

December 2, 2018
Lesson 1: Love and Devotion
Scripture: Deuteronomy 6: 1-9

Context:

The Adult Bible Studies for the 2018 through 2019 winter will focus on the word love in relation to faith. Love can be an overused word with people having different understandings of the word. In the scriptures, love is constantly brought up when discussing God's relationship with humanity and humanity's relationship with one another. Each week will examine the word and the way it weaves through God's story with humanity.

Appropriately the first lesson focuses on the words from Deuteronomy in the Old Testament. Deuteronomy is part of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament that tell the story of Israeli people and their story as the chosen people of God. Deuteronomy is similar to the book that it proceeds from, the book of Numbers, in that it continues the story of Moses and the people. There are a lot of Mosaic speeches, but there is also a focus on the laws of the people. Some scholars like Dean McBride propose this book is a kind of polity, or constitution, for the life of the people.¹ This book helped the people understand who they were and how they were to live their lives.

Our pericope picks up in the beginning of the book after the giving of the Ten Commandments in chapter five and before the statutes and ordinances that will follow. Verses four through five are known as the Shema, or the Great Commandment.² These words are some of the most important in scripture as the rest of Deuteronomy and the commandments hang on these words.³ In order to follow the commandments there must be love in the heart for both God and for others.

In this scripture both God and the Israeli people are given an identity. God is given the identity as the one who has given the people the land and has chosen them. Their ancestors belonged to God and God fulfills God's promises to them. That is how they find themselves in a land full of milk of honey.

Yet this claim also carries a responsibility. The people are claimed by God, but they must respond. They are given the choice of what to do. They can return the love by giving all their being to God and giving their heart, their body, and their strength. Better yet, they are to pass the faith on to their children by telling the story and repeating the Shema to them. They are to say these words over and over, which accounts for the later Jewish tradition of binding copies of the Shema to their arms or foreheads and then placing them on their doorposts of their homes.⁴ This tradition is part of their being that will continue whether they are in Israel or find themselves in a foreign land.

¹ Patrick Miller, "Deuteronomy," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY 1990), 11.

² Ibid., 97.

³ Ibid., 97.

⁴ Ibid., 105.

Application

When I went to Israel, this scripture came alive. In nearly every hotel, restaurant, and local business you would see this strange attachment to the door that had Hebrew letters. It would be right above or right to the side of every doorway. We discovered that this was the Shema, the verses that emphasize loving God with all your heart, body, and strength. Thousands of years of history come alive and are passed onto the next generation and to guests who come to the country to understand God. You could even buy your own copy of the Shema to take home and bind to your door.

When Jesus was preaching he actually referenced this passage as the greatest commandment for the people to follow. However, Jesus added mind to the list and gave the command to love your neighbor as yourself. So it comes to us that the Shema is just as authoritative for us today.

When I think about loving God with all my heart, body, mind, and strength I become both humbled yet excited. There are so many ways that we can honor and love God. We can love God with our heart through prayers of thanks and giving in different ways. We can love God with our mind by reading on the scriptures and thinking about the glory of God as well as asking hard questions about faith and daily living. We can love God with our bodies by taking care of ourselves physically and being active by putting our faith into practice. We can love God with our strength by striving to be a follower of Jesus in the ways of our life.

I've often found that most faithful disciples of Jesus are those who seek to obey God and give of themselves in every way possible. It does not mean they are perfect, but it does mean they seek to be God's faithful servants in both the good times and the bad times. Better yet, they seek to live that out by helping and teaching others about the faith through word and deed. The Shema cannot come to fruition unless you live it, and then pass it on to someone else. You cannot have one without the other.

As we start thinking about God and love in this series, we are reminded that there is a commitment on our part. God has given us all the tools we need to belong to God. It becomes our responsibility to develop a moral and spiritual life in which we seek to honor God in what we say and what we do. In addition to living that life, we are to pass it on to others, especially those who are either under our care or those that we mentor.

How do you live out the Shema? What are ways that you can love God with all your heart, mind, body, and strength? How do you teach these things to your children or younger family members? What spiritual practices do you utilize to keep you grounded and connected to God? How are you sharing your faith and knowledge with others about how to live righteously? These are the questions that the Shema poses to us and are the ones that God gives us as followers of Jesus to consider on our daily journey.

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