer actions. This is the strength of love. Even if my faith is so strong that mountains run from me, yet I lack the deep love and devotion toward Abba and His kids, then my “strength” is somewhere else! We need to ask — “What gets that kind of action?” What do I spend my time and money on? Who or what gets my best involvement? My strength?

What part of our personality could we call our strength? Our will? We say someone is “strong-willed.” Could we offer up to God our strong will as a form of praise? This is what the preacher calls for at an altar service. We may not want to go forward at the invitation (“What will people think?”), but the invisible part of us pressures our will to prod our physical frame in journeying to the front of the church. Our spiritual response is translated into a physical manifestation that requires the use of corporeal strength. If God says to go to the altar, and if our love is proved by our obedience, then to love Him with all of our strength is to pry loose our white knuckles and make the long walk up the aisle!

Do not give your strength to women, or your ways to that which destroys kings. Proverbs 31:3

The author of the Proverbs cautions men to not give their strength to women (31:3). What is this strength? For a graphic picture, we can revisit Mr. Samson. If ever a man literally gave his strength to women, it was he. Before we consider the main point of the story of his deception, consider that his girlfriend, Delilah, did not love him. Even in our day and age, you don't sellout someone you love for a few bucks. He was only a meal ticket for her! She was a prostitute and he was just another client.

Delilah was bribed and threatened by the men of her town to discover the secret of Samson's strength. To accomplish this, she gave him her physical affection, and then, acting like someone who had a right to his loyalty, asked him to divulge his innermost secrets. Did she have a right to the knowledge of this secret? Does having sex with someone give them certain "rights" with their partner? Perhaps that's why God warns against becoming "one flesh" with a harlot (see 1 Corinthians 6:15-17).

Samson told her three different lies as to how his strength could be drained off. Delilah tried each technique, to no avail. What on earth was Samson thinking as this gal tries each of these procedures to destroy his strength — "Oh, she's only playing around!" He may have been the strongest man who ever live, but he sure wasn't very perceptive! Perhaps Samson was "so in love" that his rational thinking abilities were out to lunch. "So in lust" might be more like it! Why do you think he gave in? Do you think this man was all brawn and no brain?

If you tell someone how they can render you helpless and they try it, doesn't that reveal less than noble intentions? Three times? And we're not talking about something that is quickly reversible, like taking Kryptonite away from Superman. We're looking at growing back a head of hair after a bad haircut!

Delilah's classic line was...*How can you say, "I love you," when your heart is not with me? You have deceived me these three times and have not told me where your great strength is* (Judges 16:15). Are we looking at a one-sided love, or what? By her actions she was saying, "Prove your love for me by letting me render you helpless for a couple of years — and by the way, you are surrounded by your mortal enemies!"

And it came about when she pressed him daily with her words and urged him, that his soul was annoyed to death. So he told her all that was in his heart... Judges 16:16,17

The kicker was that he was somehow convinced that it was important that he tell her the secret of his strength! We see here not only the power of nagging (as in Luke 18:1-8), but also Delilah's ability to elicit trust from Samson. Was it the way she batted her eyes or did she use body language to imply that it was in his best interest to comply?

I have a theory that lovers use a similar regimentation to get what they want early on in their relationship, but tire of it or wear it out as time passes. Married couples are seen frequently resorting to temper tantrums, pouting, stonewalling silent treatment, or withholding affection. Why the change? Is the use of "love" tactics too humbling? Does "acting" loving make one too vulnerable? Whatever Delilah used on Samson was powerful enough to render helpless the strongest man who ever lived! Perhaps King Lemuel had Samson in mind when he wrote... *Do not give your strength to women, or your ways to that which destroys kings!*

Do you agree that most couples eventually stop trying to "get things" from their mate using love and turn to other methods for motivation? What do you think is the most common method used for motivation? I would say intimidation appears to be the manipulative tool of choice!

Delilah did not withhold her physical favors because he would not tell her the secret of his strength. No, she withheld something else. The question we need to ask is, what made Samson give the secret of his strength, and in fact, his actual, physical strength, to Delilah? She was after a strength behind his strength. She wanted Samson to give her the contents of his heart — his ultimate strength. I believe that this is what God is calling for from us — to love Him with all of our strength! Love Him with all that motivates us — the secrets of our heart — the secrets of our strength — the secret of what motivates us! And why should we? Because of something similar to that which Delilah held out in front of Samson? The promise of total love and acceptance! Yes, a place of total acceptance that is identical to what we give to Abba! We open up our inner security codes to Him, He opens up the secret codes to heaven's wealth!

What hooked Samson? What conned him into revealing his secret? He wanted to please her! Her nagging was saying, in so many words, "I will not be happy, complete, fulfilled, apart from this secret knowledge. Give me this and I will be complete." Psychologists tell us that men desire to make women happy. It may not seem so, but Samson is a case in point. Why give this prostitute the formula that would make him impotent?

Surely not because she threatened to cut him off from physical favors. He could take up with another woman. No, she hooked him into caring about pleasing her. **He fell in love with the idea that he could please her!** Men get pleasure in thinking that they can make a woman happy. Prostitutes tap into this for money, and their long-term career success depends on their ability to convince the sucker that he is “some kind of lover!” The reverse of this is what turns most men off when they feel that their wife is bored.

What kinds of problems arise if one feels they can't please their lover? I don't want to get into a sex-therapy lesson, but my point is that there is something so powerful that a man will sell his soul for it, give his strength for it, and God is calling for that from us! “You please me! You maximize me! You thrill me! You're everything I need!” These can be words of praise from the lips of one totally lost in worship of Father God, or the words of one drunk with passion for their lover!

Can you see how strength is tied into love? The woman is saying to her husband, “If you want to make me happy, pick up your clothes you threw on the floor.” If he doesn't, she might withhold, not physical affection, but her real strength — her feelings of appreciation that surface in her tone of voice, body language, nuances, and yes, even passion. What is called the act of love can be performed with almost no strength, no passion, no real love. Remove this aspect from a relationship, and the “animal” expression of mating becomes tiresome and even boring.

I won't ask you if you agree or disagree with the last statement, but I wonder if you can think of what one might withhold to penalize their lover — something perhaps not that obvious — being outwardly compliant, but withholding something. A similar thing happened to King Solomon. We are told that he loved many women. He took wives and concubines totaling a thousand. His need, apparently, was not physical. The women represented something, yet they obviously could not give him what he was after — maybe because he could not give them what they were after — not even a thousand of them! The sad conclusion of the story was where the wild goose chase ended. We are told that they led him off into worshipping false gods — idols. What? How could the wisest man on earth fall for such a thing?

If Samson's strength was physical, then Solomon's was mental. But, both of these guys sold out their life, and thus ultimately their utmost strength, for something else. What was it? That which the object of their affections was withholding from them! Total intimacy, not mere physical

closeness, was the hook. In both men, there was the need to “get” something from the woman before them — and it wasn't their body! It was their affection! Their total person. The part they were withholding. The affection that resided in the secret place of their heart!

The wives of King Solomon were saying, in fashion similar to Delilah, “Give me what I ask for and I will give you all of me.” The unspoken promise was a total surrender in order to get a total surrender in return. But, most humans cannot give this commodity apart from a spiritual enablement from God. If we're lost in the ocean of God's love we will have enough love to spare and will give virtually unconditional love, affection, and acceptance. Young lovers can give this kind of love briefly, but endurance calls for a deeper source. The river flowing from the belly must be like the water from the rock that quenched the thirst of millions for years in the desert — directly connected to God's heart!

This is what God is asking for from each of us! Give to Him that part that you are withholding. God is making a “deal” cover to cover in the Bible. Give Him your all — your mind, body and affections — and He in turn, will give you the fullness of His Kingdom!

THE MISSING KEY

This is the greatest source of frustration in human relationships. People are seeking the secret of their mate's strength and their mate doesn't have a clue as to what the secret of their own strength is! Wives pull from their husbands, looking for the secret of his strength. They clamor for “more communication”, thinking, as Delilah, that in the abundance of words, there will be the clue to the husband's strength. And, sure enough, if the old boy talks long enough, she finds out what makes him tick. What triggers his affection. Her pulling may actually open his eyes as well as his heart.

The problem with humans seeking and giving their strength is that we are in search of something more than physical and more than human! And, bigger than this, Someone greater than human beings is looking for this total intimacy from us! Until His search is satisfied, He will continue to nag us! Until we open up the totality of our affections to Him, He, like the persistent wife, will draw and pull. Our spirit will feel His pressure. Our complete satisfaction will remain aloof until we allow His key to open the lock of our heart and affections! We allow Him to satisfy us! Give us

pleasure. We give Him what He wants — He gives us what we want!

*The eyes of Yahweh search the whole earth in order to
strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to Him...*
2 Chronicles 16:19 NLT

What's God looking for? What is every human looking for? Unconditional love! How do we get this for our Heavenly Father, or for a special human being? I believe it's rather simple. You don't have to agree with me, but I'd like you to think about it and try this with your God, and if your married, your spouse. Get you out of the picture! Not that you pull away from the object of your love, but instead quit thinking of them selfishly. "What's in it for me" will kill a relationship. Falling in love is tied to wanting to please one special person more than one's self. Most of us can't maintain this posture for very long — thus the enviable honeymoon crash!

THE PLAN

Try this. Think of your lover. Ask yourself, "How can I make them happy?" What can I "do" to give them pleasure? Say their name to yourself, and then add, "I love you more than life!" Think of something that would be out of character for you that you know they would truly enjoy. As you start making plans to do it, check your love level — wow! It's grown. Just speaking love and thinking of ways to show your love has started the flow of love. The more you do this the greater the flow. Your "will" (your strength) opens the flood gates of love. Emotional love can be increased on purpose by thinking, "seeing" and acting loving.

The sad thing is that it takes two for a zingy romance! Marriages that fall on hard times may require brain transplants as well as heart transplants! If one concerned party tries to rekindle the fire of romance long dead (or perhaps it never sparked), but the other participant in the relationship refuses to play the game, the spurned lover will be able to understand how God felt with wayward Israel! It doesn't take long before you have to quit trying — God did! The Bible's reality check is that not every story has a happy ending! Though you may not be able to resurrect a dead marriage, you can always win with Father God — in fact, this is why

he made us in the first place!

Imagine a dusty marriage where both parties get zapped with the Holy Spirit in a church service. Suddenly they want to try again. Overnight they begin seeking how to put the other's needs and desires before theirs. There will be a tremendous flow of love. Romance advance! Does it take much imagination for you to shift this drama to you and your God?

Things have been so-so between you and your Source. The sparkles and electricity have trickled away. The buoyancy of expectation that lovers feel has been missing from your relationship with your Creator. You try the steps above...

Think of your God.

Ask yourself, "How can I make Him happy?"

"What can I "do" to give Him pleasure?"

Say His name to yourself, and then add, "I love you more than life!"

Think of something that would be out of character for you that you know He would truly enjoy. Picture yourself doing it for this awesome God! Then, just DO IT!

A Love that hates

If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple.

Luke 14:26

How could Jesus ever ask us to hate our families as a requirement to be His disciple? Furthermore, the second verse that comprises our theme for this work tells us to love others as we love ourselves. If we hate our own life, what does that leave for others?

I have always felt that our Lord's words were meant as a comparison/contrast; that we're to love Him so much that our families might get the impression that we could care less about them. Through the years I have observed families come to grips with a member joining forces with Jesus. Frequently, shock waves go through the "business as usual" lifestyle. In my own pilgrimage, the folks, at least at one point, felt that I had gone off the deep end. What about you? Has anyone ever looked at you as though you had lost some of your marbles, because of your love for Jesus?

It's funny how the word fanatic can be used in our society with double meaning. If it is used regarding a sports hero, it is a high compliment. When thrown at a dedicated Christian, it reeks with sarcasm and belittlement. To set aside other pursuits, even normal, socially acceptable and often times needful pursuits, in search of a dream, is the highest form of dedication; unless, that is, if you are seeking more of Jesus! Have you seen this double-standard in society? If so, why do you

think it exists? I think the world has a little encouragement from our sworn enemy, Beelzebub!

A coach might be heard to utter words similar to Luke 14:26 as he inaugurates football's notorious "hell week." What a noble challenge for our young people as they set aside other activities in order to gain mastery on the gridiron! I can hear the gruff voice of the coach bark out orders that the football season was going to curtail their love-life, their diet was coming under massive scrutiny, and that if they couldn't stand a little pain, they might just as well turn in their jersey. Proud parents admire their stoic athletes for the great sacrifice. All this, and not only is it for a prize that tarnishes, it can leave their precious heir with life-long disabilities!

Have you ever pursued an activity or goal that required a great sacrifice? If so, did anybody get after you for neglecting other responsibilities or relationships? That just goes with the territory, doesn't it! So, what is Jesus asking from us? Literal hatred? Of course not. We are expected to take every part of God's Word in the context of His overall will. Picture a parent trying to have a conversation with their teenager who was just caught breaking the family's rules. If the teen quotes their parent out of context in order to justify their disobedience, somebody's going to get angry! The parent tells the wayward youth that they know all too well what the family's values are. Situation ethics are a luxury for those who do not have parents who care! The parent will probably say something like, "You know how we feel about this!" In a similar way, if we use this verse as an excuse for being mean or irresponsible, we'll be in trouble with Jesus! He frequently used shock techniques to get His disciples' attention.

Whatever Jesus means by this verse (Luke 14:26), it cannot mean to literally hate our family. The whole Bible commands us to love everyone — even our enemies — how much more our families. If one does not take care of their own they are worse than an unbeliever (1 Timothy 5:8). To hate, therefore, means that the discipline of discipleship will leave your family and friends thinking that you chose Jesus over them. They most likely will not be able to admire your zeal for feeling rejection and jealousy.

In a recent men's Bible study I was in, the material being considered implied that a Christian might be making an improper choice to go into the medical field if the price were too high. The Bible study book asked the question: If studies took too much time away from the family, could God possibly want the pre-med student to continue? The author was

suggesting that a couple of years of putting family in a second place position was too high of a price to pay to become a doctor. I think the author was a bit idealistic. When you're on the operating table, don't you hope your surgeon is one of those who paid the price to get all they could from their education? While the student is knee deep in time consuming studies, wouldn't it seem reasonable that family members might feel neglected?

If you were in an extreme emergency, how would you feel if the EMT's, doctors or firemen on duty suddenly put their family's needs before yours? There obviously is a time when we must put the needs of strangers before our family's. It's when it happens too often that it becomes a big problem.

I think the author of the book our men were reading would have a rough time dealing with the theme verse of this chapter. Hate? Hate our family? Would God ever ask the believer to sacrifice his family? What was the deal with God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son? Well, that was Old Testament and God was a bit meaner then? Oh, really? I thought He never changes! Could Jesus be looking for the same trust from us that God wanted from Abraham?

And He said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me (Genesis 22:12).

For Isaac, bound on an altar, it might be hard to understand what God was up to. For the family left in the dust, the priorities may not seem proper. The unsaved husband might think that his wife really does hate him when she passes up an evening of waiting on him to honor an obligation she made to the Lord. How quickly the words "cult" and "fanatic" burst forth as bullets to hurt the sincere saint in pursuit of excellence for Christ! Jesus is looking for those who will forsake all and follow Him — even to the point of being misunderstood by those closest to them! Every balanced believer knows one can avoid domestic duties and relationships and hid behind religion — that's not what Jesus is talking about.

Turn on an old war movie. A hansom young man is ready to ship out. A beautiful, but tearful young damsel is clinging desperately to him,

begging him to not go. Duty calls. His country needs him! As he walks up the plank, looking over his shoulder, he is torn. He loves this fair maiden more than anything, yet duty demands a more noble response. Does he hate her? Of course not; no more than the believer hates his family when the call of God is answered.

We expect our soldiers and doctors to make these kinds of sacrifices all the time. Is Jesus wrong for calling for the same caliber of commitment from us?

THE VALUE OF HATE

There is a question that lovers ask... *do you love Me more than these?* (John 21:15). Why did Jesus ask Peter this question? Doesn't God know everything? It says He knows the secrets of our heart; surely He knows if we love Him first and foremost. But wait a minute. The Bible says "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." In other words, our responses prove how much we love Him — not how much we "feel" or think we love Him. If my actions prove how much I love Him and if He desires to know how much I love Him, then my love is proved, not by how much I say I love Him, but by something that is not in my heart, but rather that is an action. We could say, "Lord, You know I love You. Surely You know this feeling I have in my heart!" But the love He's looking for isn't a feeling in the heart but rather action in shoe leather!

Let me paraphrase Jesus' words to Peter...

*So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "**Prove it** — tend My lambs."* (John 21:15).

What we love the most is shown by the choices we make. As children grow older, they begin to prefer being with friends rather than family. This is hard to take for loving parents. Similarly, when lovers marry and careers begin to consume more and more time, "The Question" begins to arise: Do you love me more than these? What makes love so special is feeling that you are first place in someone's life. What tarnishes love is seeing the

object of your love make decisions that prove you no longer hold that special place. The greater the relationship, the greater the need to be continually reassured. Do you think God needs to be reassured that we love Him with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength?

When someone says, “I just want to be friends,” they are letting us know that our position of preeminence is gone! Can you remember breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend? Wasn’t that the line that brought the special relationship to a close? “I just want to be friends!” No more struggle to prove they are first place. No more worry about showing a little too much affection to someone of the opposite sex. But, how is such a statement perceived by the rejected lover? As hatred!

What if a couple, going through breaking up, give the impression by their choices that the other one is still first place? Will not their choices give the wrong impression? The one who is clinging to the relationship will ask questions that have as their intention to hopefully resurrect the relationship. If you were called on to counsel the person who was trying to break the bond, you would likely encourage them to make choices that gave the clear message that they were “just a friend.” In fact, when the impression is given that the love has been replaced by dislike or hatred, the break is easier and quicker.

Father God is wanting us to break off our relationship with our former lover — the world! He wants us to prove that He is first place in our life. He continually seeks our reassurance that there is no one, or nothing syphoning away our affections. Think this not strange or a sign of immature love. No, rather it is a sign of **intense** love. Ponder these verses and also consider that God is love:

You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, Yahweh your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, Exodus 20:5

For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin. 2 Corinthians 11:2

The more intense a love, the more it invests and the more interested it is in the object of its love. Strong love pays a great price to keep the one it

loves in first place — it also expects the same in return. Fleshly jealousy is selfish; godly jealousy is selfless and concerned about another. The whole picture of a husband and wife relationship was given to us by God that we would have some basis for understanding His awesome, aggressive, possessive, spoiling, pampering love! He wants **all** of our love — **all** of our heart! In return, He offers us everything He has! Matthew 6:33 tells us that if we seek Him first he will add “all these things” to us!

Someone madly in love with their Heavenly Husband will give the impression that they could care less what the world thinks. People pleasing is not pursued, thus irritating those caught up in the games of manipulation that drive our society. Fanatics for Jesus are hated by those who use lust and fear to herd groupies through their maze of performance and exploitation!

Bottom line: Do our choices prove, beyond any doubt, that Jesus is first place in our life? Does our intense love for Him provoke us to hate that which He hates?

Before you buckle under the pressure to comply to the world’s double standard concerning the pursuit of excellence (pay any price to get man’s honor; but don’t get too fanatical about loving God), remember who made you and why He made you. Make your choices in light of eternity. Ask yourself which decision will you be happiest about a hundred years from now, not next week! If the world is willing to pay a great price for inferior, perishable glory and thrills, can we not do more for the God of eternity because we love Him with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength?

If mortal kings have surrendered their thrones in order to pursue the love of their life, dare we do any less for the Lord of the Universe? When people misunderstand our loyalty to the King of Kings and interpret it as hatred or disdain, will we pull back to please them, or press in deeper into the Love of God to drown out their whining?

Oh to live in the secret place,
 Near to the heart of God,
 That special place that lovers grace,
 Near to the heart of God.
 To find in Him my reason for living,
 Near to the heart of God,

More nourishing than all of life,
Near to the heart of God!

HOW TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN

The Bible tells us how we can enjoy a rich, fulfilling life. The Awesome Creator designed us with a capacity for love and a desire to be successful. This abundant life was formulated around mankind living in close fellowship with the Lord. Listen to the words of Jesus Christ...

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with Me. Revelation 3:20 NIV

God's design includes provisions for us even when we're drained:

Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Matthew 11:28 NIV

Yes, our loving Father God has our best in mind:

...I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. John 10:10b NIV

I have told you this so that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. John 15:11 NIV

Why is it that most people are not experiencing this abundance? Mankind has stepped out of God's plan and has tried to do their own thing. The Bible calls this sin. This rebellion blocks God's blessings from us. None of us is excluded from this problem of sin:

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Romans 3:23 NIV

Some people feel that sin is an old-fashioned concept, but the Bible tells us that our sin separates us from God's blessings.

Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor His ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear. Isaiah 59:1,2 NIV

Our good works and noble intentions are not sufficient to reinstate us to a standing where the holy God can bless us:

All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. Isaiah 64:6 NIV

God's plan of salvation is the provision of His love for a race of fallen, stubborn beings. Because the Almighty is holy, His standards are essential and can't be ignored. But, because “*God is love*,” He designed a way to reinstate those individuals who, out of sincere love for Him, would obey His instructions.

GOD'S SOLUTION

God's Spirit overshadowed a virgin named Mary, and the child that was conceived was therefore both God and man. God entered our world in human form as the son of Mary and the Son of God—Jesus, the Christ (or

“Anointed One”).

Jesus led a sinless life by complete obedience to Father God. Then, as our substitute, He took our place and our punishment.

Whereas the punishment for sin was death, and because He was just, God couldn't ignore sin, but He revealed in the Old Testament that He would receive a substitute payment for man's sins.

Animal sacrifices pointed to the day when God, in human form, would come to earth and be our substitute sacrifice—the Lamb of God! What God's holiness demanded, God's love provided!

For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16 NIV

Because Jesus was a perfect man, He could pay for our sins; because He was Eternal God, His blood paid for **all** who would come to Him.

Jesus willingly went to the cross and died as our sin substitute. He arose from the dead to demonstrate that God's holiness was satisfied. By rising from the dead, Jesus broke sin's power over us.

...He entered the Most Holy Place once for all by His own blood, having obtained eternal redemption...How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, Who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! Hebrews 9:12b,14 NIV

This salvation is all of God. Going to church, doing good works, etc., will not save us. It is very hard for independent individuals to accept that they can do nothing to merit salvation.

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. Ephesians 2:8,9 NIV

OUR RESPONSE

A free gift cannot be earned, but it must be accepted! An essential aspect of God's plan of salvation is that it separates between those who couldn't care less about God's will and those who, when they see the error of their ways, will repent, or turn from doing their own thing.

...unless you repent, you too will all perish. Luke 13:3 NIV

I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. Acts 20:21 NIV

We receive Jesus' payment for our sin by submitting to His Lordship over our life. Submission and obedience puts us back on the original path God designed for us!

That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. Romans 10:9 NIV

Do you want to receive God's gift of salvation right now?

Do you believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross for your sins? That He arose from the grave on the third day?

Will you turn from being the boss of your life and surrender to Jesus, and ask Him to be your Lord?

Here is a sample prayer. Ponder it, then put it in your own words and say it to God, if you truly mean it.

Dear Heavenly Father, I come to You admitting that I have sinned and have not done Your will. I believe that, out of love, you sent Jesus, Your Son, to die for my sin. I believe that He rose from the dead and has

destroyed sin's power over my life. I turn from my sin and receive Jesus as my Savior and my Lord!

The exact wording is not as important as the heart response. Did you turn from being the lord of your own life and, in receiving Jesus, are you making Him your Lord?

This may seem like a simple prayer, yet it is a legal transaction, a covenant. If you were sincere, God will honor His Word and will save you and send His Holy Spirit to live inside you.

GROWING AS A CHRISTIAN

Read the Bible every day. Get an easy to understand translation, such as The New International Version, The Good News Bible, The Book (Living Bible), or The New American Standard Bible.

Start reading at least a chapter a day. Begin with Matthew's gospel and read through the New Testament first; then begin reading in the Old Testament.

Make notes as you read, and write down any questions you may have to ask a Bible teacher later. Begin each Bible study with prayer for God's guidance.

Look up these verses on the importance of Bible study: 1 Peter 2:2; 2 Timothy 3:16, 17; Psalm 119:11; Psalm 1:1-3. Check the index of your Bible for the location of the books of the Bible.

Talk to God your Father in prayer, every day. Begin your prayer time like Jesus' example, with praise (Matthew 6:9). Confess any sin. 1 John 1:9 tells us the Lord will forgive us. Look up these verses to see what happens when we don't confess our sin: Psalm 66:18; Psalm 32:1-7.

Pray for others (Ephesians 6:18, 19; Colossians 4:2-4). Instead of worrying, pray (Philippians 4:6-7). Give thanks in your prayers (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). Bring your requests to the Father in Jesus' name (John 16:23,24).

Beware of a new pull. Our enemy, Satan, wants to pull you down,

discourage you and make you give up. Jesus said the first thing that would happen to us after we receive the Word would be that Satan would come to try to steal the seed (“I didn't feel anything; nothing happened”). Also, persecution, worry, cares of this world, and the love of sin will attempt to choke the word (Mark 4:3-20).

Resist the devil in the name of Jesus the very instant you recognize his temptation traps of sin and doubt: 1 Peter 5:6-9; James 4:6-8; Ephesians 6:10-18; 2 Corinthians 10:3-5. Think of “resisting” as chasing away a stray dog who's getting into your garbage...“Get outta' here, you pest!”

When temptations or pressures increase, get together with another believer. The Lord wants us to strengthen each other (Galatians 6:1,2). We're to help others! This entire book is about winning the war against our enemy, Satan. **Learn all you can; share all you learn!**

Meet regularly with other Christians (Hebrews 10:24,25). Find a good church home where the Bible is taught, God is praised, Jesus is served, and the Holy Spirit is honored. If you have difficulty locating a church that teaches the whole Bible, including the Baptism of the Holy Spirit and spiritual warfare (such as this book teaches), write Spear Ministries at the address in the front of this book, and we'll seek to help you find one.

Look into being baptized in water (Matthew 28:19,20; Acts 10:47,48).

Begin seeking the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This is when Jesus pours out the power of the Holy Spirit on us. Study these verses: Luke 11:9-13; John 7:37-39; Acts 1:4-8; Acts 2:1-4; Acts 10:44-46. Chapters Nine and Ten in this book deal with this in more detail.

Begin sharing the story of God's love and salvation with others. You may be the only “preacher” some people will listen to (Romans 10:9-15).

*For whoever will call upon the name of the Lord
will be saved.*

Please share your comments at...

www.RoyalMountainMinistry.com
RMM@RoyalMountainMinistry.com