

Careful to Remember

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[0 : 0 0] Deuteronomy We pray that you will now take that word and write it on our hearts and open our minds to receive it.

And we pray that this may be so, so that we will be better servants of Jesus Christ. We ask this in his name. Amen. A Pharisee, an expert in the law, came up to Jesus and said to him, Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?

And Jesus said to him, You shall 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 Jesus says nothing new there, for he's actually quoting from Deuteronomy chapter 6. Indeed, quoting from Deuteronomy 6 verse 5, one of the most important verses really in the whole of the Old Testament.

Strict Jews today will still recite twice each day Deuteronomy 6 verses 4 and 5. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

[1 : 3 5] You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Might. There is the heart of God's requirements for his people.

Those verses are in some sense a summary of the Ten Commandments, which have occurred in the preceding chapter. In another sense, they are a heading for the rest of the book of Deuteronomy.

For in Deuteronomy 5 to near the end, 28, we get an outline of all the laws and commandments that God gave his people in the Old Testament. And these verses about loving the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and strength, in a sense are the key to all the laws that God gives.

A summary of the Ten Commandments in the preceding chapter, and then the key by which we understand all the laws that follow in the subsequent chapters. Notice that the command to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength, is about the internal attitude or motivation or desire of people with response to God.

And so as the key to all the laws that follow, it tells us how those laws are to be kept. So when we read in later chapters about the laws of which foods are clean and which foods are unclean for the Israelites, then it's all about how to love God with all their heart, soul and strength.

[2 : 5 9] When we read the laws about putting prophets to death who are false prophets, that's a demonstration about how to love God with all your heart, soul and strength. The obligations to celebrate the various feasts, the feasts of Passover and weeks and tabernacles, they are a way in which Israel is to love the Lord its God with all its heart, soul and strength.

The Israelites were commanded in a little obscure command to have tassels on their cloaks. That was again in part to show how they were to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul and strength.

They were to give tithes, a tenth of all their produce, of their fields and all their income. And again that was to be a demonstration of loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength.

For God was not just on about some sort of external obedience, as though you've got to do the right thing regardless of what you think or feel. Anybody can give a tithe begrudgingly or unwillingly.

That's not obedience to God. What God wants is the law kept with a heart that loves him totally, with a soul that loves him totally and with all the strength.

[4 : 15] That's how we are to respond to God. And notice that the response is to be a total response. Moses doesn't say, love the Lord your God half-heartedly, with some of your heart, some of the time, with some of your soul, with some of your strength.

But rather with all of your heart and all of your mind and all of your soul and all of your strength. It's total and absolute, uncompromising, unshared with any other.

And it arises out of the verse before. Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone.

There is no other. There is no other God. Not only is there no other God for Israel, but there is no other God in the world. And therefore there being one God and one God only, Israel is to love that God with all their heart, soul and strength.

Not to share their allegiance with any make-believe God or idol. Total and unqualified love of God. And that, of course, is also Jesus' message in the New Testament.

[5 : 33] He doesn't change that at all. Remember when he said, no one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.

You cannot serve God and money, he said. That's the same total, absolute devotion and allegiance to God that we find in Deuteronomy reiterated by Jesus.

He also said, if anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Odd words for Father's Day.

But not meaning hating father, but rather that God must be loved above all else. It's an uncompromising, total love, devotion to Almighty God.

And indeed love is the best word that describes how we are to respond to God. This is the first time in the Old Testament that anybody is called to love God at all, here in Deuteronomy chapter 6.

[6 : 34] Of course it's a word that's so often misunderstood. People today think that they can make love and really what they're doing is having sex. People today crave love, but they end up finding that all they're doing is having sexual activity, which doesn't produce love, and doesn't give them love, and doesn't express their love.

But of course that's not the sort of love that's being called for here either. Very often today we get confused and we think that love is purely an emotion. So falling in love is equated with some sort of emotional experience.

But God is not wanting his people to have warm feelings for him. He commands us to love him. That's a command. Our emotions generally can't be commanded.

Because to love God is more than warm feelings, more than just some emotional experience, but rather an act of the will. Just as in a wedding service, couples are asked not, do you love?

That's pretty obvious. But rather, will you love? That is an act of the will. And that's the same for God. He's commanding us to love him. It's an act of the will.

[7 : 43] Will you love him? With all your heart, soul and strength. Or not. And as in a marriage, so there is to be an exclusive devotion and love between the marriage partners that is not shared with anybody else at all.

The same with our love to God. It is to be exclusive. Many times in fact in the Bible, the relationship between God and his people, whether in the Old or the New Testaments, is described in terms of a marriage.

That in a sense, God has pledged himself as a husband to a wife to his people, both Old and New Testaments. And so that love is not to be shared with anyone else.

That's why God is a jealous God. Not jealous in a bad sense of the word, but jealous in the sense of a husband, jealous for his wife's total love of him, her total response to him.

So love, you see, is not an emotion. It is fundamentally an act of the will. And that's why it can be commanded. And that indeed is why it is commanded. But it's very appropriate that love is the term that's used for the fundamental response of God's people in the Bible.

[8 : 51] It's appropriate because that's how God treats us. We love God because God loves us. That's why he can demand love. He's not an ogre sitting in the sky wanting us to love him, but rather he's a lover wanting us to love in response.

So when God demands of us love, we realize that what he's on about is a mutual relationship. That we relate to God personally, and he to us as well.

And that we love him because he first loved us. And so in the Old Testament, that's made clear. If you were here last week, you'll remember some of the things that God did for Israel in its immediate past history.

That's his love at work. His love at work bringing them out of Egypt. His love at work bringing them through the wilderness and sustaining them. Giving them food and drink and protection through the 40 years in the wilderness.

That's the love of God at work. And therefore in response to his love, he demands of his people love him back. And of course it's the same in the New Testament as well.

[9 : 55] We are called to love God as Christian people because God has loved us first in Jesus Christ and his death on the cross. So then, love is a summary of what God wants us to do for him.

To love him because he loves us. To love him as an act of the will. Not as a warm emotion or fuzzy sort of feeling. But rather as something deliberate and active.

But to love him as a total and absolute love. As a wife to a husband or a husband to a wife. That's how we're to love God. Unshared with anyone else. Uncompromising, total in its attention and love of God.

The importance of this is drawn out by the verses that follow. Keep these words that I'm commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you're at home and when you're away.

When you lie down and when you rise. Four periods of time that are mentioned. Is it really that they are the four and only four periods of time when we are to teach about the love of God and our response of love to our children?

[11 : 09] Is it that we're only to teach them when we lie down or when we rise or when we sit at home or when we're away? Well no, of course not. The Hebrew idiom often puts two opposites together to indicate the totality of everything.

So when in the beginning of the Bible we read that God created the heavens and the earth. It doesn't mean that God made two things the heavens and the earth. It means by putting in a sense opposites together God made everything.

So when Moses commands the Israelites to teach or recite to your children when you're at home and when you're away it means all the time. And then he reinforces that by saying and when you lie down and when you rise meaning all the time.

So you get Moses telling the people to teach their children all the time twice. That's how important it is. You are to always be reciting to your children teaching your children these things about the love of God and love for God all the time.

That's how important it is. Now we're very keen I think in our society to teach our children that two plus two equals four. I don't know many parents who would say to their children when you get to about 15 you decide for yourself whether two plus two equals four or equals seven or equals something else.

[12 : 32] We're fairly keen to make sure our children learn how to spell. Probably not as keen as we used to be but still relatively so. So we really insist that if they're going to write the word hippopotamus at least it must have an H at the beginning and a couple of P's in the middle even if we can't remember how the rest of the word goes.

And we're fairly keen to teach our children at least some basics of right or wrong. So we wouldn't say to a child well when you get to 15 you decide whether it's right or wrong to kill somebody.

We'd be a little bit more directive I think than that. But why is it when we're dealing with the things of God that we don't have that same attitude?

Why is it when we're dealing with the things of God we say well when you get to about 14 or 15 you decide for yourself. Why is it that we don't take God as seriously when we teach our children as we do about arithmetic and spelling and some basic issues of morality?

Don't we know that 2 plus 2 stems from God? Don't we know that it's God's order that creates the sort of basic arithmetic of the world? Don't we know that the fundamental reason why it's bad to murder is because of the character of God?

[13 : 42] But no we spend more time teaching basic issues of morality and arithmetic and spelling than we put God on the side. We leave that to the Sunday school teachers or the vicar or the church or the godparents maybe.

But you see God is more real than 2 plus 2 equals 4. God is more real than how we spell hippopotamus. God is more important than do not kill because God is the one from whom all of that derives.

God is more very upset and said Jesus will be very upset that James doesn't think he's real.

How many children have such conviction about the truth of God? Very few I think and maybe very few of us. Why is it that we're not prepared to say to children or adults even that those who reject God are wrong?

Why is it that we let them decide and think well it's ok for me and it's ok for them to decide for ourselves what we think is right or wrong? I think we're in danger of relativising what is absolute truth.

[15 : 18] Caught up in a postmodern world of tolerance where tolerance is the highest virtue of all and yet it's a flawed ideal when we tolerate what is untruth. God is not a take it or leave it matter.

God is real more real more important than any of the laws of algebra any of the laws of spelling and any of the basic principles of morality in this world.

Beginning of verse 7 which is so weak in this translation which says recite them means teach them diligently engrave upon them inculcate in them. Moses is on about parents engraving in the hearts and minds of their children something about the truth of God that will last them for their lifetime.

He's not on about some little things that they can decide to take or leave when they get to 15. He's seeing the role of the parents as being engraving in hearts and minds something that will be indelible about the love of God for them and their response of love for him.

It is better to be an illiterate and innumerate Christian than it is to be literate and numerate but an agnostic or an atheist because God is more important than those things.

[16 : 36] And yet sadly we don't seem to see that priority so often. Even in this church we struggle to find an extra Sunday school teacher because our Sunday school is growing. How often as parents do we take seriously the inculcation of Christian truth to our children?

Telling them what's true. Not saying you decide for yourself but saying this is true whether you believe it or not. How often do we pray with our children? Read the Bible with our children? Have family prayers together?

Find out what they learn in Sunday school? Encourage them to think Christianly about their schooling and about their world in which they live. Moses gives some other examples about how important it is to love God with all the heart, soul and strength.

In verse 8 he says, bind these words as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. Since Jesus' day these have been taken literally by strict Jews.

You've probably seen pictures or met people who have massutzers on their door of containing the words of Deuteronomy 6 verses 4, 5 and onwards, little boxes on the side of their door before you enter the house.

[17 : 51] You may have seen Jews who have got strapped on their forehead sometime or seeing pictures, little box on their forehead strapped, keeping this law quite literally about binding something as an emblem on your forehead.

But of course these words originally were not meant literally, though there's nothing necessarily wrong with taking them literally, so long as we understand the full meaning of what's being demanded here, something that is perhaps best taken metaphorically.

The key to it, verse 6, keep these words that I'm commanding you today in your heart, in your heart, we can't do that literally in a sense. So these analogies in verses 7 and 8 are to show what it means, show how we can put these words in our heart, that's how important it all is.

Israel is on the edge of the promised land. It's spent 40 years in the wilderness, it's afraid to enter because the land is inhabited by strong people, strong nations, fortified cities, it's afraid to enter because Moses is about to die and it's unsure of its future leadership.

It's on the verge of the land and it's overlooking the land. And so the words that come in verses 10 and 11 are enormous encouragement to the Israelites, encouragement about God.

[19 : 12] When the Lord your God has brought you into the land, not if, but when, certainty and confidence you see. And when the Lord your God has brought you in, not when you've got there, not when you've made the effort, but when God brings you, it's God's work.

Again, an encouragement to a people about to enter the land. And it's not just any land, but it's the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to give you. And as we saw last week, one of the themes in this book is the faithfulness of God to promises that he's made in the past.

So again, an encouragement to Israel to enter the land because God has promised to give this land. But it's not just any old land, it's a great land. Look at the things that are in the land that are being given to Israel at the end of verse 10.

Firstly, it's got fine large cities that you did not build. They don't have to go in and start from scratch, they're there. Basic protection. Houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill.

Not only basic shelter, but far more beyond God is giving to his people. Thirdly, there are cisterns that you did not hew. Maybe we don't quite understand the significance of that.

[20 : 22] But if you go to Israel, you soon see how important water is. If you go to Jerusalem, you might see the tunnel built by Hezekiah, 520 metres long, cut through solid rock in 700 BC in order to ensure a water supply for Jerusalem.

That's some effort in 700 BC to cut half a kilometre through solid rock for water. water. You go to a place like a rut in the desert and you see a well that's 75 feet deep through solid rock to get water.

Some effort. You go to Masada and you see, and even though this is well after Moses' time, but you see the cisterns to keep water at Masada. Cut in solid rock, 1.4 million cubic feet worth of water.

That's quite a lot of water. Cut by hand in solid rock. That's a lot of work. And if you're the Israelites and you're being promised a land that already has cisterns that you don't have to hew, that must be some encouragement because water is so important.

But not only that, in verse 12, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant. Well that's brilliant too because vineyards and olive groves take 3, 4, 5 years before they bear fruit. Here they're already there and they're already bearing fruit.

[21 : 42] God is not only promising the basics of water and food and shelter and protection but he's promising far more besides because God is a great and generous God. God is a God who loves to give to his people.

God is a God who loves to lavish upon his people good and great things. God is not a stingy giver. But there's a warning. The warning comes at the end of verse 11 and the beginning of verse 12.

when you've eaten your fill, that is you're replete and satisfied, then take care that you do not forget the Lord. It's not talking in terms of oh who was that who brought us out of Egypt as though you'd forget God's name.

But it's rather the forgetfulness that comes through satisfaction. Sunday afternoon, roast dinner, nice pudding, bit of wine maybe, chocolates, cheese, coffee, open log fire, put the feet up, what happens?

We drift off. We fall asleep. Sort of contented sleep. The sleep that comes from satisfaction. That's the same sort of thing that's being warned against here spiritually as well.

[23 : 00] That Sunday afternoon stupor. Israel will enter the land, all these things provided, luxury, satisfaction. When you've eaten your fill, how tempting it would be to sit back and look around and think we've made it.

To sit back and think about how satisfied you feel. Dozing off into that spiritual stupor of forgetfulness of God who's provided it all for you. That's the warning.

And that's an important warning because spiritually we're more in danger when we're wealthy and satisfied than when we're poor. We spend more time praying for the poor than the rich and yet the rich and the satisfied are those in more spiritual danger and peril it seems to me.

Many Christians lose their way as Christians when they begin to settle down, get a house, begin to have a bit of money for a change, begin to acquire goods and possessions, have more exciting leisure times, begin to have family and lots of goods and property.

That's when Christian life's under threat. That's when Christians who've been keen in their university days when they didn't have perhaps much money, keen in the young adult life as they're beginning to get things, drift off, doze off.

[24 : 16] The late twenties, thirties or forties, whenever it is, whenever we get a job, that's the Sunday afternoon Christian feeling as we begin to doze off and forget about God. Never forget that all the abundance and prosperity we have and we do comes from a gracious and loving God.

Never forget to thank him every day for every good gift he gives you. Because if you forget one day then it's easier to forget the next and if you forget two days to give him thanks then the chances are you'll probably forget the third day as well.

It's very easy to doze off on a Sunday afternoon and it's very easy to doze off spiritually when we're wealthy and prosperous and have received much blessing at God's hand.

We have even more to give thanks to God for than Israel did. How much more peril we're in then to fall into that spiritual stupor. Let me remind you of some of the things God has given us through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Blessings and far more than cities and systems, far more than vineyards and olive groves, far more than all the things that Israel received when it went into the good land, are ours through our Lord Jesus Christ.

[25 : 39] But we're in the same danger that Moses is warning the Israelites of. These are the words of the very first reading on the first Sunday I was in this parish.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.

He destined us for adoption as his children according to the good pleasure of his will to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us.

When did you last give thanks with all your heart and soul and strength to an almighty and gracious God for every good thing that he's given you in and through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Maybe now is a good time to resume the practice of giving thanks and loving God with all our heart, soul and strength. Amen.