

“Meditations on Loving God”
Deuteronomy 6:4-25
February 2, 2014

INTRODUCTION:

Judaism has long recognized the importance of Deuteronomy 6. Verse 4 begins with a phrase that was Moses’ way of highlighting something: **“Hear, O Israel.”** It is used six times in Deuteronomy, but the one in verse 4 is the most important. Verses four and five are known in Judaism as the “Shema”, after the Hebrew of the first word in that phrase. If there is any one verse that is meant to summarize the whole book of Deuteronomy, and even the whole summary of our response to God, it is these two verses. **“Hear, O Israel: The Lord your God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”** It was the consensus of the Judaism of Jesus’ day, a consensus which Jesus endorsed, that loving God is the greatest of all commandments. Nothing is of higher priority than loving God.

The priority given to loving God also permeates the New Testament. Paul said that all things work together for good for those who love God, in which he views love for God as something of a synonym for what it means to be a Christian. Paul had undoubtedly given a great deal of thought to Deuteronomy 6, and some of his thoughts can be found in the classic love passage of 1 Corinthians 13. His thoughts there are centered around this idea of the priority of love, in which he imagines many things that have been viewed as great spirituality, but which are missing this component of love for God. In Paul’s view, all those things are worthless. Paul is not unique among New Testament authors. John said, **“We love because he first loved us”** (1 John 4:19), meaning that if we don’t love God, then we know little of God’s love for us.

So let me ask you a question that is more important than any you could ever be asked. Do you love God? Is there any love in your heart that exceeds a love for God? Perhaps it is a love of comfort, or a love of self, money or another person. Since our passage this morning is a foundational one on loving God, it has much to teach us. I would like to make five simple and brief points from these verses about loving God.

I. Loving God Is Present Tense

My point here is a very simple and obvious one, but one easily overlooked. The only kind of love that is legitimate is present tense love. If I tell my wife, “I used to love you,” that is not a good thing. If I tell her, “I will love you at some future point,” that too is not a good thing. The only way past tense and future tense love is good is if it is joined to present tense love. If I can say, “I love you

right now,” then it is okay to say that I loved you in the past and I will love you in the future.

How does this relate to loving God? Very often we view love for God as a future tense matter. We think that once some other things happen, then the way will be clear for us to love God. Once God does something we want him to do for us, we will love him more. If that’s our attitude toward God, we will never love him. Moses talks about that in verse 16, where he looks back on the way they put God to the test at Massah. **“You shall not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.”** Exodus 17 describes the events at that place. Israel was in the wilderness and had run out of water. Instead of responding in faith and waiting on God, they demanded that God meet their needs, accusing him of bringing them to the wilderness only to trick them and kill them. Jesus used this verse out of Deuteronomy 6 when he was in the wilderness at a time of need. When the devil tempted him to test God’s love by climbing to the pinnacle of the temple and jumping off, Jesus quoted verse 16. He would have chosen death before questioning the love of God and demanding God’s provision in his time and his way.

The application is to live in the moment and love God in the present. Do you love God right now? Have you ever said to him, “I love you, O Lord”? Or do you say, “As soon as God takes care of my need I will love him.”

II. Loving God Is Whole-Hearted

Moses says that we are to love God with the whole heart and soul. While we use the term heart to refer to the emotions as opposed to the head, which refers to the understanding, Hebrew used the term differently. It referred to every part of our human nature: the understanding, the will, the emotions and the motives. Tim Keller says that “the heart is not primarily the emotions, but rather the seat of our fundamental commitments and trusts, and therefore it is the control center of the whole life.” Christopher Wright summarizes this verse, “Love the Lord your God with total commitment (heart), with your total self (soul), to total excess! Loving God should be ‘over the top!’”

It is the very nature of love to be whole-hearted. Imagine a young man proposing marriage to a woman in a way that is not accompanied by whole-hearted love. When he proposes with a declaration of love, she wants to know what he means when he says he loves her. So he says, “It is the logical thing for us to be romantically involved. I have made a study of the personality types that make for the best marriages, and statistically our personalities are the best match for a good marriage. Furthermore, the household jobs we like are a good fit for marriage. You like inside jobs and I like outside jobs.” Or imagine our young man loving her with the will, but not his emotions. He might say to her, “I don’t have loving feelings for you right now, but I am committed to doing loving things, and I’ve got to believe that the feelings will eventually follow.” If

this woman were your friend, and she came to you to report this conversation and ask your advice about what she should do about this proposal, what would you tell her? We would all say the same thing and tell her to run from this guy as fast as she could. Nothing less than whole-hearted love will do in marriage, so why do we think that love for God is any different?

One of the results of loving God in this whole-hearted manner is that it will spread to our families and our communities as we talk about God before others. I think that's what verses 6-9 are teaching. We will teach God's commands to our children not out of a sense of duty, but naturally. This will be done when we sit in our houses, walk along the way and lie down and rise. Have you ever noticed that you can't stop talking about the things about which you are passionate? After about six months of research, this past weekend I finalized my plans for a new road bike and put in the order for it. I was excited about the bicycle and had a hard time not talking about it. I was with several men from our church all weekend, and they love me and were very kind to indulge me as I talked about it. If we love God, we will want to talk about him with others. It naturally flows out of a wholehearted love for him.

III. Loving God Is Responsive

In the passage I quoted earlier from 1 John, the apostle said that "we love because he first loved us." Our love is a response to God's love for us. This answers the question of how we come to have a love for God. This can be seen clearly at the end of this chapter in a section on parenting. When children ask their parents about the statutes and rules commanded by God, parents are told what to say. Many Christian parents skip verses 21-23 and go straight to verse 24. Why do we keep God's rules? **"The Lord commanded us to do all these statutes"** (v. 24). That is true, but it's not the first thing Moses advises of parents. They are to say, **"We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand"** (v. 21). Parents here are being told to teach obedience to God by first teaching God's grace. We obey not to get God to love us, but because he loves us.

The snow event earlier this week saw many stories of major efforts made by parents to get to their children. We had about thirty children stranded at the church last Tuesday night. One pregnant mother left her house, with her two-year old in tow, to come to the church to pick up her four-year old. After six hours in the car, she finally made it here at 4:00 p.m. Early on Wednesday morning, I was walking around the neighborhood here at the church, and I saw two women with large backpacks, dressed for a winter hike. With a look of fierce determination on their faces, they were walking from our neighborhood to Oak Mountain Intermediate School to be with their children.

With even greater determination, God came to his people when they were enslaved in Egypt, to deliver them from their bondage. Their Egyptian bondage

is a picture of our bondage to sin. God has come to us through Jesus to deliver us from that bondage. He has done so with fierce determination because we are his treasured possession. As we receive this love, we love and obey him in return.

IV. Loving God Is Exclusive

God's love for us is such a committed and exclusive love that it demands our exclusive love for him in return. His love is a jealous love (v. 15), just like the love of a husband and wife is a jealous love. It is appropriate that no rivals be permitted to that love. In the example I used last week, it would be like bringing a girlfriend home and wanting Wendy to be friends with her. Just as no one would fault my wife for demanding my exclusive love, God is not out of line in demanding our exclusive love of him.

Paul taught in Romans 8 that nothing can separate us from the love of God. The reverse is not true. As Christopher Wright said, "Unfortunately there is plenty that can separate God from the love of God's people." Verses 10-16 speak of three things that can separate God from the love of his people: affluence, the idolatry surrounding them and hardship. Let's look at the first of those, affluence. For generations, the Israelites have been poor. They were slaves in Egypt, and for the past forty years they have been wilderness nomads. But the time is coming when they will be newly rich, and Moses warns them of the dangers of such riches. They can capture the heart and cause us to forget God. Erwin Lutzer, pastor of the Moody Church in Chicago, said it well. "Few people have the spiritual resources needed to be both wealthy and godly."

The form of Moses' warning gives us help in guarding our hearts from being captured by affluence. He anticipates their entry into the land promised them, **"with great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant"** (v. 10-11). Did you notice the pattern repeated there? All the things they would be receiving upon entry into the Promised Land were gifts. Humility and gratitude are the spiritual resources we often lack that make us unable to be both wealthy and godly. Everything you have is a gift from God. You might say, "But I worked hard for what I have." I'm sure that's true, but consider who gave you the health and stamina to work hard. Not everyone has been given that gift. And many people work hard but never seem able to acquire much in the area of wealth as a result of their hard work. It is by receiving all things from God's loving hand that we can avoid having our hearts drawn away by wealth from loving God.

Francis Ridley Havergal was a gifted nineteenth-century hymn-writer who has several hymns included in our hymnal, one of which we will be singing at the conclusion of today's service. She kept something she called a "Mercies Diary" At the end of each day she recorded in four or five words just *one* thing

for which she was supremely thankful. If we would avoid the spiritual pitfalls of affluence, we would cultivate such grateful hearts.

V. Loving God Is Obedient

When we looked at the Ten Commandments two weeks ago, we spent a good bit of time talking about how we should hear God's law. We don't hear it as conditions for the Father's love, but as an expression of the Father's love. Notice the important phrase of verse 24, where the commands of the Lord are said to be **"for our good always."** Let me expand on that by saying that the commands of God express not only what ought to be, but also what is and what will be.

The commands of God express what is. That is, they reflect the way we are, the way we were designed by our Creator. The commands are like telling your 16-year old daughter, "Make sure you keep oil in your car's engine." It is the nature of the engine to require the lubrication supplied by the oil. It violates our nature to disobey these commands. When we steal, covet, get angry or lust, it violates our nature as much as it violates the nature of an internal combustion engine to be deprived of oil.

But the commands of God also inform us of what will be. There is a glorious promise found later in the Old Testament where God says, **"I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts"** (Jer. 31:33). I am overwhelmed by the goodness of that promise. It means that every command I read will one day be a perfect description of my heart, not because I'm anything special, but because the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ keeps his promises. The day is coming when the command to love God with all my heart will be fully realized. I'm so glad, because I'm not there yet. The day is coming when I will fear no more and be anxious no more, because that's part of the law of God that will be written on my heart. The day is coming when I will love my neighbor as myself. Every command of God's word can be read as a promise.

CONCLUSION:

Let me close with the same question I began with. Do you love God? It is the greatest commandment, but a commandment that cannot be kept until we know and receive God's love for us in Jesus. John Calvin's seal and motto was a hand holding up a heart to God, with the words, "I offer my heart to you, Lord, readily and sincerely." Let me invite you now to do the same. Receive his pursuing love of you right where you are, and then tell him you love him.