

**“The Two Great Commandments: Loving God with All of Our Souls”**

Mary Henderson Bowman

**Date:** November 5, 2023



The Bible tells us that God is love.<sup>1</sup>

So perhaps we should not be surprised that the two greatest commandments<sup>2</sup> are all about the ways of love.

We have been following this path of love through the four parts of us that Jesus has highlighted . . . heart, mind, strength, and soul.

And this morning, we have arrived at our souls.

Each of us has a soul, but I would wager a guess that most of us do not think very often about our souls.

This morning, we are going to pay attention to our souls.

Does it surprise that our souls actually need our attention — and even our care?

It is easy to think that our souls are static and unchanging.

We can tend to think that our souls are otherworldly and therefore out of the reach of our world.

And yet this is not the picture we get from the Bible . . .

The psalmist paints a detailed picture of the soul . . .

The soul feels pain, (Psalm 13:2)

Our souls can feel distress. (Psalm 31:9)

The soul can be forlorn when confronted with evil. (Psalm 35:12)

Our souls can become embittered. (Psalm 73:21)

The soul can be full of troubles. (Psalm 88:3)

Our souls can be in distress. (Psalm 31:9)

The soul can be cast down and disquieted. (Psalm 42:5)

Our souls are needy, and they require our attention and care.

Our souls house the most essential parts of us.

Our souls contain our essence, our personality, our sense of identity in God, our ability to commune most deeply with God.

Our soul is a gift from God that is eternal and God-oriented.

James Bryan Smith put it this way: “Your soul is your deepest nobility, it is what makes you sacred and precious and valuable.”<sup>3</sup>

Our souls are what tells us that we are known and still loved with all of our mistakes and imperfections.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 4:12

<sup>2</sup> Mark 12:28-34

<sup>3</sup> James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful You*, 17.

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One person going through depression shared that it was their soul that gave them hope when their mind, and heart and will had crumbled. It was the soul that stayed the course to what was most important.<sup>4</sup>

The author James Bryan Smith tells us there are certain things the soul cannot abide.<sup>5</sup>

One of those things is disconnection — which should not surprise us.

One of the clearest lessons of the recent pandemic is that human beings are made for connection, and we get distressed and forlorn and disquieted when we do not feel connected.

This is true of our connection to one another, and this is also true of our connection with God.

Disconnection is a soul crusher.

Connection is a soul reviver.

It is essential that we pursue connection with God and with others.

There are other agents that work against the soul besides disconnection.

There is what I call the triple threat of sin, guilt, and shame.

I call it the triple threat because these three often work together to disconnect us by suggesting that we are not worthy of love and connection.

Sin acts against our soul like a disease — or we could call it dis-ease.

Sin causes a rupture in our souls that only God’s loving forgiveness can repair and restore.

Love and forgiveness are the cure for the dis-ease of sin.

Guilt — which often accompanies sin — similarly infects the soul in negative ways.

And shame — the other companion to sin — is particularly harmful because it pushes us to stay separated from God and one another because we don’t feel worthy.

So what are we to do for our souls?

We practice three ways to combat the triple threat.

First of all, we seek deeper connection with God.

The Bible tells us that our souls hunger and thirst for God.

One of the most important things we can do for our souls is to spend time in God’s presence. God’s loving and merciful presence is the nurture needed for the soul.

One way to help our souls is to gather in worship. Worship is a pure gift for our souls — and usually our minds and hearts as well. Your being here this morning is a balm for your souls.

When we worship, we draw close to God and one another and God draws close to us and we are fed in a way that is both true and mysterious.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 18.

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Another important way we care for our souls is the time we set aside for prayer and prayer alone.

For parts of my life I was a pray as you go person — doing most of my praying in the car. I would drive and talk to God.

I still do this, but I have learned that talking is not the only thing we want to do in prayer. It is vitally important for our souls that we spend time listening to God. And the best way to do that is to be still — even for 5 minutes a day.

Even if it is only 5 minutes a day, it is important to sit still and say, “Lord, I am being still and remembering that You are God and that You are with me and for me.

We save our talking for another time in the day. We just sit. And then we trust that God will use that time. Sometimes we hear something — sometimes we don’t. Sometimes we feel a presence — sometimes we don’t. But when we simply sit and devote that time to listening for God — God comes. And our soul knows it, even if the rest of us cannot detect God.

Finally, confession is one of the best practices for our souls.

Our confession is simply being honest about the ways we have sinned and fallen short of our own hopes for ourselves — and then turning to God for the forgiveness and the love that will completely clean our souls from the sin itself and the shame and guilt that may have attached themselves to the sin.

Confession is an important avenue for reconnection to God and to others. Confession allows secrets to come into the light and be transformed into grace. Sometimes it is enough to confess in worship, but sometimes we have to share the secrets with a human being we can trust.

Your soul is your essence. Your soul is your deepest connection to yourself and to God. Take the steps you need to move toward deeper connection, forgiveness, and restoration. Amen.