

## Deuteronomy 6:1-9. Love that Takes the Lot

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut 6:5). It is impossible to underestimate the importance of these words. In Matthew 22:34-40 we read:

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question:

"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

The Jewish religious leaders couldn't agree among themselves what was the greatest commandment. Some said it was the law of circumcision, others the law of the Sabbath and yet others the law requiring sacrifices. So if Jesus answered the command to be circumcised was the primary law he would be boxed in a corner and have to justify this position against those who thought that either the law of the Sabbath or the law of sacrifices was the greatest demand made by God.

What kind of person do you want to be? A person of importance? A person of effectiveness? A person of means? A man or woman of leisure? Maybe you are of a more pious bent. Do you want to be a man or woman of prayer or a man or woman of the Word or a person of good works. Jesus drills down below such surface matters to bedrock. Above all else you MUST be a man or woman of immense love. Note very carefully what Jesus said: "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." Now the Law and Prophets tell you what kind of person you should be. In other words, everything God expects of you and me depends on how much you love God and how much you love people. As Goethe profoundly stated, "We are shaped and fashioned by what we love."

A certain young teenager made a decision in her early teens that "Whoever loves me first can have my life." That man was mass murderer, the diabolical Charles Manson. That is the man this girl, Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme loved with absolute commitment and it was this love that shaped and fashioned her into a twisted and contorted person who, in 1976, tried to assassinate US President Gerald Ford.

What is the greatest command? Jesus' answer, spoken with full authority, comes from Deuteronomy 6 and from the text the Jews call the *Shema* (pronounce sh<sup>e</sup>-maa), the Hebrew word that means "Hear!" The Jews call this passage "Hear" (*Shema*) because it is the first word used: "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength*" (vv4-5).

Chapter 6 begins by commanding Israel, when they enter the promised land, to obey all the commands, decrees and laws that Moses teaches them. God is challenging his people to reach a high level of moral excellence. Zig Ziglar quips, "Your attitude, not your aptitude will determine your altitude." Moses recognizes that God's people will only succeed in scaling the heights of moral excellence *if God's laws are written upon their hearts*. At the end of the day you will only do God's will if you want to do it. You

will never please God if deep down in your heart you have no intention of doing so. That's why in verse 6 Moses says, "*These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.*" Moses says this immediately after giving them the Shema. In other words, the foundation of heart-obedience is this: "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*" So, if God's people love Yahweh, God, with every fibre of their being then all of the commandments relayed by Moses will indeed be upon their hearts. Jesus says the same thing to you and me, "*If you love me, you will obey what I command*" (Jn 14:15). That's what it boils down to: Do you love Jesus more than your spouse, more than your kids, more than your siblings, more than your parents, more than your own life?

Chapters 6-11 belong together. Chapter 6 begins with the foundation of heart-obedience, that is, wholeheartedly loving Yahweh, God. Chapter 7 continues this theme by describing God's covenant as "*a covenant of love*" (vv9, 12). In Chapter 10:12-13 Moses asks, "*And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your good?*" He begins the concluding chapter of this section by urging them again, "*Love the LORD your God and keep his requirements, his decrees, his laws and his commands always*" (11:1). He tells them that they will experience all the wonderful covenant blessings of God "*if you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today - to love the LORD your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul*" (v13). He tells them that the LORD will drive out the other corrupt peoples from the promised land "*If you carefully observe all these commands I am giving you to follow - to love the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways and to hold fast to him*" (v22). So we can summarise the central thrust of Chapters 6-11 in one exhortation: Love God unconditionally and thereby obey all his commands and enjoy all his promised blessings. The Heart of Love for God is a mighty current that will sweep you along into a Life of Heart-Obedience and this river will in turn take you and empty you into a limitless sea, an Eternity of Fulfilment. It's an unstoppable sequence: Love for God, Heart-Obedience, Fulfilment.

### Why should we love God?

Why should God's people love God with every fibre of their being? Let's get the zoom lens operating and take a closer look at what we are supposed to hear in verse 4, the *Shema*. In Hebrew no verb is used in this original statement. There are only four Hebrew words: (1) Yahweh; (2) Our-God (1 word); (3) Yahweh; (4) One. The first reason is provided in the words *Yahweh our-God Yahweh One* OR, if you prefer, "The-Lord our-God the-Lord One".

God's people are entering a land already occupied by various people groups. One of the main gods worshipped by these people groups was called Baal. But despite using the same name there was not one Baal worshiped in Canaan but many Baals. People developed their own versions of Baal. By contrast, God's people are told *Yahweh our-God Yahweh One*, that is, to remind them that their God is One not Many, not like Baal. God is who he is. There is only one true version of what God is like and that's the version he himself gives us. So be warned. Don't treat God as though he is made of clay or plasticene, as though he can just be refashioned according to what you think he should be like. You and I must take God as he is and love him for who he is.

In verse 3 Moses reminds Israel how Yahweh promised to make them prosperous and numerically great in the land. He does this as "the God of your fathers". In other words this promise is not new, it was made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is one promise, which presupposes one underlying covenant. The point is that *Yahweh is not one God at one time and another God at another time.*

Blaise Pascal, the 17<sup>th</sup> century French scientist and mathematician said, "It is right that what is just should be obeyed. It is necessary that what is strongest should be obeyed." Yes, God is the strongest and so it is pointless to disobey him. However, what Deuteronomy 6:4 is teaching us is that God is just, righteous, faithful and, indeed, "it is right that what is just should be obeyed." To say Yahweh is One is to say that he does not change, that he remains faithful to his promise, that he is utterly faithful and dependable; that he is just. He is indeed a God worthy of your love.

Verse 4 can be read another way: *Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone*, meaning "Other people may worship other gods but we have a relationship with only one God and we will worship and love only him."

#### **But what does it mean to love God?**

The word "love", like our English word, is used very broadly in the Old Testament to describe loving food, sleep, the soil, wisdom, the good, evil, oneself, one's neighbour, one's offspring, and the opposite sex (licitly or illicitly). So it would have been a pretty flat command if Moses had just said, "Love Yahweh." That's why the words "*with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might*" are added.

A girl wrote the following letter to her former boyfriend:

Dearest Jimmy,

No words could ever express the great unhappiness I've felt since breaking our engagement. Please say you'll take me back. No one could ever take your place in my heart, so please forgive me. I love you, I love you, I love you!

Yours forever, Marie.

P.S. And congratulations on winning the state lottery.

The demand that we love God 'with all our heart, and with all our soul and with all our might' indicates that there is no ulterior motive involved. We do not love him for what we can get out of the relationship. We love him for who he is.

Back at 4:29 Israel was warned that if they ever were sent as captives to another country because of worshipping other gods then there is still hope if they truly seek God - "*you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul.*" We've already observed from chapters 10 and 11 that loving God means serving or worshipping him "*with all your heart and with all your soul.*"

We know Israel failed to love God wholeheartedly and did end up in captivity. Are we any different? Are we capable of generating this love for God in our hearts? No! Hence the promise of 30:6: "The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live" (30:6). We must allow God to do some surgery in our hearts if we are to love him as we ought.

In Deuteronomy 6:7 Moses insists that it is parents who are primarily responsible for teaching their children how God wants them to live their lives. He says this immediately after commanding them to love God with everything they've got. It is only when God's people truly love God that there is hope for future generations. The English poet Yeats said, "Education is not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire." Educating our kids is not a matter of merely filling their minds with the knowledge of how God wants them to live. The point is that as parents themselves love God and, with this foundation teach their children, they are lighting the fire of love for God in the hearts of their children as well.

As parents take to heart the force of Deuteronomy 6. Seek to bring up your children "in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4). But make sure you don't reduce this down to have a structured time of family devotions, as helpful as such a discipline may be. What matters above all is that you yourself as parents live lives that express the depth of your love for the Lord and in that context pass on to your children how they too can express their love for the Lord.

*"Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door-frames of your houses and your gates"* (vv7-9). The command to "impress" on children's hearts involves the image of "the engraver of a monument who takes hammer and chisel in hand and with painstaking care etches a text into the face of a solid slab of granite." Verses 8 and 9 clearly continue with parallel metaphorical imagery - the Jews have made a terrible mistake in taking this language literally and making containers containing the Shema and other Scriptures to wear on the arm (*phylacteries*) or place at the top of the right-hand door post (*mezuzahs*). The point is that because we love God so much we train ourselves to consider how he wants us to live in every situation of life. This way of talking is familiar in the Ancient Near East. So an Egyptian wisdom teacher urges concerning his own words:

Let them rest in the casket of thy belly,  
that they may be a key in thy heart.

Joseph Addison said, "What sculpture is to a block of marble, education is to the soul." It is the God-given task of parents to take a hammer and chisel and etch and carve on the souls of our children all that God requires of them. In other words, we must go to great lengths to ensure that our children deeply and profoundly understand the Lord's will for their lives. We must not assume that because they grow up in a Christian home or church community they will develop this understanding by osmosis.

Moses does not say to parents, "Send your children to me and other leaders of the people and we will teach them how they should please God." He tells the parents to take responsibility for teaching their own children. There is every reason why parents, in seeking to fulfil this responsibility, should encourage their children to go to Sunday School and get involved in their church's youth group. But at the end of the day other teachers and leaders only supplement and reinforce what you as parents are already doing. We parents must take primary responsibility for teaching our children.

The first command is *Shema*, Hear! Let's make sure you and I have taken to heart who God is: Yahweh Our-God Yahweh One. There's none like him. We must let him reveal

himself to us and love him for who he is. Jesus, as God's own Son, knew his Father thoroughly and loved him so completely that his very food, he said, was to do his Father's will. So unconditional was his love that, though he abhorred the prospect of dying on the cross, he was so dedicated to fulfilling his Father's will, that he laid down his life for us, his enemies. And, we are told, he did this "for the joy set before him." Like Jesus let us too love God with everything we've got, knowing that unconditional love for God takes us into depths of heart-obedience which in turn pours us into fathomless depths of eternal blessing and fulfilment. May the Lord circumcise our hearts to love him and, as we have opportunity to impact the lives of children, may it be that as we teach them how to please God our own love for God ignites a passion for God in their own young hearts!