

The Covenant Pulpit



Deuteronomy 6:4-5, John 3:16, Matthew 28:18-20

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This next week I'll be in India, where more than a billion people are squeezed into an area one-third the size of the United States, making it the most densely-populated place on planet earth.

India is the world's largest functioning democracy, and an awaking giant in the global marketplace. But there's no place on earth where women are more exploited or oppressed than in India. Most baby girls are aborted or abandoned. Little girls are routinely sold into slavery. Older girls are forced into loveless marriages or prostitution. And the women of India have the highest suicide rate in the world.

But the most miserable people are the Dalits. These are the *Untouchables* in the caste system of Hinduism who make up one-third of India's population. Though most of them are Hindus, they are never allowed inside a Hindu temple or even recognized as fully human. Dalits are victimized by the most severe social apartheid that the world has ever known. You can recognize these *Untouchables* because they are usually darker and smaller, the poorest of the poor, shuffling through life with eyes cast downward. According to Hindu doctrine, they were born into this *untouchable* caste to atone for some terrible sin committed in a previous lifetime.

But Christianity is on the fast track in India. Though only 3% of Indians are Christians, the number of Christians has doubled in the last ten years. If the rate of growth increases at its current pace, it will soon be geometric. Hindu nationalists warn that, left unchecked, Christianity will replace Hinduism as the major religion of India in the next century.

What accounts for this explosion of Christianity? Most conversions have been among the Dalits, especially their women who are the lowliest of the lowest people in India. There's a reason for this: the gospel makes no distinction based on color, race, social status, or gender. How can there be a more compelling message than this: God loves the unloved, he touches the *Untouchable*, and those who walk with downcast eyes can now look up with dignity because their redemption was purchased by the passion of Christ!

I wish that I could see Rupali next week. She stands out in her church because she is tall, with long thin face, and creamy in color. She looks different because she is not a Dalit. She was born into a high caste. When her mother died, her father abandoned her. Her uncle took her in out of pity. At twelve years of age she announced that she had become a Christian. Her uncle was outraged that she would identify with a church of *untouchables*. He beat her unmercifully, but she refused to renounce her faith. Finally, she

was thrown out onto the streets to fend for herself. Most Indian girls in her situation would have turned to prostitution. Instead, she survived by begging for handouts from the people in her newfound church.

Later she married a Dalit who had been disowned by his family for becoming a Christian. It was an amazing act of courage. No one in her town had ever seen a high-cast person marry an *Untouchable*. The moment Rupali married him she too became *untouchable*, subjecting herself to degradation and humiliation. Recently Hindu authorities cracked down on Christians in her state. Her husband lost his job as a street cleaner. They were left with no money, no house, and no family. They faced certain starvation.

The authorities said that Christians could have their jobs back if they would register as Hindus at the courthouse. Some renounced their faith. Many masqueraded as Hindus while worshiping Christ in secret. Desperate to get his job back, Rupali's husband pretended to be a Hindu. Rupali was devastated. She knew that they had to love God with *all* their heart, soul, and strength. The One, who gave everything for them, deserved everything from them in return. She prayed passionately that God would show them a way out. God's way out was for them to go to the authorities and say that they *were* Christians after all. Now her husband works in a rice field for pennies a day and she sells cloth on the streets. They are still painfully poor, but their faith Christ is public again. Rupali says, "I'm most happy not to be pretending I'm not a Christian. Jesus didn't pretend. He stayed on earth and died on a cross for me."

It doesn't matter whether you're a poor Indian like Rupali, or a wealthy American like Horace who attends a PCA church in Alabama. Horace almost lost everything when his stock portfolio took a nosedive and the company he headed was about to fire him. Desperation drove him to his knees. Horace prayed, "Lord, what do you want from me?" The answer came back loud and clear: "I want *all* of you." Though his assets later skyrocketed, Horace drives a Ford and lives in a simple home. He and his wife have given away millions to missions, and have made 41 mission trips around the world. Both Rupali and Horace have the same thing in common: they are consumed with passion for God. They live by this principle:

Because God gives us all of himself, he wants all of us for himself.

Last week we learned that, more than anything else, God wants our passion. But it would be a mistake to think that passion is mere emotion. It is far more substantial than that. For Rupali it was the realization that the

one that gave everything for her deserves everything from her in return. For Horace it was realizing that God wants *all* of us. The word passion comes from the Latin *passus* which means “to suffer” or “to be consumed” for someone else’s good. Let’s look at how the Bible spells out passion for us:

1. The Great Commandment. Nowhere is passion more clearly defined than in Deuteronomy 6:4&5:

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

This commandment is at the heart of the Judeo-Christian faith. Jesus said that everything hangs on it. Rupali realized that this commandment forbids all pretenses. It changed Horace’s lifestyle. For every one of us life boils down to a simple choice: either we will live the great compromise or we will obey the great commandment. So what does this commandment ask of us?

An exclusive commitment. These phrases leap out of Deuteronomy 6:4&5: 1) “...**the Lord is one...**” The sacred Hindu writings say there is one ultimate reality manifested by countless gods and goddesses. Hindu theologian Sri RamaKrishna writes, “There are as many Hindu Gods as there are devotees to suit the moods, feelings, emotions and social backgrounds of the devotees.” There is a profound sense in which postmodern Western culture has become very Hindu in its thinking. We want life to be a buffet table where we can pick and chose whatever ideas, religions, moral choices, or gods that suit our changing moods. But the God of the Bible not only says that he *is* one God, but he is to be *the* one God in our lives. He says in Exodus 20:3, “You shall have no other gods before me.” Nothing in our lives is to come before him. He is preeminent in all things. 2) He is not only “**the Lord**” but is also “...**our God...**” and “...**your God...**” We belong to him and he belongs to us. He created us, and then redeemed us, for a passionate relationship with him. 3) “...**Love the Lord your God...**”

Biblical love is not defined by feeling, but a commitment to give *yourself* away to someone. In the old wedding ceremony the pastor would ask, “Do you give *yourself...*?” Love is an exclusive commitment: “Do you give yourself *only unto her...*?” Love gives when it costs everything: “Do you give yourself *only unto her for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness or in health...*?” And love goes the distance. “Do you give yourself *only unto her...until death do you part?*” St. Augustine wrote, “The opposite of love is not hate, it is indifference.” If a couple hates each other there is still hope for

the marriage. The real crisis is when they simply don't care anymore. Jesus warns in Revelation 3:16, "Because you are lukewarm—neither hot or cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth." Indifference makes Jesus want to throw up. Love is an exclusive commitment that calls for...

A heart passion. Deuteronomy 6:5 says, "Love the Lord your God with *all* your heart..." To the Hebrew mind, the heart was the core of our being. It involved our mind (the way we think) and our emotions (the way we feel). Proverbs 4:23 says, "Above all else, guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life." God wants passion from the very core of our being. In Psalm 86:11 David prayed to God, "...give me an undivided heart..." When God wrote his final epithet on David's tombstone it was that he was a "man after God's heart." In other words, everything within him passionately pursued the heart of God." Later you read again and again these words about some king of Israel: "He loved the Lord, but not with his *whole* heart as his father David did." God wants the very essence of your being.

A soul passion. Deuteronomy 6:5 says, "Love the Lord your God...with *all* your soul..." If the heart speaks of mind and emotion, the *soul* speaks of our spirit. The Hebrew word for soul is *nephesh*. Genesis 2:7 says, "The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." The Hebrew word for living being is *nephesh*. It is also the word for soul. When God breathed into Adam, he breathed himself into him. And what is God? He is a Spirit. The soul is that part of us that is Spirit. It is what distinguishes us from animals. God created animals out of dust, but didn't breath *his* Spirit into them. Do you ever wonder why humans alone are driven to worship someone or something? It is that spirit in everyone that longs to be reconnected with its source of being. God says that we will never really live until *all* of our spirit is fully plugged into him.

A strong passion. Deuteronomy 6:5 ends with, "Love the Lord your God...with *all* your strength." Here he is speaking about our body, and all the resources that we possess. St. Paul summed up his life this way in 2 Timothy 4:6, "For I am being poured out like a drink offering..." He is describing the wine that the priest in the temple pours out as an offering on an altar hot with fire. The wine bubbles, sizzles, and then evaporates. In sports terminology, we say of an athlete who spends himself in the game, "He left it all out on the field." If our God is a consuming fire, he will consume the lives of those who embrace him. St. Paul ended his life with these words, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have kept the faith." (2 Timothy 4:7&8). Can the same thing be said of us? The Great

Commandment asks so much of us. But, before you dismiss it, I want you to see a second description of passion.

2. The Great Commitment. The very essence of the Great Commandment is in the Great Commitment of John 3:16:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Everything that God asks for us in the Great Commandment he does in the Great Commitment. I believe that this is the greatest verse on stewardship in the Bible. Here’s the passion of God for us.

Love gives *itself*. John 3:16 defines love this way: “For God so loved the world that *he gave...*” To love is to give. But, before you can give what you have you have to give *yourself* first. When John 3:16 says that he gave “...his one and only Son...” it means that he gave himself. John 1:1 says of Jesus: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The logic is crystal-clear and profoundly-simple: because Jesus is God then, when God gave Jesus, he gave himself. Unless you first give yourself away, you will never joyfully give everything else away. To the extent that you hold back your things, you are confessing that you are holding back a part of yourself from the one you love.

Love gives its *best*. Notice the passion of those words, “...he gave *his one and only Son...*” When the Father gave the Son he gave that which he loved most. He gave that which was best. He gave that which had first place in his affections. He gave the “one and only” or all that he had. Passion doesn’t give the leftovers of life. It never calculates, “How much can I give and still have enough left over to meet *my* needs. Passion never plays it safe. It is the riskiest thing in the world.

Love gives to *redeem*. John 3:16 goes on to give the reason for this amazing love: “...that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” God’s love gives to those who don’t deserve his love, or even want it. God’s love is all about grace. At the heart of stewardship is an optimism that if we invest those who are the most lost, we will get the most return on our investment. If we love God we have to love those that he loves. He loves the world. He searches for the lost sheep, will not stop until he finds the lost coin, and runs to embrace the lost son to return from the far country. Do you have a heart that aches for your lost relative, your neighbor or classmate or co-worker who doesn’t know Christ, or the clerk at the shop,

or the pro at your golf club, or billions of people across the globe who are headed for a Christless eternity? If you are inspired to live the Great Commandment because your passion has been ignited by the Great Commitment then you will give passion to that which God gives his passion.

3. The Great Commission. It is not be accident that the Great Commandment to love God with *all* that you are and have leads to the Second Great Commandment; “Love your neighbor as yourself.” In short, just as God gave himself to you, and you give yourself to him, you must then give yourself to your neighbors. This is so counter-intuitive and counter-culture. We want to wall ourselves off from our neighbors, and protect ourselves from the evil that they might do to us. But Jesus’ last words on earth to his disciples are recorded in Matthew 28:18-20:

“All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always to the very end of the ages.”

This command is known as the Great Commission. It calls us to mission. But it is a co-mission or a partnership in mission. We do this together with Jesus. “Surely I am with you always...” We do it in his great power. “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.” When we were part of the world he cared enough to come to us through someone who cared enough to share the gospel with us. Having given ourselves to the one who gave himself for us, we now are called to give ourselves to those for which he has given himself. Sometimes passion calls us suffer. But it always calls us to stewardship. In a couple of weeks we will be called to make our *Faith Promise* pledge for the mission outreach of this church. You cannot be indifferent to this. It is at the very heart of the Great Commandment, the soul of the Great Commission, and calls us to the Great Commission.

I am so challenged by God’s passion for us and the world. When I read about Rupali in India and Horace in Alabama I am inspired. But when I think of someone I have met who understands the passion of Christ, I remember a Chinese pastor that we met in Beijing. He was arrested by the Chinese authorities for preaching the gospel. It didn’t matter that he was dragged away from his wife and little children. He figured that a prison was the best mission field possible. After all it was filled with rapists, thieves, and murderers and other assorted bad guys who needed Jesus. It didn’t take long for him to start sharing the good news of Jesus with his cellmates and in

the prison yard. And it didn't take the prison authorities long to clamp down on him. They beat him again and again for sharing the gospel.

Finally he was moved to a solitary cell. But that didn't stop his passion for Christ. He preached the gospel to the guards on the other side of the bars. So they blocked up the windows. He was now completely shut off from everyone else, and his voice was silenced. He remained in solitary confinement for over twenty years. The only time he got out was when they took him to a pit at the far end of the prison property. The pipes from the latrines of the prisons emptied into that pit. Once a week he was stripped naked, lowered into that cesspool, and forced to scoop out the excrement to be used as fertilizer on the fields that grew the prisoner's food. For him that was joy because he was out in the open where he could share the gospel with the guard assigned to him. But the smell was so bad that the guard would run beyond earshot. Even then he was filled with joy because he was free to sing hymns at the top of his lungs.

He was finally released from prison as an old man. The authorities gave him a parting warning: "When you get outside, don't talk to anyone about Jesus." As he walked out of prison his pent-up passion was ready to burst out. Waiting outside for him was his wife, children he hadn't seen in years, and grandchildren he had never seen. But he walked right by them, almost at a run, to the marketplace across from the prison where he began to share the gospel. The thing he missed most was not wife (although he loved her dearly) or his children (although he had missed them desperately) or the home cooked meal that they had brought with them, but the freedom to share the gospel.

Did it offend his wife or children? Not at all. They sat beaming with pride as he told that story. Those of us Americans who listened suddenly felt like spiritual pygmies. What is passion? It is a commitment to give *all* of yourself to him because he has given *all* of himself to you. And you can't wait to share it with those who don't yet know. It is to fulfill the Great Commission because, having been apprehended by the Great Commitment, we have given ourselves to the Great Commandment.

O Lord, consume us with such a passion as this!