

**Experiencing God with your Mind
Romans 12: 1-2, Colossians 2:1-8**

Friends, by a show of hands how many of you have heard someone talk about experiencing a significant shift in their relationship with God because “it went from their head to their heart”?

In other words they went from knowing information about God - to having Him mean something to them personally and emotionally and thus it began to impact and change their life.

And maybe a number of you here this morning would describe the growth in your own relationship with God in such a way... as having gone from your head to your heart.

So you can relate to what that expression is trying to describe – which is how you started to care and actually believe in bunch of facts and information about God that had been crammed into your “head” by attending Sunday school and listening to sermons for most of your life and it turned into a relationship with God.

Now, here’s another question for you – those people who use that “head to heart” phrase... how many of them are in their mid-twenties or younger? And how many of them tend to be close to Baby Boomers or older?

Friends I would bet you – dollars to donuts – that virtually none of them are mid-twenties or younger and the vast majority of them are at least my age or older.

That’s because it was during the 50’s and 60’s North American society and culture underwent a massive paradigm shift in what people thought really mattered, in what people felt made things authentic and genuine and real and so it’s mostly Baby Boomers and their parents who will use that “head to heart” phrase because it represents they went through.

Now if you are not of North American or Western background you will probably not have experienced what I’m talking about in the same way – but since you’re in North America at the present time, it might help you to better understand the current condition of the church in western society.

You see in the 50's and 60's we started to move away from a modern scientific worldview which only cared about what could be observed and measured in a logical, rational fashion and embraced our feelings, started to get in touch with our "inner child" and anything that made us feel truly alive.

If you want an example of how this changed things just look at the Star Trek franchise.

In the original series Dr. Spock was admired for his ability to be logical and rational about things about and not let emotion or sentiment cloud his judgement, and he was always slightly puzzled by these inferior human traits and why humans allowed themselves to be governed by them.

When the franchise got re-booted in the late 80's with Star Trek TNG, the crew didn't have a Vulcan member anymore, instead it had an artificial intelligence android named "Data" who was always trying to understand and experience human emotion and sentiment.

And Data was admired as an Android who wanted to become a little more human than machine.

This is a subtle change but accurately reflects the shift that had taken place in our society and how we had come to value "heart over head instead of head over heart."

And it also changed what people expected in their church life and relationship with God as well.

There had to be more to Faith than just doctrine, theology and bible teaching if it was to be considered genuine and authentic. Faith needed to be experienced in our hearts - to make it come alive for us and assure us that it was authentic... and by the grace of Jesus, this happened for many many people, and that was a good thing.

And friends, this shift from "head to heart" also resulted in a major change in how we instructed and taught our children and youth in the church. We did not want our children and

youth to have that dull, lifeless, focus on facts and knowledge type of religious experience that we did.

So we shifted from an emphasis on bible and doctrinal content in curriculum and began to focus experiential programming.

We hoped that we could provide our kids and youth with the kinds of the opportunities they needed to allow them to have a “heart experience” of faith and have Jesus become their “personal” savior.

Are you following what I’m describing here friends? Does this make sense at all?

Now, I have to say that my goal in giving you this quick overview on this societal shift and how it affected the Church and our faith experience is not to criticize it... or to say that it was wrong, or that people didn’t genuinely experience God working through it.

Rather it’s just to help us see how the pendulum will often swing to the other side.

So if we wanted to be critical of how the Church in the past was too academic, too theological, too doctrinal – in other words too much “head knowledge” to the exclusion of “heart knowledge” that’s fine...

As long as we recognize that today we can be criticized for having too much “heart knowledge” emotion, sentiment, experience and so on to the exclusion of “head knowledge.” Now you may think that’s just fine – however take a look around you and count how many young adults you see among us...

And that’s probably more than what you will see percentage wise in your average church.

Church researchers are discovering that young people who grew up in the church, and attended the kids programs and the youth programs are leaving the church when they become young adults.

Why is that? Well friends it's because their faith hasn't gone from their hearts to their heads.

Best case scenario if our kids and our youth are in church every Sunday of the year, or attend their youth program every week that means we'll have given them 52 weeks of instruction, where they do some sort of Bible study for about 30 min... and most kids and youth are nowhere near that level of participation right?

Contrast that with what they do during the rest of the week. They are in school from Monday to Friday for about 9 months of the year, about 6 hours a day, in a classroom - where they are taught how to use their mind to understand and make sense of the world around them!

And friends, in the end that is what is really shaping them – how does 30 min each week compete against that?

It can't... and so when our kids and teens become young adults and come into their own mental maturity they would

agree with Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 13:11 *"When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me."*

But they would mean it in a totally different way than he did.

The tragedy is that our young adults grow up to realize that the faith of their childhood and teens years was nothing more than an emotional experience of a simpler sentimental time that basically just there to keep them out of trouble and now they've outgrown it...

...sort of like believing in Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny, or thinking they would marry their highschool sweet heart.

They quickly discover it doesn't have much to offer them as adults in the real world, or worse yet it is incompatible with the way their mind has been trained to see and understand this world...

Now again – I’m not bringing this up to be overly critical of, or make us despair about our efforts to raise up our children in the Lord, we do our best God helping us – though it ought to make us sit up and take notice of what is really shaping how our kids and youth think...

I bring this issue up to show you that by observation, study, reflection from general knowledge that comes from God’s creation around us, it is possible to come to a point where we can see a real and genuine need for faith to move from our “hearts to our heads.”

And friends as we start this series on experiencing God in His creation it is important to acknowledge, that one of the primary ways we do this - is through the use of our head, through our minds.

And it’s important that we remove any misconceptions that spirituality or faith is somehow disconnected from using our minds in a disciplined and rigorous manner – and instead

emphasize the fact that using our minds in this way can be a very spiritual thing to do...

And we need to realize that if we don’t use our minds, or encourage others to use their minds our faith and their faith, can actually suffer.

And the irony in this whole situation is that if we applied just a little bit of disciplined rigorous thinking we would discover that the whole “head vs. heart” comparison is actually a false dualism with no biblical support.

You see friends when scripture instructs us in Deuteronomy 6:5 to “*Love the Lord our God with all our heart...*” it isn’t actually speaking about an emotional situation as we would typically understand it.

Instead we are being commanded to obey, serve, listen to, honor, praise, be loyal to the Lord our God with the center of our very being – our heart – our “Leb” in the Hebrew.

So yes that includes our emotions and feelings, but it also includes how we think – how we use our mind.

In fact Strong's Hebrew Lexicon lists the different nuances of this word "Leb" that we translate as "heart" and it lists them in this order: 1. In the midst (of things) 2. Heart (of man) 3. Soul, heart (of man) 4. Mind, knowledge, thinking, reflection, memory

Isn't that interesting...

Then it goes to also list; 5. Inclination, resolution, determination (of will) 6. Conscience 7. Heart (of moral character) 8. As seat of appetites 9. As seat of emotions and passions 10. As seat of courage.

So how we typically understand and use "heart" in our day to day understanding in terms of "emotion and feelings" is not the primary usage in scripture, its actually 9th on the list of what it refers to in scriptural usage...

Now don't misunderstand me – I'm not saying that emotions and feelings are unimportant and that our mind is more important.

That would simply be falling back into that false dualism and its unintended consequences again - and that's exactly what we're trying to get away from with some disciplined and rigorous thinking...

Instead what we are encouraged, actually commanded to do in scripture- is to Love God, with **all** of our inner being, and we need to realize that this includes our mind and what we think about and how we think about it.

And this can certainly mean thinking about God and contemplating His nature, meditating on His Word and commands, studying to understand scripture and what it says

– but it also includes applying our thinking to studying and understanding all the various aspects of God's Creation; science, medicine, art, music, dance, mechanics, sports,

electronics, law, economics, languages, history, culture, philosophy... and so on.

Now you might not think this sounds very spiritual, thinking about very earthly, very material things but it is - because John 3:16 says *“For God so loved the cosmos – He sent His only Son...”*

The Cosmos is a beautiful arrangement friends; and it includes all the parts of creation we just listed and many many more – God sent His Son for these things too... so focusing on them is very Christian, very Godly...

And Romans 12:2 suggests that if we have been transformed by the Holy Spirit renewing our minds – then we have the capacity to determine God’s will - for these different areas of His creation through our thinking process - and thus we can experience God with our minds, we can love God with our minds.

And Romans 12:2 also tells us that if our minds are renewed then *“we are not to be conformed to the pattern of this aon – of this age”* any longer

So friends, we have to be deliberate in choosing to think like a Christian so that we aren’t swept along with the current process of thinking that is innately passed on to us from our culture and from being educated in its public schools, and that means being slightly more rigorous and in-depth than asking *“What would Jesus do?”* and not being so reactive as the religious right.

And we can do that by deliberately choosing to think about and mentally engage with the world around us by thinking things through according the biblical storyline of Creation, Fall, Redemption and New Creation.

Let me give you a basic example of how this can work with music styles.

Perhaps some of you remember the days when playing guitar and drums in church was not only frowned upon, it was argued that it was sinful and of the devil and we shouldn't allow it.

Well if we were going to think Christianly about this issue we'd start off by admitting that music was created by God, and the potential for different styles of music was also created by God and that developing them was part of our job as stewards of the earth – and all that was originally good.

Then we'd also affirm that when Sin came along and affected things it didn't create anything new, it simply twisted and redirected our usage and development of the creation for its destructive ends – so any musical endeavor we know now is affected in some way by Sin.

So yes – drums and guitars have been used to make music that does not honor God, but so have organs and choirs... everything is in some way affected by the Fall into Sin.

Then we bring in the good news “For God so loved music... that He sent His only Son...” and we study music; its form, its features, how its made, why some arrangements and patterns appeal more than others... and so on so that we can better understand from its Created structure how we can develop and use this part of God's creation according to His will.

And then, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we start making music in this way as an expression of our relationship with God and our belief that one day Jesus will return to make this whole creation new and unaffected by Sin.

And through this process of thinking like a Christian, by following the biblical storyline, we recognize that any type of music is acceptable to God provided it has been redeemed.

So this is a very basic, extremely simplified example of how to think like a Christian and how it can help us determine God's will for things and how we can also experience God in the process of that.

Now, it takes a commitment from us to discipline ourselves to think in this way – about everything... music, art, relationships, business, sports, weather... as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 10:5 *“we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”*

and no it’s not easy, especially at first, and it’s not always pleasant because its can be hard work.

But remember what Hebrews 11:12 says *“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”*

And friends, I think Paul does a good job at describing the benefits that can come from such disciplined rigorous Christian thinking in passage we read from Colossians 2 and I’m just going to read it again for you and just listen to in light of what we been speaking about.

² *My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete*

understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

⁴ *I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. ⁵ For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.*

So friends, did you catch that? The benefits of experiencing God with our minds...

They are; i) the full riches of complete understanding, ii) all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge and iii) not being deceived by other arguments, iv) a disciplined and firm faith in Christ.

Doesn’t that sound rewarding? Doesn’t that sound like the kind of faith that our young people would find useful in the real world?

Friends I hope you are getting mentally stimulated by this, and you're already starting to experience God - just by thinking about it!

And the good news friends is that this is available to all of us, because we all think, we all use our minds... we don't have to be smart, we don't have to be mental giants – we just need to start being disciplined in our thinking, and committed to thinking like a Christian... and be faithful in it and we will experience God with our minds. Amen