Jesus has told us that the first and greatest thing any of us can do in life is love God. Specifically, we are to love God with all of our heart, all of our soul, all of our mind, all of our strength.

Last week we talked in depth about what it means to love God from our heart. We learned that loving from your heart, contrary to what our culture might say, has little to do with your emotions and feelings. Instead, it has everything to do with your will. When you love God from your heart you choose, regardless of how you feel, to place your life in God’s hands, to surrender and abandon yourself to God and God’s ways.

This morning, then, we are going to move on to the next dimension as we think about what it means to love God with all of our soul. Specifically, how is loving God with our soul different from, or related to, loving God with our heart, mind and strength?

The discussion, of course, has to begin with a definition. What exactly is a soul? More importantly, what does the Bible mean when it talks about the human soul?

When we use the word soul these days, it’s often used as an adjective. Some people, for instance, describe certain music as soul music. Earth, Wind & Fire. Luther Vandross. James Brown, the actual Godfather of Soul.

There’s soul food, which I imagine tastes even better when you eat it while listening to soul music.
Sometimes we refer to somebody else as a soul mate, or a soul sister. When we do, we’re usually trying to say something about the depth of that relationship.

There’s an alternative rock band called Soul Asylum. There’s a famous book from the black power movement of the 60’s called Soul on Ice. There’s even an old song which probably half us here know how to play on the piano called Heart and Soul - a song which, by the way, should in no way ever be classified as soul music.

Primarily, of course, we use the word soul as a noun. We say that every person, every human being, has a soul, possesses a soul, has been given a soul. Although, interestingly enough, just because a person has a soul doesn’t necessarily mean that they have soul. Does he have a soul? Of course. But does he have soul? Not so much. But that’s another discussion altogether.

Webster’s Dictionary gives this primary definition of the soul: “An entity which is regarded as being the immortal or spiritual part of the person and, though having no physical or material reality is credited with the functions of thinking and willing, and hence determining all behavior.”

Well now, that clears it up, doesn’t it? Not at all. It’s confusing, isn’t it? The way we use the word in our culture clearly shows that when we talk about the soul we’re referring to something deep and foundational about a person, deeper than personality, deeper than style, deeper than preferences. But beyond that, I’m not sure our culture really knows what to say about the soul.

So we turn to scripture for help. The Bible, of course, speaks often of the human soul. The scriptures tell us, for instance, that a person can fear for his soul, risk his soul, lose her soul, save her soul. The soul can feel wounded. The soul can also feel troubled. The soul can one day feel contentment and the next day torment.

Obviously, we must be able to love with our soul for Jesus tells us that doing so is the most important thing in life.

One of the most telling passages of scripture when it comes to the human soul is actually in the very beginning of the Bible. In Genesis 2 we read the mysterious account of God’s creation of the first human, Adam.

In verse 7 we’re told, “The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became [literally] a living soul.” With the life of God’s breath, Adam becomes living clay rather than ordinary clay.

We see the opposite of this, of course, whenever we witness the body of a person who has died. For as you know if you’ve ever seen a corpse, there’s an emptiness there. The body remains, and yet it’s just a shell. The

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3 John 12:27.
4 3rd John 2.
5 II Peter 2:8.
6 Genesis 2:7. Italics mine. By the way, God is not only the only one, according to scripture, who can create a soul, God is also the only one who can destroy a soul. See Jesus’ comments in Matthew 10:28.
7 I was helped here by the Bible Dictionary, edited by Paul J. Achtemeier, (San Francisco: Harper’s, c. 1985), p. 1055.
essence of the person is gone. This body which once was “living clay” has now become again, “ordinary clay”. Something has left. And that something, I believe, is the soul.8

This gets, I think, very close to helping us understand the soul. The human soul, as God’s Word sees it, is the very essence of a person. It is your life, given to you by your creator. And while your soul has something to do with your body, your feelings, your mind, your will, and your relationships, it is also somehow beyond all those things, not limited to any of those things, and perhaps even greater than the sum total of all these things.

In a mysterious way, your soul is your very person, created and enlivened by God.

When it comes to the life of a human soul, one of the main things we see in scripture is that God has always intended that the human soul, each human soul, would come to dwell in a place of deep contentment. Not comfort necessarily, but contentment. A place of peace, and rest, and joy. Psalm 1, in fact, even though it never uses the word “soul”, paints a beautiful picture of the human soul at rest in contentment.

Specifically, the human soul which finds itself continually walking in the ways, or the laws, of God, is like a tree which is planted beside streams of water, its roots sunk deep in places where nourishment always flows. Such a tree, the psalmist tells us, always yields fruit at the right time, never withers at the wrong time, and continuously prospers for all time.

Listen to me. This is a picture of what God intends for your life, for your soul. At the very roots of who you are – listen to me carefully – you are meant to be connected to a great and ever-flowing source of nourishment and life which is, of course, God.

Your soul is meant to be deeply-rooted in a loving relationship with your Creator and with others around you God has also created. When it is, then your life, like the tree in this Psalm, is full of purpose, and vitality, and permanence, and joy.

You see, your soul, the deepest part of who you are, was created to be connected. In other words, you are hard-wired to be firmly rooted in a place that is deeply satisfying. And I believe that this deep desire to connect and be fulfilled will be in you whether or not you choose to root your life in God and his love.

And so if not in God, you will seek to be rooted somewhere, in something far bigger than yourself, in something that can give your life meaning and purpose, in something which brings contentment and satisfaction to your life. If not God, you’ll go looking for this in a thousand other places.

It may seem trivial at first, but one way we really see this play out is in sports. I mean, people these days go nuts for their favorite team. Agreed? So much passion, and time, and energy, and celebration, and heartache, and money dedicated to seeing our team win.

Understand now, I’m not just pointing fingers. I’m guilty as charged. I’ve been rooting for the San Francisco Giants since I was a kid going to watch Willie McCovey play first base. And this year they finally win it all. Well, the night that they clinched the series - and wife can verify this for you because she actually has it on video - I just might have displayed nearly as much emotion that night as I did the night my first child was born. Sad but true. And I know I’m not alone here.

8 Scripture teaches, of course, that through the resurrection of Christ all souls who trust in Christ will be eventually reunited with their bodies and that at that time their bodies will be in a new and eternal state. As Christians, we affirm the resurrection of the body!
What’s that all about? Why do we get so worked up about something which is – let’s be honest about this now – something which is ultimately meaningless in the larger view of things?

You know why? Because we are hard-wired in our soul to connect to something that is bigger than us, something that will bring meaning and purpose to our lives. And if we don’t find this contentment fully in God, then we will go looking for it elsewhere, even by identifying ourselves with a sports team.

If sports isn’t your thing, just fill in the blank. Politics. Career. Financial or material investments. Even religion, at least the man-made variety. All of us are simply wired to connect to something that is larger than us, something that we hope will fill our lives with purpose, and meaning, and contentment, and joy. The thing is, if we seek to root our souls in anything other than God, we will ultimately be left thirsty.

The victory, the promotion, the accumulation seems to satisfy for a time. I won’t deny that. But sooner or later we find ourselves thirsty again, perhaps even thirstier than before. As one writer put it, the desire for things besides God to deeply satisfy our souls is a lot like the craving of salt in a man who is dying of thirst.9

I will go as far as to say this. I am confident that I can describe the condition of your soul this morning with either one of two words. This very day your soul is either thirsty, or your soul is content, or at least on the way to being thirsty or on the way to being content. Your soul is either like a tree deeply-rooted beside an ever-flowing stream, or your soul is like chaff and dust which even a light wind can blow away.

And I bet that if you’re honest with yourself, you know exactly which description best fits you.

Because again, the soul, the very essence of who we are, was created to be rooted in God. When it is, there is profound contentment. When it is not, there is profound thirst.

In John 4 we find the story of the time Jesus met a thirsty woman next to a well one day. Not only was she a woman but she was a Samaritan woman, which made two very good reasons why a good Jewish rabbi like Jesus should never even look her way. But not only did Jesus look her way, he went out of his way to make a connection with her.

As she was minding her own business drawing water from the local well, Jesus approached and asked her, “Will you give me a drink?” Startled by his request, she answered him, “How is that you, a Jewish man, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink.” In other words, “Sir, I do not think that you want to be caught dead talking to me.”

Jesus wasn’t put off. “If you knew the generosity of God and who I am,” he said, “you would be asking me for a drink, and I would give you living water.”

Well, that threw her. And for a while after that the conversation didn’t go so well. Mainly because she thought Jesus was talking about her thirsty body when all along he was really talking about her thirsty soul. “Everyone who drinks of the water in this well will be thirsty again,” he told her. “But those who drink of the water I give will never again thirst. Because the living water I have to give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life, a stream of water nourishing the very roots of your soul.”

Later in the story we learn that this woman has had five different husbands and that the man she is now living with is not her husband. While some of us try to satisfy the deep thirst in our souls with sports, or work, or money, this woman tried to satisfy that thirst in the arms of man.

Clearly, she has had no better luck than any of us. For none of us can ever satisfy the thirst of our souls by pouring on new relationships, experiences, achievements, careers, or even religion. There is only One who can satisfy that thirst, only One who has living water which can satisfy our souls.

When we choose to root our entire lives - body, mind, heart, relationships, time, possessions, all of it - in the hands of God, we will eventually begin to discover the contentment and peace that we have been searching for all our lives. We will find meaning and purpose and value and worth in the unconditional love of God. And the best part is that we will find that all these things will belong to us in increasing measure no matter what circumstances life may throw our way.

I heard a friend of mine in the church this week say, “Life keeps coming at you.” Isn’t that the truth? Just when you think you’ve got it all figured out, just when you think you’ve got all your ducks in a row, something comes along to mess the whole thing up.

Car breaks down. Recession hits. Job gets cut. One you thought you trusted betrays you. Lab report comes back positive. Rejection notice shows up in the mail. Death of a loved one stops everything in its tracks.

We try our best to pretend that we have things all under control. But we know that all it takes is one single moment in time to shatter that illusion.

Knowing this is true, we worry. We grow anxious. We get angry. We lose our patience. We grow desperate. We don’t see a way out. We scramble for options. We grow discouraged. Some of us even we give up.

But what if loving God with all your soul means that no matter what circumstances come your way you will continue to trust that your soul, your very life, is firmly rooted in a foundation that will never be shaken?

My team may win or it may keep on losing. I may or may not succeed in school or work. I may remain healthy for some time; I may not. I may find myself married some day; I may not. My friends may remain faithful; they may not. My children may outlive me; they may not. I may not even ever have children to begin with.

What if loving God with all my soul meant that no matter what does or does not happen in my life, my hope, my confidence, my destiny remains rooted in the only foundation which I trust will never fail me?

Writer Dallas Willard suggests that we would do well in life to learn to abandon all outcomes in life which are not ultimately in our control anyway. Which is, by the way, most outcomes.

Because when we do so, when we let go of every single thing which is out of our control, all we are left with is humility and trust in the only One who ultimately does control outcomes. And in that place of humility and trust, perhaps we can begin to learn to love God with our souls.

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10 She’s 0 for 5 and number 6 isn’t looking all that promising!
11 M. Craig Barnes was helpful in understanding this account of Jesus and the woman at the well in his marvelous book, Sacred Thirst: Meeting God in the Desert of Longings, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, c. 2001), p. 21-24.
Jesus put it this way one time. “Come to me all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Blessed is the one who delights in the ways of the Lord. That man, that woman, is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season – in whatever season! – and whose leaf does not wither – no matter what! Whatever that man does prospers. Whatever that woman does flourishes.

Let me close with a story.

Horatio Spafford was a prominent American lawyer who lived in the mid-nineteenth century. In spite of his prominence, however, he was also a man who certainly faced his share of heartbreaking circumstances.

In 1871 his only son died at the age of four. That very same year the great Chicago fire left him in personal financial ruin.

Two years later he was scheduled to travel to Europe with his family but had to send them on ahead so he could stay back and work out zoning problems which had been created by the fire. While crossing the Atlantic ahead of him, however, the ship his family was on collided with a sailing ship and sank rapidly.

Tragically, all four of Spafford’s remaining children, his four daughters, drowned at sea. Only his wife, Anna, survived. When she reached safety, sent him a now-famous telegram with the news. It simply read, “Saved alone.”

Just for a moment, pause to consider this man’s life. I don’t know about you, but I cannot begin to imagine a life faced with these circumstances. Honestly, I’m not certain that it all wouldn’t crush me.

As some of you know, however, these circumstances did not crush Horatio Spafford.

In fact, shortly after the news of the tragedy, he boarded a ship to go and meet his grieving wife. As that ship eventually passed near the very spot where his four daughter had recently died, Horatio Spafford was inspired to write the words of a song which, ever since, have been sung around the world. The song was titled, It Is Well With My Soul.

I want to invite us to make his words, this song, our prayer this morning. In spite of whatever circumstances you face or will face in this life, is it not your deep desire to be able to find your way to the place where you can truly say that no matter what, it is well with my soul, that no matter what, I love God with all of my soul.

When peace like a river attendeth my way
When sorrows like sea billows roll
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say
It is well; it is well with my soul

Matthew 11:28-30, NIV. Emphasis mine.
It is well with my soul
It is well; it is well with my soul

My sin O the bliss of this glorious thought,
My sin not in part but the whole
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul

Refrain

And Lord haste the day when my faith shall be sight
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll
The trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend
Even so it is well with my soul.

Refrain

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The Next Step
A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

- Read Psalm 1 again. What immediately sticks out at you from this passage?

- Would you describe your life today as a tree planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither? Is it true that whatever you do prospers? Why or why not?

- In your understanding, what is a soul? What does it mean to say that a human being has a soul? Are there ways in which you are aware of your own soul?

- Are humans the only ones who have a soul? Do animals, for instance, have a soul? Does God have a soul?

- It is God’s intention that each human soul come to dwell in place of deep contentment, a place where we know that in spite of whatever circumstances may come our way our life is irredeemably safe in God’s hands. How far are you from this place? In other words, is it well with your soul?

- How are you most tempted these days to try and quench the deep thirst in your soul by placing your hope in something other than God? Relationships? Experiences? Achievements? Career? Man-made religion?

- Would it be possible for you to abandon all outcomes in your life over which you are ultimately not in control of anyway? Which outcomes are you needlessly anxious about today?

- What do these words from Jesus mean to you? “Come to me all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28–30)

Further Scripture Readings for the Week:
Monday: Matthew 11:25–30 – Rest for your soul
Tuesday: John 4:1-42 – A thirsty woman
Wednesday: Matthew 6:25-34 – Seek God first
Thursday: Psalm 42 – A prayer of the soul
Friday: Ecclesiastes 3:1-15 – A time for everything
Saturday: Philippians 4:4-9 – Do not be anxious