Love the Lord your God with all your Mind

Aldred Neufeldt

13 February 2022

Texts: *Luke* 10:25 – 28; *Philippians* 2: 1 – 11; *Proverbs* 3:1-10 and 13-15

S1 This is the 6th sermon in the series on 'the greatest commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind[1]; and love your neighbor as yourself[2]" (Luke 10:25-28).

My privilege is to reflect on 'loving the Lord our God **with all your Mind**.'

It's a good word – **Mind.** We use it often – sometimes to 'give someone a *piece of your mind'* – which is quite different than saying you've *changed your mind*, or *never mind*; – and, even more different than encouraging *mindfulness* as Christine did earlier and Melana did last Sunday.

But what is *this 'mind'* we are to love our God with? We rarely think about it. Did you wake up today and say to yourself: 'I've got a mind?' I expect not! We don't go around thinking '*here am I **with** a mind*.' Mostly our innate sense is just of **being** an "I."

S2 But *we do know* where the mind is. When Peter asked a few weeks ago, most of us pointed to our heads – to that 1.4 kilo of grey-matter in our skull. Within that brain exists our conscious mind – the 'I' – but exactly where and how isn't all that clear. On the other hand, the brain is quite accessible for study, and something I once knew quite a lot about. And if you want to understand the mind, it's helpful to know something about the brain.

So, for me, this topic is like visiting old friends from my undergrad and doctoral studies a lifetime ago. We were tired of Sigmund Freud's notions of *psychic energy* and of B.F.Skinner's *stimulus-response*. Neuro and cognitive sciences were in their infancy – and promised better ways to understand the brain and human behaviour. Left unsaid was the idea we might also get a clue about how our minds functioned.

S3 The dominant view was that the brain's structure and function was fixed. Parents of children born with an intellectual disability were told their child was incapable of learning. It might be best to send **'it'** to an institution. And a grad student of mine, Clark, who'd been a teacher and exuberant athlete, got the same advice when he crushed his spinal cord as he slid into 3rd base in a heated ball game. He was told he'd never walk again. To my generation that kind of thinking raised problems. So, we began questioning how fixed our neural systems really were.[3]

---

[1] From Deuteronomy 6:5

[2] From Leviticus 19:18

[3] The idea that the brain and its function were not fixed throughout adulthood was already proposed in 1890 by Wm. James in *The Principles of Psychology*, but not seriously pursued until the 1970s.

To give context, in my undergrad years I did rat brain research, placing electrodes into and then dissecting their brains to study if and how the amygdala governed emotion. And, in graduate school, I pursued information and systems theory as ways of studying cognitive strategies people use to perceive the world and store stuff in memory.

S4 We wanted a glimpse of what was inside the 'black box,' as the brain was referred to. And, in succeeding years, knowledge of the brain increased exponentially. What also increased was wonder at the brain's complexity. 100 billion neurons, some science writers began to say – as many as stars in the Milky Way.'

S5 That statement caught everyone's attention, but it's more hyperbole than precise. Recent measurements put the number of brain neurons at 86 billion, and over 200 billion stars in the Milky Way. But it doesn't really matter. The difference between 86 and 100 billion, let alone 200 billion, means little us – we just know they're huge.

But if you ask which is more complex – our brains or the universe up there – you might be surprised by the answer. Both theoretical physicists and neuroscientists agree - the *universe* S6 *between our ears* is much more complex. Physicists have a pretty good idea of laws governing the universe, but we still don't have a good idea of how our minds enable physicists to derive their constructs of the universe. The same is true of other creative ideas coming from the mind.

So, what's been learned that helps us think about the mind?

S7 *First, how we understand the brain has changed*. We're used to the idea of having one brain. Now, some argue we have 'three' – apart from the head, there's another complex neural structure in the heart and one in the gut, all linked together. Where we once thought the 'head brain' talked down to the heart and the stomach, research now indicates the opposite. Many more messages are being sent up than down. Your heart is constantly sending emotional signals to your brain, beating faster or slower as you face choices. And, where we once thought emotional struggles in the mind, like anxiety or depression, developed stomach problems, recent studies suggest it's the other way around.

S8 Of course, the head brain is far more sophisticated. To make decisions, our minds access memories, perceptions of our surroundings and many other brain sources. My mother's admonition when I got into trouble – use your head – makes eminent sense, though I didn't always think so. But research also suggests that, before finalizing a decision, it might be wise to pull up a chair for input from our gut and heart brains.

S9 Second: *We've learned our neural networks aren't fixed*. They're changing all the time. *Neuroplasticity* it's called – neural pathways are constantly re-organized, new ones built, old ones falling by the way, in response to experience – many instigated by our minds. Learning a new language helps forge new neuronal pathways as does continually ruminating on negative thoughts. One is positive to our well-being, the other negative. Such brain change explains how cognitive behaviour therapy can help people deal with, say, anxiety, or how visualization and

positive self-talk can help Olympic athletes in competition. Both are meant to stimulate positive neuronal pathway development. A different type of *neuroplasticity* is where neural networks reorganize themselves to compensate for an injury or sickness. That explains how my student Clark recovered some of his walking ability after a severed spinal cord.

S10 Third: *We've learned a lot on how the mind and brain are both very different, yet interconnected.* The mind uses the brain, and the brain responds to the mind. The mind also changes the brain. In some ways, this is stuff we've long thought but had little evidence for. People choose their actions—their brains do not force them to do anything.

The good thing about knowing our minds and brains are separate, theoretically, is that it puts you in the control seat. Mind you (pardon the pun), learning to manage your thoughts and actions is easier said than done.

All of these learnings speak to how loving the Lord with all your Mind is thought of.

S11 To begin, think of how wonderfully we are created – how those 86 billion neurons in our brain respond to the mind, and the mind uses the brain by way of neurochemical, electromagnetic and other means to accomplish what you and I think and do. It's more wonderfully complex than we could have imagined. What potential! What a gift! Thanks be to God!

Second, it's a humbling mystery how, in our conscious minds, we think the thoughts we do, feel and show love, get angry, give emotional support, construct treatises and sermons on ideas we can discuss, along with the other routine and creative things we do. We take it for granted. But, to me, it's a miracle repeated daily. The minds we've been endowed with go way beyond those of any other living thing. It's how God created us.

And, in a biological context where evolutionary change is a consideration, I find it amazing how the ideas and words of wisdom from folk living thousands of years ago are still fresh today. No 'evolution' of the mind evident by that measure. S12 The words attributed to Solomon some 3000 years ago in the book of Proverbs, read by Adriel earlier, are an example. Consider the final proverb:

- Do not be wise in your own eyes;
  fear the Lord and shun evil.
- Blessed are those who find wisdom,
  those who gain understanding,
  15 She is more precious than rubies;
  nothing you desire can compare with her.

One can find hundreds of similar sentiments expressed by other writers, but none superior.

So how do we love our God with all our mind?

These minds or ours reflect the essence of who we are – our conscious selves – our thoughts, the decisions we make, what we do and how we do it, our motivation, and so on. It's no wonder the saints of old saw the importance of including this phrase in the greatest commandment.

S13 So, 'to love the Lord our God with all our mind' suggests something like "*with all our conscious being*" – our conscious mind reflects the 'I' we talked of in the beginning. The Prophet Jeremiah suggests this, after chastising the people of Judah for trusting in man rather than God, and for their deceitful hearts. He calls them to repent with these words: Jeremiah 17:10

> "I the Lord search the heart
> and test the mind,[4]
> to give every man according to his ways,
> according to the fruit of his deeds."

Testing the mind is the emphasis. That's where the truth of what we think and do lies.

S14 And, as Christians, our model for living out that truth is Jesus the Christ. One of the most succinct expressions of what 'loving our God with all our minds' means in practice is in the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Philippi:

> "Therefore," Paul said to the church then and to us today, "if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion,
>
> **2** then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.

S15 Or, said another way, we as followers of Christ today, united with his Spirit, comforted by his love, show our love of God with all our minds ('being one in spirit and of one mind' Paul says) by:

> **3**Do nothing out of selfish ambition – rather in humility value others above yourselves,
> **4** not looking to your own interests – rather the interests of the others.
> **5** In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

S16 That's the benchmark, challenging as it is – it's modelled by saints of the past and living amongst us today. So, it'd doable. Through God's grace, we've been endowed by marvellously complex brains that, through neuroplastic change, adjust to support our dominant wishes, thoughts and deeds. Through God's grace we've been richly gifted with creative and talented Minds – our conscious selves, through which we shape what we think and do and, in turn, shape the brain. To live out the promise of that treasure, we are called to love the Lord with – not just part – but all our minds – in whatever we do, and when-ever we do it. And, for that we need help – the help of our Christian community to love us, to encourage each of us to pursue thoughts and practices that nurture our minds, and our neuronal pathways – all toward modeling in our lives the ideals expressed by Christ through his life.

S17 That's how we *Love the Lord your God with all your mind*!

Amen

---

[4] According to one source, the original Hebrew word was 'kidney', later translated as 'mind'