

Week Three: Love God with All Your Strength

Sunday, April 15, 2018

by: Rev. Roger Lenander

“God gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

Isaiah 40:29-31

Eagles are some of the most majestic birds in the sky, but, at least once in their lifetime they will molt. In their aging their feathers will drop off, their beaks and claws will alter in such a way that their walk resembles that of a turkey. They lose their strength and ability to hunt for fresh meat that is necessary for their survival. They become depressed and lose the desire to eat. Often they will be found on a barren rock in the sun. Younger and stronger eagles will harass them and peck at their bodies. Their fate would be death if it were not for the older eagles who will fly over and drop fresh meat to the suffering eagle. The molting eagles would die if not for the efforts of the older eagles who are their strength in this time of weakness. When the new feathers are grown their strength is renewed so that they can soar once again.

God has created us to soar, but there are times in life when we go through hard times and transitions. We lose hope that leaves us weak and empty. From where is our strength to come? The psalmist reminds us that our strength comes from the Lord. We have Jesus, Living Bread and Living Water, to nourish us so that we can soar again. In our times of weakness, the Lord is our strength.

We thank you Lord, for you are my strength when I am weary. Feed my spirit with hope and encouragement. Open my eyes that I may see your goodness. Help me to encourage others in times of affliction and sorrow. In Jesus name, Amen.

Monday, April 16, 2018

by: Misty Coyle

We have been watching a comedy show, “Living Biblically”. The show is about Chip, a modern-day man who decides to live strictly in accordance with the Bible. A film critic for a New York Newspaper and a soon-to-be father, Chip wants to be a better man following the loss of his best friend. His wife supports him and my favorite part: Chip forms a “God Squad”! Father Gene, a Catholic Priest helps Chip translate the rules of the Bible to a modern world; and Father Gene’s best friend, easygoing Rabbi Gil Ableman, who respects Chip’s chutzpah and is glad to serve as a sounding board when they meet at their local bar. Even at work, Chip’s boss supports his changing efforts by giving him an editorial column to write about what he is experiencing as he tries to live by the Word. Chip’s best friend also is in support of Chip’s change, and most of the time challenges Chip with everyday questions to ancient tasks.

Chip knows this change will be hard; but, he has an obsessive temperament which helps keep him on track and really giving every command/rule his best effort. He sees the positive things along with the negative and puts the question: “Why is there a negative effect?”, to the God Squad. In one episode, Rabbi Gil said it perfectly: “Who said God would make your world better if you do as he says? What does ‘better world’ mean to you? Do you really think God thinks like you?” And to this Chip responded with a soft no and promised to give everything he has, to continue to make changes. He is choosing to love God with all his strength.

Yes, Chip has the chutzpah to continue his work; but, let's look at what strength or might means. Strength is defined as the quality or state of being strong or being an influence. Might is physical strength, power to do or accomplish, capacity. So, Jesus in Matthew, is commanding us to love God with the things that make us strong. Just as Chip realized, to love God with our accomplishments, our influence and all of our tangible capacities. With every new rule to learn, Chip, in each episode, asks himself: What am I good at? What do I have going for me? What am I capable of? He is choosing to love God not with just who he is but with what is at his disposal. Everything he has available for honoring God which includes spouse, children, home, pets, wardrobe, tools, phones, and the list goes on and on. How can you love God with all your strength and/or might?

Mighty and merciful God, thank you for everything I have. Let my words, time, and possessions be used for your purpose. Fill my heart with your desires and let the Holy Spirit guide my strength to fulfill those desires. Amen!

Tuesday, April 17, 2018

by: Juel Pierce

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:2-8)

As I reflect on "Love God with All Your Strength," I think of the strength of Jesus. What comes to my mind is the picture of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, praying to God to take away the trial and suffering and death that was coming. Luke's gospel has the verses that as he was praying, an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. It also has the additional note that he prayed so earnestly that his sweat became like great drops of blood falling on the ground. (Luke 22:43-44—not included in all the manuscripts of Luke)

I think of Mary Magdalene, who stayed outside the tomb searching for Jesus with all her strength, even as the other disciples went back to a safe place.

Or Mary, Jesus' mother, who did not run screaming from the room when confronted by the angel with the news that she would be pregnant in a cultural context in which her pregnancy could make her an outcast.

Or David, the shepherd boy, who volunteered to fight the strong man of the Philistines, Goliath, and who chose for his strength five stones and a sling.

Or people we all know, who when facing death, grief, loss of all kinds do not abandon their faith but with prayer and supplication make known their needs to God.

Strength is not in armies, or missiles, or loud shouting or lies, but in only our faith in Jesus.

Loving, faithful God, show us the true strength of humility and servanthood, courage in the face of suffering. May we love you with all the strength you give us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Wednesday, April 18, 2018

by: Jim Pierce

*One of the scribes came near . . . and asked [Jesus], 'Which commandment is the first of all? Jesus answered, 'The first is, 'Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; **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.**' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.'* (Mark 12: 28—30, NRSV, emphasis added)

This great commandment, “to love the Lord my God with all my strength,” strikes me as paradoxical. I am at a time in my life where I am much more aware of my weakness than of any particular strength. That is certainly true of physical strength. I’m not even close to that buff, toned, eighty-one year old body-building woman I read about in the paper last week. In fact I never was close and the distance between us is growing.

It is also true of my strength of will, my resolve to do the things I should, and to say no to those things with which I struggle, often failing, my “no” unspoken. Here, too, I am more aware of weakness than strength.

So, confronted by this command, my response is not, “You’ve got it God. Don’t worry, I’ll stand up for you!” No, instead my response is “God, I have nothing to offer, but if you want it, it’s yours.” This, too, is paradox, this a holy one, because that is exactly the response God is hoping for.

In Mark 13, Jesus’s final tutoring session with his disciples before he journeys to the cross, he tells them, *“When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.”* (Mark 13:11) Do you see it? Not my words, your words, but the words God gives us to speak in the moment. Not my strength to stand up on my own, not yours, but the strength God pours into our weakness when strength is needed.

To love the Lord your God with all your strength, is simply to confess, “God, I am weak. I can’t do it. Give me your strength and with it I will show your love.”

Holy God, my strength, my salvation, I offer you today not my strength but my weakness, that through it your strength, your salvation might be revealed. Amen

Thursday, April 19, 2018

by: Phil Hornbostel

Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love. Now, brothers and sisters, you know that members of the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints; I urge you to put yourselves at the service of such people, and of everyone who works and toils with them. I rejoice in the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence; for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours.--I Corinthians 16: 13-18

Loving the Lord your God with all your strength is different than loving with all your heart or all your soul. Paul provides an excellent example of loving God with all one’s strength, in his letter to the church at Corinth. And it means much more than Sunday morning worship. It extends outward for us, just as it extended for Paul’s followers to help those in need, not only in our own congregation, but also throughout our community, and throughout our world.

Here love of God is shown by our strength, our physical abilities and talents to help others. We are asked to provide assistance through strength for those not so strong, not so gifted, not so self-assured, and not so comfortable. In sharing our abilities and our talents with others, we extend ourselves beyond a private relationship with God, into a very public relationship with those around us.

What if you don't feel strong? What if you are lacking in strength? Well, if you have physical limitations, you're in good company with Paul himself. He tells us in II Corinthians of his physical ailments, that he had begged God to take from him. God told him that rather than delivering him from illness, he wanted Paul to boast of his weakness, and to continue to love God with whatever strength he had (chapter 12), "for whenever I am weak, then I am strong".

Whatever our gifts, our time, our talents, we are called to share them as a thankoffering to Jesus Christ for all that he has given us. When we share them with all our strength, we are truly loving God.

Father God, grant me the boldness and willingness to say "yes" when I am asked to help others in my family, my congregation, and my world. Keep me ever mindful of the understanding that in showing my love for the least of your children, I am showing my love for You. And when I am weak, and feeling helpless, share your strength and reassurance that you are with me, and that my weakness is strength through your love for me. Amen

Friday, April 20, 2018

by: Jeff Langdon

The word strength can mean a number of things. It is sometimes translated as "might". As I ponder on this word and try to get my hands around it, I read that my strength is my "substance"- my possessions or even my body. This word strength has to do with the physical world... something concrete. As I try to understand the word, I have in mind that I have always correlated it with my body. I am to love God with my body ... my physical self....and with what I do with my body.

A few years ago, Kris and I took a trip to the Grand Canyon. In our preparation for our trip I looked at pictures of the Grand Canyon and took in the amazing beauty that I hoped to see. I used **my mind** to think about it.

We set out on our journey using our minivan, and the maps on our iPhone and road atlas...and it was in **my heart** that I made the decision to drive the 20 hours it would take for use to get there to see it up close.

When we got to the canyon, it was with **my soul** that I found the beauty as almost overwhelming... acknowledging the expanse of the canyon and its depth and colors.

Finally, it was with **my strength** that I experienced the grandeur as we walked miles along the rim and wishing I was younger and with better ankles so that I could walk down to the canyon floor. It was this lack of strength though that kept me out of the canyon. It was this lack of strength that prevented me from seeing firsthand the active work of the Colorado River as it continues to carve the canyon. I denied myself the opportunity to experience firsthand that temperature change that happens as you descend into the canyon. It would have only been a 8 mile walk down and them back up. In my previous life I could have done it. But today I lack the strength. While I enjoyed the trip, I did not fully experience what could have been.

That is what strength can do.... it can engage you in life... physically. And that is what God wants...

God wants our strength.

But what happens when I am out of strength? What happens when my body won't do what God or I want it to do? That is when we realize that importantly, strength ultimately comes from God.

Scripture is actually pretty clear on this. While we do have our own strength and we do have some degree of control over our bodies, people of God from thousands of years ago to the present day have proclaimed that our strength is always grounded in God. In Paul's writing from prison he said this: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13) All that I can do I can do because God gives me strength.

Our strength fails – but God's power remains. We are never alone in this work. God helps us to express our love in heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Let us pray: God, we are called to love you with heart, soul, mind, and strength. We are called to love you with our will, essence, thoughts, and body. Most days it feels like we have just begun this journey. God, supply all of us the strength to continue this journey. Help us reflect your love in all we do. AMEN

Saturday, April 21, 2018

by: Rev. Roger Lenander

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."
4:13

Philippians

When Paul declares he can "do all things" he is referring not to his own accomplishments, but to do those things that come from following Christ. Being an active participant in the God's mission to love the world towards the purpose of redemption for all who believe means that Paul would bear the burdens that come with following in that purpose. For Paul it meant hunger, imprisonment, beatings, and violence to his own body. How could Paul continue on to proclaim this Good news of Christ who restores and redeems all who believe in Christ? Through Christ who lives in him. Christ is his strength made perfect in his weakness. He is sufficient.

Think of this applied not just personally in our own relationship with Christ, but also applied to our relationship as the church. As we carry the message of Jesus to the world around us, the Enemy is at work in our midst driving us to dividing and accusing one another of not being sufficient in our contribution to God's work. The enemy cannot win because the battle is not with our human strength, but with the strength of Christ who lives in us. This is a claim we make by faith. By grace. By scripture. Because faith, grace, and scripture do one thing – they point to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Heavenly Father, I ask you to strengthen my mind, body and spirit today. When I'm weary, may I be refreshed. When I'm worn, may I be renewed. When I'm broken, may I be restored. When I'm fearful, may I become faithful. I pray that I walk in complete confidence today knowing that the Lord Almighty is with me. Amen.