

**PREPARATION FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM
(LOOKING BACK AND GROWING FORWARD)
STUDIES IN THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY
LESSON 4**

**The "Great Commandment"
Deuteronomy 6:4-9**

After stating the Ten Commandments, Moses went on to encapsulate the essence of this law in one of the most notable passages in the Hebrew Bible, Deuteronomy 6:4-9. The Jewish community calls it the Shema, from this passage's first word. Along with Deuteronomy 11:13-21 and Numbers 15:37-41 it is the prime prayer of Judaism, recited daily by observant Jews. Jesus identified it as the Great Commandment in Mark 12:29-30.

A literal translation might be: "6:4 Hear, Israel: YHWH (The transliterated Hebrew letters composing the name of God) is our God, only YHWH. 5 You shall love YHWH your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength. 6 These words which I command you today--take them to heart. 7 Repeat them to your children. Say them when you are sitting in your house, when you are walking on the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as a sign on your hand. Let them be headbands above your eyes. 9 Write them on the door frames of your houses."

The verses offer many possibilities in translation, all equally allowable given the rules of the Hebrew language, yet each having a different twist: "YHWH is our God, YHWH alone •YHWH our God--YHWH--is one •YHWH is our God; YHWH is one."

The question is: "Is the Hebrew statement an affirmation of the oneness of God--a profession of monotheism in the face of the pantheon of gods the Israelites knew from their Canaanite, Egyptian and Mesopotamian neighbors? Or is it primarily the affirmation that Israel's God is YHWH and that they may have no other?" We can not really be sure, though the difference is only one of emphasis. An affirmation of monotheism seems a bit too abstractly philosophical for those times, although it is conceivable that the statement was intended to deny the many Baal and Asherah gods the Canaanites recognized. Moses under divine inspiration was probably not interested in affirming the unitary nature of God so much as impressing upon Israel that there is only one God for them. His name is Yahweh. He had been faithful to them in the past. And they must be loyal to Him now. There may be other so-called gods among the other nations. But Yahweh is certainly the only God that deserves and demands Israel's love. The command to love Yahweh is central to the book of Deuteronomy.

Verse 5 is central to the book of Deuteronomy and to the entire Bible. Obedience to God is made possible only by a response of love to God. *"E. W. Nicholson said, 'It is in a very real sense true to say that the entire book is a commentary on the command which stands at the beginning: "You shall love the Lord your God...."' He goes on to say that a national law can never attain its goal as long as it is effected only by compulsion. It must be founded on the inward assent of the people."* - Maxwell, Deuteronomy

I have often quoted Saint Augustine's insightful comment that sums up all of Christian ethics: "Love God, then do as you please." If we truly love God we will want to do what is pleasing in His sight, and we need never worry about doing right because things which will not please God will not please us. If we do not love God, all the rules in the world will not make us obey Him. The law tells us what to do; love gives the desire to do the will of God.

This urging to love God is found ten times in Deuteronomy and nowhere else in the Pentateuch. It is the Shema, the basic essential creed of Judaism. It is used to open every Jewish service and is the first Scripture that every Jewish child commits to memory.

But, how do we love God? What is love?

"For to love you have to climb out of the cradle, where everything is 'getting' and grow up to the maturity of giving, without concern for getting anything special in return." Merton, Love and Living. Love is not about making a deal. It is a sacrifice. Love is not something that is packaged to be marketed. It is a form of worship. The people in the book of Deuteronomy, amidst their hardships and every day struggles, understood this, yet putting it into practice was a whole lot more complex.

The late Trappist Monk, Thomas Merton, wrote *Love is the revelation of our deepest personal meaning, value and identity. This revelation remains impossible as long as we are the prisoner of our own egoism. I cannot find myself in myself, but only in another. My true meaning and worth are shown to me not in my estimate of myself, but in the eyes of the one who loves me; and that one must love me as I am, with my faults and limitations, revealing to me the truth that these faults and limitations cannot destroy my worth in their eyes; and that I am therefore, valuable as a person, in spite of my short comings, in spite of the imperfections of my exterior "package."*

Merton goes on--*the package is totally unimportant. What matters is this infinitely precious message which I can discover only in my love for another person. This message, this secret, is not fully revealed to me unless at the same time I am able to see and understand the mysterious and unique worth of the one I love.*

In Simple Secrets of a Wonderful Marriage, Mel and Pat Krantzler, codirectors of a Marriage Counseling Center in San Rafael, CA, say that the *key* is to respect each other's space, rights, and needs. They outline several strategies which, they say, have carried them through the ups and downs of their own 18 years of marriage. For example:

- "No matter how you feel—be courteous."
- "Don't interrupt."
- "Value each other's differences."
- "Share the housework."
- "Work as hard at your marriage as you do at your career." (Watching TV together isn't enough.)
- "Accept changes in your relationship."

The common thread here is: even though husband and wife certainly *love* one another, for the marriage relationship to remain strong, that love must be *demonstrated and expressed* daily in concrete ways. (Source: *Bottom Line Personal*, 10/15/95, pp 9-10)

We must do the same with our love for God!

What is the meaning of the word, Love?

We have trouble with the word "love." We think it is a feeling, something you fall into, a warm fuzzy on our insides. But love is not a feeling. Love is an orientation of the will in action toward another. To love God and to love our neighbor does not mean that we have particular feelings about God or our neighbor. Love isn't something that you fall into like you fall into ditches or holes filled with mud. Love is a deliberate action of the will. To love means deliberately to turn ourselves toward another, to give away something of ourselves to someone else without regard for return. In the Bible, love is described in self-sacrificing terms: "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." To love is to be turned inside out toward someone outside of yourself - whether toward God or your neighbor.

As Jesus taught in the parable of the Good Samaritan, your neighbor, who is the object of your love, is anyone whom God has put in your path who has need of you at any particular moment. That may be someone with whom you have a brief encounter on the street or waiting in line at the grocery store or at the doctor's office. It may be the person who is in the hospital bed next to you. Your neighbor is a member of your household, your husband or wife, your children, your in-laws. Your neighbor is the person who lives next door, and two and three doors down, the fellow members of your congregation, your co-workers and classmates at school, the person in the office cubicle next to yours or the one who works next to you on the factory line. Think of all the people with whom you come into contact each day. Those are the people whom the Law says we are to love, whether they

are kind to us or not, whether we like them or not, whether we feel like it or not. And if we do not love our neighbor whom we see, how can we claim to love God whom we do not see?

Jesus links our love for our neighbor with our love of God. They are not the same but one is expressed by the other. We show our love for God by loving our neighbor. The cup of water we give to someone who is thirsty, we give to God. The food we give to the hungry, we give to God. The comfort we give to someone who is suffering, we give to God. The time we spend enriching the lives of others - at home, at work, in our community and congregation - is time offered to God. Those are our spiritual sacrifices; they are the exercise of our "priesthood."

How do we show our love for God?

Let us count the ways. We express our love for God by having no other gods in our hearts, by giving God our whole-hearted fear, love, and trust. We act in love toward God in our use of His Name in worship and prayer, and by our glad attention to His Word. We give our love to God by honoring the authorities He has placed over us. We express our love by caring for the health and well-being of our neighbor's body, by upholding marriage in the way we conduct our own sexual lives, by helping our neighbor improve and protect his property and income; by upholding our neighbor's reputation and not participating in gossip or slander; by being content with what we have rather than continually wanting what we don't have. Those are at least some of the ways by which we show our love for God and for our neighbor.

When we love in those ways, we reflect God's love to others, the way the moon reflects the light of the sun, the way a polished mirror reflects the light that strikes it. Our self-centeredness and inborn desire to be god in place of God has distorted the reflection of God's love. Just as fingerprints and dirt smudge the reflection in a mirror, so our sinfulness has destroyed our reflection of God's love.

God intends that His people who love Him should express that love in holiness.

It is interesting that holiness is seen by a startlingly small number of Christians as something that pervades every area, every aspect, every minute of our lives. Too many believers view "holiness" as perhaps something that is practiced on certain days, or at certain times of the day; or, they view "holiness" as an ideal to be attained by a select, "called" few, but not by every Christian. Understand that "holiness," being holy, is not a mystical term! It is not just an otherworldly description of those select few super-saints who live their entire lives unblemished by the temptations and concerns of this world. It is not a word that has all of its roots in the "by-and-by" realm of heaven. It is not a phrase that is descriptive only of the Christian locked inside a closet praying in earnest, the way Jesus described it.

It is true that, in some cases, "holiness" can take this sort of meaning. Take the example of the Benedictine Monks of the Abbey of Gethsemane near Bardstown, KY. Perhaps when you think of a "holy" person, a picture of a monk or a nun comes to mind. These monks of Gethsemane, the most famous of whom was the writer Thomas Merton, have a daily schedule that begins with a 45-minute song-and-Scripture service at 3:15 a.m., followed by reading, individual prayer, and breakfast. Then around 5:45 comes another song-and-Scripture service, a time of community worship; then the monks work at their daily jobs until noon. After a fourth 10-minute praise service, the main meal of the day is eaten, followed by more reading and individual prayer, and an optional "siesta." At 2:15 the day's fifth praise service commences, followed by four more hours of chores or reading and prayer. After another song-and-prayer service, supper is taken; then comes more reading, more individual prayer, and a seventh-and-final common prayer service at 7:30 p.m. After that it is early to bed. The schedule on Sunday is much the same, except that all work and chore times are replaced by additional times for reading and individual prayer.

That is "holiness." But that is also not the life for everyone. The life of a monk is a special calling reserved for only a few. But does that mean that the rest of us can not be holy? Quite the contrary! Because, although this type of personal, isolated holiness is spoken of in Scripture, far and away what is more common in God's Word is what we might call "practical holiness." Holiness for the masses, if you will. Applied holiness. Holiness that you and I can, should, and must put into practice as part of the natural flow of our lives. Something that

is not added on as an additional responsibility of our daily routine, but rather something that permeates every area of our existing routine. What exactly does it mean to be "holy," now? Well, the word literally means "set apart." It means we are separated; it means we are marked for a special God-given purpose; it means we bear the mark of being "not of this world." It means we are easily and unmistakably identifiable as children of God the Father and joint heirs in Jesus Christ. So to "be holy" means to be "set apart" in this way.

Loving God means we are to be pure.

The purity of God is vital to understanding His character. What is purity? Freedom from sin; ideally, sinlessness. Not succumbing to the temptations of the devil. And God has modeled this behavior perfectly for us through the person of Jesus Christ Who was and is God Incarnate. A vital piece of Christian belief is the understanding that Jesus Christ lived His 33-year earthly life entirely free from sin, in complete purity. So when God says, "Love the Lord thy God," part of what He says to us is, "Be pure."

We are not under the law and do not have to worry about our beards, eating habits, etc. But the underlying ideas of Deuteronomy and Leviticus still very much apply! Being concerned with the way we worship--that is what Paul was getting at in 1 Corinthians when he exhorted us to examine ourselves before partaking of the Lord's Supper. Steering clear of unnecessary compromise--that is what Jesus was teaching when He turned away the rich young ruler who was unwilling to give up his much-prized possessions. Taking care not to do things which might be interpreted as evil, even if we know ourselves that they're not so--that is what Paul, again, was talking about when he exhorted us not to become "stumbling blocks" before others. This is practical holiness! It is taking care to conduct ourselves in every arena of life as persons of purity, persons who will not compromise what we believe to be essential, persons who will go the extra mile and take the extra step to avoid even being identified with sin by being in the wrong place or putting ourselves in the wrong position. "Be pure," says the Lord, "at all times, because I the Lord your God am just that."

When God tells us to "love," He is telling us to be just.

Justice is a vital part of God's holiness. And once again God demonstrated that perfect justice to us through the example of Jesus Christ, God the Son. Christ who refused the societal expectation that certain groups of people are just "meant" to be treated as less than human; Christ who insisted that all persons be treated with worth; Christ who preached that eternal rewards would be administered according to God's just standards, not according to who accumulated the most prestige and external piety in this lifetime. To truly love, God commands, we must be just and fair.

Being just is a practical matter. It can not be something we "tack on" to the rest of our lives; it has to be something that pervades every area of life! Doing business--the way you treat your employees, and the way you treat your clients or customers. Dealing with neighbors--refusing the urge to harm with words or with actions. Dealing with outsiders--recognizing that truly there is no such thing as an "outsider" in God's eyes. "Love," God commands--and that means being just. In all arenas of life.

When God says to love, He is commanding us to be compassionate.

And once again God has modeled compassion perfectly through Jesus Christ, particularly through the sacrifice which Christ made on our behalf, the sacrifice of His life on Calvary on a cross that you and I might know God and know eternal life. Compassion is a vital part of love; we can not be loving without seeking to be compassionate in all areas of life.

This, too, is practical holiness! Being compassionate not as an afterthought, not just as a "special project" now and then, but at all times, in all ways. Being liberal and generous with our possessions, our money, and our time. Recognizing that there's much, much more to life than simply trying to get and keep "what's coming to us." Loving means being compassionate.

How much *do* you love God?

In Matthew, Jesus was asked for a summary of the law. The question came from an expert in the Law, a Pharisee. It was designed to trap Jesus in His own words. "Which is the great commandment in the Torah?" If you could summarize all that Moses taught in one simple commandment, what would that commandment be? It was a question that the Pharisees wanted desperately to know. If God expected us to obey His law, and He does, then what did the Law require? What was the minimum, the bottom line, the executive summary? The great debate among the teachers at the time of Jesus was whether the Torah, the five books of Moses, could be reduced to one essential commandment from which flowed all the others. They were searching for the Torah in a nutshell, a least common denominator, a bumper-sticker-sized slogan that would fully capture the Law of God. The Pharisees had so far only managed to expand things to 613 do's and don'ts.

We need to recognize such things as what a speaker recently called the "religion of St. Minimum." What's the least that I have to do to make it? How often do I really have to go to church? How much do I really have to give God? How often do I really need to pray? How much do I really need to know? What's the bottom line? The religion of St. Minimum tries to keep things practical, and painless. It delights in loopholes, and bargains with God to be "fair." It substitutes virtues for perfection, morality for holiness.

Jesus sensed the trap. He knows what is in a person's heart. He knows how we twist and turn against God's law. He replies with not one, but two great commands: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself." The two go side by side, hand in hand. The love of God and the love of our neighbor are inseparable. You cannot claim to love God if you don't love your neighbor. On these two commandments -- the love of God and the love of the neighbor -- the entire Torah and the Prophets hang. Love God with your whole being; and love whomever God puts next to you as you love yourself. And if that still doesn't fit on your bumper sticker, you can distill the Law down to one four-letter word: "Love." St. Paul writes to the Romans: "He who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,' and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." (Rom. 13:9-10)

In Matthew 22:37, the words which Jesus used to express *how*, and how *much*, we are to love God are "heart, soul, and mind." In Deuteronomy, the words "heart, soul and strength" were used. And in both the Hebrew and the Greek language, these words were pretty all-encompassing terms. The "heart" in particular was used to refer to one's emotions, thoughts, will, intentions, desires, courage--in short, saying that you were doing something with "all your heart" was a symbolic way of saying that you were *demonstrating* it and *expressing* it in *every possible way*. And *that is* how we are to love God! Loving Him with all your "heart" doesn't simply mean you *feel* lots of love toward God. It means that you *express and demonstrate* your love for your Lord in a *multitude of ways*. That is the message a person might try to get across to an indifferent spouse, asking, "Do you *really* love me?" That was the message that Jesus was trying to get across to Peter on the shores of the sea in John 21, "Peter, *do* you love me with all your heart?" That is, "How are you *showing* your love for me? I just *demonstrated* my all-surpassing love for you, Peter, by dying on the cross a few days ago. How are *you* demonstrating your love for *me*?"

(The question of the Law leads to another question. "Who then can be saved?" If God demands such wholehearted love for Himself and for others, then who would dare to step into God's presence? Would you? You know you don't love like that. Not even Mother Theresa loves like that. The Law question kills us. If the entire Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments, then we are hung by the Law and the Prophets. Our salvation is only in Christ Who died for our law-breaking.)