

The Greatest Commandment (Deuteronomy 6)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Deuteronomy

I. Background / Review

- a. **Personal Reflection:** I recall when the Lord called to Moses from the burning bush at Mount Sinai: “Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” (**Exodus 3:5**)
 - i. In a similar way, I feel that as we enter **Deuteronomy 6**, we are entering “holy ground”. While all the Scriptures are inspired, the passages we now encounter go right to the heart of the Old Testament. They are worthy of special honor and attention!
- b. The **Book of Deuteronomy** consists of a few speeches that Moses gave to the Israelites near the end of their 40 years of wandering in the Wilderness.
- c. The second of those begins in **Deuteronomy 5**, with Moses recounting the Lord giving the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. The people were terrified at their encounter with the Lord and asked that they no longer hear His voice. Their leaders went to Moses and requested that Moses alone speak with the Lord, and they would do whatever the Lord said.
 - ii. The Lord was pleased with this request, expressing that He wished they would always have that fear of the Lord, which would keep them from sin and, as a result, bring many blessings into their lives.
- d. **Deuteronomy 6** includes one of the most famous passages in all of the Old Testament: what Jesus would later refer to as “the greatest command” (**Matthew 22:36-38**).

II. The Lord God is One

- a. Read **Deuteronomy 6:1-4**.
- b. “The Lord our God is one Lord”
 - i. Several translations based on the Masoretic Text, as well as at least one based on the LXX, render this: “the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (see LES, NKJV, ESV, etc.).
- c. **Question:** Does this contradict what the Scriptures teach and what Christians understood from the beginning of the church, namely that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (three different persons) are all God?

- i. **Related Question:** Does the New Testament contradict the Old Testament (this passage in particular) regarding the nature of God being manifested in three persons?
- ii. The Old Testament has indications throughout that while there is only one God, there are places where God is referred to in a plural sense (more than one “person” or “personality” represented). For example:
 1. **Genesis 1:26** - “Let *us* make man in *our* image”.
 2. **Psalm 109/110:1** - “*The Lord* said to *my Lord*, sit at *my right hand* until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.”
 3. **Psalm 44/45:6-8** - “*Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; Your royal scepter is a scepter of uprightness. You loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, Your God, anointed you with the oil of gladness more than your companions.*”
 - a. This passage is prominently quoted in **Hebrews 1:8-9** to support the divinity of the Son of God.
- iii. In the New Testament we find a clearer development of God being a unified one but consisting of three persons. So, in some passages, God is referred to in a singular sense, but in others, God is referred to as more than one person. For example:
 1. **John 1:1** - “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with* God, and the Word *was* God.”
 - a. Again, two persons (one referred to as “the Word of God”) are both referred to as “God”.
 2. **John 10:30** - “I and My Father are one.”
- iv. It seems that there have been believers from near the beginning of the church, and certainly extending through the modern era, who have struggled with this concept of there being only one God, in view of the references to both the Father and to the Son of God. Two common (but *heretical*) attempts to ‘resolve’ this apparent contradiction have been:
 1. **Heresy No. 1:** Make the Father and the Son of God into the same person. Somehow, make the claim that the Father *became* the Son.
 2. **Heresy No. 2:** Reject the divinity of the Son of God.

- v. Early Christian writer Hippolytus, writing against the heretical teachings of a man named Noetus who had lived in Smyrna prior to his time, explained how Christians believe in only one God, but in three persons. Noetus taught, in attempting to defend belief in only one God, that the Father and Son were the same person. From *Against the Heresy of One Noetus*:
1. "Now they [the followers of Noetus] seek to exhibit the foundation for their dogma by citing the word in the law, 'I am the God of your fathers: you shall have no other gods beside me;' (**Exodus 3:6** and **20:3**) and again in another passage, 'I am the first,' He says, 'and the last; and beside me there is none other.' (**Isaiah 44:6**) Thus they say they prove that God is one. And then they answer in this manner: 'If therefore I acknowledge Christ to be God, He is the Father Himself, if He is indeed God; and Christ suffered, being Himself God; and consequently the Father suffered, for He was the Father Himself.' But the case stands not thus; for the Scriptures do not set forth the matter in this manner....
 2. "If, again, he allege His own word when He said, 'I and the Father are one,' (**John 10:30**) let him attend to the fact, and understand that He did not say, 'I and the Father *am* one, but *are* one.' For the word 'are' is not said of one person, but it refers to two persons, and one power. He has Himself made this clear, when He spoke to His Father concerning the disciples, 'The glory which You gave Me I have given them; that they may be one, even as We are one: I in them, and You in me, that they may be made perfect in one; that the world may know that You have sent me.' (**John 17:22-23**)
 3. "What have the Noetians to say to these things? Are all one body in respect of substance, or is it that we become one in the power and disposition of unity of mind? In the same manner the Son, who was sent and was not known of those who are in the world, confessed that He was in the Father in power and disposition. For the Son is the one mind of the Father....
 4. "...There is, brethren, one God, the knowledge of whom we gain from the Holy Scriptures, and from no other source. For just as a man, if he wishes to be skilled in the wisdom of this world, will find himself unable to get at it in any other way than by mastering the dogmas of philosophers, so all of us who wish to practise piety will be unable to learn its practice from any other quarter than the oracles of God. Whatever things, then,

the Holy Scriptures declare, at these let us look; and whatsoever things they teach, these let us learn; and as the Father wills our belief to be, let us believe; and as He wills the Son to be glorified, let us glorify Him; and as He wills the Holy Spirit to be bestowed, let us receive Him. Not according to our own will, nor according to our own mind, nor yet as using violently those things which are given by God, but even as He has chosen to teach them by the Holy Scriptures, so let us discern them.

5. "God, subsisting alone, and having nothing contemporaneous with Himself, determined to create the world. And conceiving the world in mind, and willing and uttering the word, He made it; and straightway it appeared, formed as it had pleased Him. For us, then, it is sufficient simply to know that there was nothing contemporaneous with God. Beside Him there was nothing; but He, while existing alone, yet existed in plurality....
6. "...And as the Author, and fellow-Counsellor, and Framers of the things that are in formation, He begat the Word; and as He bears this Word in Himself, and that, too, as (yet) invisible to the world which is created, He makes Him visible; (and) uttering the voice first, and begetting Him as Light of Light, He set Him forth to the world as its Lord, (and) His own mind; and whereas He was visible formerly to Himself alone, and invisible to the world which is made, He makes Him visible in order that the world might see Him in His manifestation, and be capable of being saved.
7. "And thus there appeared another beside Himself. But when I say another, I do not mean that there are two Gods, but that it is only as light of light, or as water from a fountain, or as a ray from the sun. For there is but one power, which is from the All; and the Father is the All, from whom cometh this Power, the Word. And this is the mind which came forth into the world, and was manifested as the Son of God. All things, then, are by Him, and He alone is of the Father..."
 - a. (Source: Hippolytus of Rome, *Against the Heresy of One Noetus*, sections 2-11; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 5, pp. 223-227)
 - b. **Take-aways for Christians:**

- i. We have to look at all the Scriptures. They speak of their being only one God. However, they also speak of that one God consisting of multiple (three) persons.
- ii. There is a difference between a singular “one” and a unified “one”. In each case we need to discern which one is intended, taking all the Scriptures into consideration.
- iii. The Father is the source or origin of all three, as light begetting other light or as one fire begets another fire. Another illustration is a ray of sunlight that comes forth (or is begotten) from the sun in the sky.
- iv. For more information on how the early Christians understood these passages and the mystery of the relationship between the Father and the Son, see *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, articles on ‘Trinity’ and ‘Christ, Divinity of’.

III. The Greatest Commandment

a. Read **Deuteronomy 6:4-5**.

- i. “Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that He had answered them well, asked Him, ‘Which is the first commandment of all?’ Jesus answered him, ‘The first of all the commandments is: “Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.’ So the scribe said to Him, ‘Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He.’” (**Mark 12:28-32**, NKJV)
- ii. “‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?’ Jesus said to him, “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” (**Matthew 22:36-40**, NKJV)

- iii. Let us never forget that the most important commandment, and one of only two on which all the others hang, is *to love God with everything we have in us*, with our entire being.
 - 1. Love is the foundation and reason behind all the other commands. If We love God, we will obey His commands.
 - a. “If you love Me, keep My commandments.” (**John 14:15**, NKJV)
 - b. “He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him.” (**John 14:21**, NKJV)
 - c. “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.” (**1 John 5:3**, NKJV)
 - 2. God is looking for people who love Him with everything we have; not just religious people who follow most of His rules.
 - a. Consider what Jesus said to the church in Ephesus, in **Revelation 2:1-7**.
 - i. They were doing many good and commendable things in fighting evil and persevering through challenges.
 - ii. Yet they had “left their first love”, and therefore were in danger of losing their place.
 - b. Similar to the church in Laodicea, which had become “lukewarm” (**Revelation 3:14-22**).
 - c. Jesus warned that as the end approached: “And because lawlessness will abound, *the love of many will grow cold*. But he who endures to the end shall be saved.” (**Matthew 24:12-13**, NKJV)
 - 3. **Questions/ Challenges:** How is your love for God today? Do you love him with all your heart, soul, mind and power/strength? Has the intensity of your love for God trailed off, even though you may have remained religious and are avoiding the ‘major’ sins?
 - a. Take stock of your life regarding these questions, and repent if you have fallen as the church in Ephesus did.

iv. **Random Question:** Where does it say we are to love God “with all your *mind*”?

1. Note that this particular phrase, quoted by Jesus, is not found in **Deuteronomy 6:5**.
2. **Answer:** See **Joshua 22:5** in the LXX.
 - a. In the LXX it says, “with your whole *mind* and soul”.
 - b. However, in the Masoretic Text it says, “with your whole heart and soul”.
3. Loving God “with your whole mind”? What does *that* involve?
 - a. Today, this may be the most neglected aspect of the four ways we are called to love God.
 - i. In the early days of the church, the attitude among apologists for the Christian faith was that intelligent, truth-seeking people would end up becoming Christians. In contrast, the ignorant and superstitious people who were too lazy to think clearly on these matters, would not.
 - ii. Men like Apollos *proved the faith with the evidence of reason and the Scriptures*.
 - iii. Today, in many circles faith is considered something you have or don't, like a “leap” into the unknown, divorced from your mind and from reason. Belief in the Scriptures is considered a sign of ignorance, because people can no longer prove and defend the faith based on reason and evidence (fulfilled prophecies, eyewitness accounts, etc.).
 - b. It sounds like you need to *think* to be a Christian! God gave each of us a brain and expects us to use it to get to know and serve Him. If we have been given a good one, *even more* is expected (**Luke 12:48**).
 - c. Some have the attitude that being a good Christian means all you need to do is to find a nice church, follow what the leaders tell you, and effectively put your mind in ‘neutral’ or ‘disengaged’. They believe that a good disciple is one who *does not question things* in the church.

- i. However, how is that possible if God gave each of us a mind, and demands that each one of us love Him with *all our mind*?

IV. Teach These Laws to Your Children

- a. Read **Deuteronomy 6:6-9**.
- b. Parents, especially fathers, are given the primary responsibility for spiritual instruction of the next generation. They need to know the Scriptures deeply themselves and remind their children of them at home and elsewhere throughout the day and night.
 - i. This was supposed to be going on all the time, not just once/week.
 - ii. This pattern is confirmed by Paul in the New Testament.
 1. “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother,’ which is the first commandment with promise: ‘that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.’ *And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.*” (**Ephesians 6:1-4**, NKJV)
 2. Note that this is the responsibility of the fathers, rather than the church leaders (or a ‘children’s ministry’).
 3. This puts a great weight on all fathers to become teachers within their families, involving being equipped to answer their wives’ questions (**1 Corinthians 14:35**) as well as to instruct their children.
- c. They were told to bind them (the Scriptures) on their hands and before their eyes.
 - i. Read **Deuteronomy 11:18-25**.
 - ii. Jesus referred to this in **Matthew 23**, in rebuking the Pharisees.
 1. “But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments.” (**Matthew 23:5**, NKJV)
 - iii. Phylacteries are small boxes fastened to the forearm or forehead, with a small portion of the Scriptures in them.
 1. Many Orthodox Jews continue this practice, today.
- d. Write on the doorposts of their houses and on their gates.

- i. They would see the word of God whenever they went in or out of their houses. This provided a constant reminder.
 - ii. A 'mezuzah' is a small decorative box that some Jews fasten to the doorframes of their homes, in which a small section of Scripture is written on parchment (often **Deuteronomy 6:4-9**).
 - 1. The word 'mezuzah' means "doorpost".
 - 2. Recall that the doorposts of the homes were also the place where the blood of the slain lamb was placed on the night of the Passover, to protect those within the households.
 - 3. Conservative and Orthodox Jews still observe the practice of mounting mezuzahs on the doorframes of their homes. Some are constructed quite simply, but others are rather ornate and made of expensive materials.
 - iii. Along similar lines, many Christian homes have Scriptures written in prominent places (such as in a picture frame, on a chalkboard, or on a sign) to constantly remind them of things in the Scriptures.
- e. Importance of meditating on and memorizing Scripture.
- i. Talk about them when at home, on the road, lying down, getting up, etc.
 - 1. It seems to me that this assumes that parents are memorizing the Scriptures and encouraging their children to do likewise.
 - ii. Read **Psalm 1**.
 - 1. Blessings from meditating on the Law of the Lord day and night.
 - a. Like a tree planted by streams of water that will bear fruit in season, with leaves that do not wither. Whatever he does will prosper.
 - b. In contrast with the wicked, who will be like dust in the wind.
 - iii. From **Psalm 119** (designated **Psalm 118** in the LXX).
 - 1. Read **Psalm 118/119:9-16**.
 - a. Hiding the word of God in our hearts can keep us from sin.

- b. Jesus did this, quoting from **Deuteronomy** when He was tempted three times by Satan.

2. Read **Psalms 118/119:97-105**.

- a. He loves the word of God and thereby gains great wisdom.
- b. It is like honey to the taste; like a lamp to his feet in the darkness.

3. Read **Psalms 118/119:145-148**.

- a. He arises even in the middle of the night and before dawn to meditate on the word of God.

iv. From Paul, in his letter to the **Colossians**:

- 1. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." (**Colossians 3:16**, NKJV)

- f. **Challenge:** Have the same devotion to knowing, memorizing, and meditating on the Word of God as was held up in **Deuteronomy 6**. Get it into our hearts. Teach it to our children throughout the day. Find ways to be reminded of these things.

V. Don't Forget God When You Become Prosperous

- a. Read **Deuteronomy 6:10-15**.
- b. **Warning:** the danger of prosperity (similar to the third soil that Jesus spoke about in His Parable of the Sower).
 - i. When God's people become wealthy and comfortable, they can tend to forget about God.
- c. Read **Proverbs 30:7-9**.
 - i. The speaker has just two requests of the Lord.
 - 1. Don't make me too poor; and
 - 2. Don't make me too rich.
 - a. I may be tempted to *forget about You*.
 - ii. **Question:** How many Christians today are praying "Please, Lord, whatever you do, *don't make me a wealthy person!*"?

- d. **Warning:** the danger that over time, God's people will tend to become like the nations around them.
 - i. We (the church) need to be a counter-cultural island of spiritual sanity as we are surrounded by a morally deranged, corrupted world.
 - ii. Resist picking up the lies and corrupt habits of the culture around you.
 - iii. Don't forget where we came from (slavery in Egypt for the Israelites; out of the world and enslavement to sin for us).
- e. **Challenge:**
 - i. While it may seem unrealistic today to many of the young families in this room, there may come a time in a few years when you find yourself very comfortable financially.
 - 1. That could come as a result of a career break, or an inheritance, or due to relocating to a much less expensive part of the country.
 - 2. Many years ago, some of the Christians who impressed me most, by the convicting example of their lives, were those who decided at an early age that they would not keep adjusting their lifestyles upward as their financial situation improved. Instead, they would be content with simple accommodations and a simple lifestyle, devoting their resources to helping the poor and advancing the kingdom of God.
 - 3. Make decisions and set your minds now, regarding the kind of principled life you want to lead, so that you do not get swept away in the tide of materialism if/when a time of prosperity comes...and you effectively "sell out", get spiritually choked out, and end up forgetting God.

VI. Don't Put God to the Test

- a. Read **Deuteronomy 6:16-25**.
- b. Do not put God to the test.
 - i. This passage refers back to the events of **Exodus 17:1-7**, when the Israelites put the Lord to the test, complaining about their lack of water. They challenged the Lord, saying: "Is the Lord with us, or not?"
 - ii. Jesus quotes this passage from **Deuteronomy 6:16** when He is being tempted by Satan in **Matthew 4** and **Luke 4**.

1. “Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, ‘If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: “He shall give His angels charge over you,” and, “In their hands they shall bear you up, Lest you dash your foot against a stone.”’ Jesus said to him, ‘It is written again, “You shall not tempt the LORD your God.”’” (**Matthew 4:5–7**, NKJV)
2. God *puts us to the test*; we are never to test/tempt Him! We are put to the test through trials, suffering and various temptations. This refines and perfects our faith, just as Jesus Himself had to be perfected through suffering (**Hebrews 2:10, 5:9**).
 - a. “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ,” (**1 Peter 1:6–7**, NKJV)
 - b. “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.” (**1 Peter 4:12–13**, NKJV)

VII. Closing Take-Aways

- a. God is one; there is only one God. There is no other.
- b. The greatest commandment: to love God with everything we have (heart, soul, mind, strength). All the other laws hang on the two greatest commands.
- c. We need to be immersed in the Word of God, and parents need to immerse their children in it as well.
- d. Don’t forget where we have come from, especially in the face of prosperity.
- e. Don’t ever put God to the test (as Satan tried to do to Jesus). He tests us, to refine our faith. Let us never attempt to put Him to the test!