

3. Strength òdam| ‘me’odekah’

A Hebrew teacher once said, “There are some words which no-one should attempt to translate from Hebrew”. Sometimes the meaning of a word cannot adequately be squeezed into another language without losing a lot in the process. *Me’odekah* is one such word.

To love God with all your *me’odekah* literally means “with all your *very* or *muchness*” which sounds odd even to Hebrew speakers. It can mean ‘exceedingly, much, force or abundance’ and traditionally it gets translated as ‘strength’ or ‘might’.

So what does “with all your *me’odekah*” actually mean? Well, in answer to that let me read to you some words from a marvellous little book by Lois Tverberg and Bruce Okkema called ‘Listening to the Language of the Bible’:

‘A few years ago a local teacher threw out a challenge and I took it personally. The challenge was: “If your body is flabby, your faith tends to be flabby!” I took up the challenge of trimming the flabby body as I began preparing to live in the land of Israel for a while. I had heard how difficult it is to live in that land where everything seems to be uphill. During this preparation I learned many things; but the main thing I learned was the meaning of the word *me’odekah*. If you have ever undertaken a fitness [regime] ... you know the challenge of lifting that weight for just one more repetition or adding just one more pound to your weight-lifting routine. The result can bring tears to your eyes. This kind of straining with all of your being is to experience what the word *me’odekah* means. Some people describe it as “oomph”. But it means so much more!’

So for you to love God with all your *me’odekah* means loving God with everything you’ve got: your strength, your passion, your enthusiasm, your determination – your oomph!

Conclusion

So to conclude, according to our Lord Jesus, the greatest commandment – our number one priority – is to love the Lord, our God, with all our feeling and thinking; with every moment of our lives; and with the greatest passion and commitment that we have. This is, after all, how God, through Jesus, loves us and calls us to share this love – firstly with Him and then secondly with everyone else in the world.

Amen.

The Greatest Commandment

Deuteronomy 6: 1-7
Mark 12: 28-34

Introduction

Illustration – Joke about George W. Bush seeing Moses (“The last time I listened to a talking Bush I ended up with 40 years in the desert!”)

During those 40 years in the desert Moses receives God’s instructions for life – for the whole Jewish nation - the Law. Which is why the Pentateuch – the first five books of our Christian Old Testament – are attributed to Moses himself and invested with such authority.

So when Jesus is asked which is the greatest commandment he replies by quoting probably the most famous Jewish prayer of all – the *Shema* (the Hebrew word for ‘hear’). This prayer is said to this very day by devout Jews every morning and every evening. The words themselves come straight from the Torah – the Jewish Law – from Deuteronomy 6: 4-5 which state:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.
Love the LORD your God with all your **heart** and with all your **soul**
and with all your **strength**.”

Now the observant among us will have noticed that when Jesus quotes this very well-known piece of Scripture in Mark’s Gospel (and also in Luke) he adds “with all your mind”. This could have been inserted for reasons of clarification on the part of the Gospel writers particularly for the benefit of Gentile (i.e. non-Jewish) Christians who may not have been familiar with Jewish Scriptures and ways. I’ll explain why this is necessary in a moment.

But as this is, by Jesus’ own admission, the greatest command in the Scriptures (and incidentally there are 613 commandments in the first five books of the Bible alone!) maybe we should spend some time figuring out what it actually means for us.

So let’s take each one of those three words – heart, soul and strength – in turn and put ourselves, as it were, in the shoes of Jesus’ Jewish hearers. Because I think if we can understand what they understood then it will help us to understand. Understand? I’ll just get on with it shall I?

1. Heart bb|e ‘levav’

In the Western world we have been greatly influenced by thousands of years of Greek philosophy. Indeed quite early on in the history of Christianity, Greek and Roman philosophical ideas gained huge importance in the formulation of Christian creeds and doctrines – the stuff we believe today. As Christianity broke further away from its Jewish roots and became a separate religion the Greek ideas became more important and the original Jewish worldview less and less so. Now we can't change this – its history – but it does present a bit of a problem for us – and this is it. We are trying to understand what Jesus – a 1st Century Jewish man – means as he quotes from an even more ancient Jewish Scripture: and we're doing this from our thoroughly Westernised viewpoint. So this is why I'm walking this road of rediscovering our Jewish roots at the moment. I think it's so crucial to the Church – if we are really to understand the stuff we read in the Bible.

The most important thing to understand about *levav* is that in Hebrew, the heart is the centre of human thought and spiritual life. We tend to think that the heart refers only to emotional matters. You've only got to walk around Clinton Cards the week before Valentine's Day to prove that! But in Hebrew *levav* refers to your mind and thoughts as well.

Many ancient cultures assumed the heart was the seat of intelligence and without the benefit of a more advanced understanding of the human body it's easy to see why they thought like this. After all the heart is the only constantly moving organ in the body – a heartbeat can be felt and heard and when the heart stops beating a person dies.

So when God says through Moses, “Love the Lord with all your heart”, He doesn't just mean with our emotions but our thoughts and reasoning and learning as well. Jewish people understood this but just so that everyone else would, we read in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus adds ‘mind’.

Our Greek-influenced Western culture tends to separate intellect from emotions; thinking from feeling. So we come to Church on Sunday and worship God in songs of praise but we can look upon Bible study as an optional extra for the keen ones. But this would have been totally alien to Jesus and his Jewish hearers; as a matter of fact in his time study was considered “the highest form of worship”!

I think we need to rediscover what it means to worship God with our minds. I'm not saying we all need to go and get a degree in theology – it's not about getting letters after your name. To the Jewish mind you learned about God because you loved Him and you wanted to know more and more of him.

As disciples of Jesus today, we want to learn more of him because we love him and we want to be like him. To study Jesus is an act of devotion which is precisely why we need to reflect on the fact that loving God with all our *levav* is certainly a response of the heart but also, just as importantly, of the mind.

2. Soul v|p|k ‘nephesh’

When we look at the word *nephesh* – which usually gets translated ‘soul’ – we can see very clearly just how influenced our own views are by Greek philosophy and especially the ideas of Plato and his followers.

Plato was a philosopher from the 5th Century BC who had a sharply dualistic view of life. He believed there were two worlds – the visible material world that we live in and the invisible spiritual world. The material world is a source of evil and is inferior to the spiritual world. He believed there was also two parts to a human being – an immortal soul that is pure spirit which originates from the spiritual world which is trapped in a physical human body – which amounts to no more than a defective lump of crumbling clay. He even calls the body the prison of the soul. The only hope for us, according to Plato, is death - when our immortal soul will escape its earthly body and return to the spiritual world. There you go – that's Platonism in a paragraph!

The scary thing is this sounds like what a lot of Christians believe today. Why is that scary? Well, again, because it's totally alien to what Jesus or Paul or anybody in the Bible ever thought or said or wrote.

Jewish people like Jesus didn't have this dualistic view of body and soul. They didn't feel the need to compartmentalize people in the ways that Plato did. They saw the physical created world as fundamentally good – yes, of course, there was a lot of bad in it but it was created by a God who designed it with humanity's best interests at heart. Human beings were a dynamic body-soul unity, called to serve God, their creator, passionately with their whole being – now - in the physical world.

So now you know that, you probably won't be surprised to hear that the word *nephesh*, translated ‘soul’ can also be translated ‘life’. We are to love God with all our life – with every moment that we live. Instead of trying to squeeze a bit of God into our already busy lives – like an hour or so on a Sunday morning or whatever – it's about sharing every moment of your life with God. Inviting Him to be a part of everything you do. It's about not dividing up your life into the religious or Christian bits on the one hand and then the normal everyday bits on the other – it's about recognizing that God is there **in all of it** and so we should love Him **in all of it** – by the way we behave, the things we do and say, our attitudes, our priorities etc. This is how we love God with all our *nephesh* – all our life.