



## The Greatest Commandment

Mark 12:28-31; Deuteronomy 6

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We are going to start talking this morning about the right way that we as believers must respond to the gracious, steadfast, powerful, unchanging and welcoming love of God that we have looked at over the last couple of weeks. How do we respond to the love of God as His people whom He has purchased by the blood of His dear Son? How do we respond to the God who loves us—the God who set His love on us before the foundation of the world, the God who provided the sacrifice necessary for our forgiveness in His Son, the God who pursued us in the midst of rebellion, who opened our sin-blinded eyes to see the depth of our sin and our desperate need for a Savior, the God who regenerated our dead hearts and gave to us the very faith necessary to be saved, the God who adopted us as His children and who comes to live in us? There is only one response that makes sense – we love because He first loved us – that’s what saved people do. And it is what God expects from His people – he commands that we love Him. He commands preeminence in our hearts.

So I want for us to look today at the interaction that Jesus had with one of the Scribes who had watched him as He was preaching and teaching. Read Mark 12:28-34.

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When Jesus is asked to name the greatest commandment, He doesn’t hem and haw around. There is debate for Him. When asked to name the greatest commandment, Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6:4-5. The context of that commandment of God was the preparation of Israel to enter the Promised Land, to enter the land of blessing, to enter Canaan and to subdue it and to live as the covenant people of God. God had delivered Israel from bondage to Egypt and brought them to Himself and in Deuteronomy 6, we see the unchanging desire of God for His people. That truth is this: "The ideal life for each member of the people of God AND for the body as a whole is to live a life that is governed and defined as one of fervent love for God as a proper response to God's love for them." We are going to spend this morning looking at the context of Deut 6 and getting an overview of this commandment to love God.

This text shows us what should be our response to the love of God for us by which He has made us His people. It is the benchmark, the defining principle of the people of God. This is the Greatest Commandment, the one that we should desire to obey above all else. Remember beloved, grace does not do away with the moral law or make the commandments of God less binding on us. Rather, enabled by the indwelling Holy Spirit and the grace of God we can now obey the Law that God created us to obey in the first place. It is not that grace gives us a pass on the moral law of God; it is that grace enables us, when we walk in the Spirit, to keep it in the right manner. It is not that we obey the commandments to become righteous, but because we have been made righteous by the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf. It is not that we obey the law so that God will love us, but because God already loves us. It is not that we obey the commandments of God so that we can become someone new, but because we have been made new by the grace of God in Christ. (1 John 5:3, ESV) Again, remember that the context for this commandment is pretty simple. Israel is preparing to enter the Promised Land and as they are preparing to go God, through Moses, is going to clearly establish for them what is to be the governing principle of their lives, the governing principle for the people of God, to clearly establish their identity as the people of God. As we look at this text today, I first want us to see:

#### 1) The heart behind the command. (Deuteronomy 6:1–3, ESV)

It's important that we do not view God in the same light as some kind of needy man or woman that stamps their feet demanding to be loved. That is not the picture here at all. Instead, from the very beginning we see that there is a purpose behind these words, a purpose behind this command. And notice that Moses is very careful to establish that these are God's words, not his own. He makes Israel to see that this commandment, and the rules and the statutes – the expectations that surround the commandment – are specifically from God. Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the rules—that the LORD your God commanded me to teach you... These are God's words, not mine, and as such they are not to be taken lightly. Moses wants Israel to know the binding nature of this commandment. This is a “thus says the Lord” kind of moment. Moses then gives to them the divine reasoning behind the commandment that is about to come. You need to obey this command for these reasons:

...that you may fear the LORD your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life...This

commandment that I have been instructed by God to give to you is going to be the basis by which you and you sons and your son's sons can fear the Lord and keep his commandments. It is going to be the root from which true obedience to all of God's statutes and commandments will spring forth. The idea of fearing God is one of those great old theological truths that have fallen out of favor in church as a result of the concerted effort to tame God and make Him more user friendly. The concept, though, is a great one. It is an idea that encompasses so much. If you were to do a study of this phrase, just through the book of Deuteronomy for instance, you would see that it includes things like: Keeping his statutes; loving Him with heart, soul and might; serving Him exclusively and putting away idols, putting away contenders for His throne; holding fast to Him, clinging to Him as your treasure, regarding Him as your praise; being filled with wonder at His works; being humbled by His might and power; trembling at His authority and greatness, worshipping Him as God and King. It is a mingling of honor, praise, love, awe, fearful reverence, when we behold the greatness of God. Moses is saying that this commandment will be the foundation for a God-fearing life. Moses is giving this commandment

...that your days may be long...This commandment that I have been given by God to give to you will be the source of long life for you – one of the chief blessings of the OT indicating God's favor.

...that it may go well with you...Hearing and obeying this command is vital so that it may go well with you. Moses is establishing the truth that whether the nation prospered or struggled would be connected with their obedience to this commandment that was going to be given to them.

...and that you may multiply greatly, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey...You must hear and obey the commandment that I am giving to you so that you will grow in number, so that you will know and experience and enjoy the manifold, multiplied blessings of God in this blessed land that God has given to you.

Before we ever get to the commandment, we need to see the heart that is behind it – the desire of God to bless and to prosper His people. This is God's heart for his people. So what is this commandment? You can imagine the anticipation of the people. What is this great commandment that is to form the foundation for our lives as the people of God? The command

itself is found in verse 5, but it comes with an introduction of sorts, kind of a preamble. Let's look at verse 4 and 5 together.

2) The Greatest Commandment (v. 4-5) Now what are we supposed to understand from this preamble? How do these words introduce and set up the commandment that follows? This introduction is called the "shema". "Hear" is the Hebrew shema, and means "to hear and understand, or to hear with discernment, to hear and submit, to hear and obey."

"The Lord, our God, the Lord is one." Some people take these words as a simple reference to the unity of the Godhead – the three in one, that the Triune God – Father, Son, and Spirit – are one unity. Linguistically – if you just study the words there apart from the context – you could come away with that understanding, but beloved that understanding is way too narrow. This is not simply a claim of unity in the Godhead, it is a claim of exclusivity – that God is exclusively God. The God whom we worship is the only true God. He is Yahweh Elohim. He is the only real one, or unique, God among the many false gods. He is not merely first among the gods...He is the one and only God and even more than that – and here is the heart of what is being said -- He is your God and you are His people. He has given Himself and you belong to Him, that is how God sees it. This is not a theological proposition to be tucked away in our handy bag of things that are true but not practically important. The uniqueness of God and His sole claim to deity is meant to grip our hearts because we belong to Him. The refrain throughout Scripture is what "I will be your God, and you will be my people." It began all the way back with Abraham, through the Patriarchs, through the Exodus and establishment of Israel and reaches its climax in Christ. This God who has made Himself known in Christ is the only One worthy of all honor, glory, power and of our devotion. He is our God and we are His people. This is a claim of exclusivity. We need to hear this and hear it repeatedly. A right understanding of who God is and our relationship to Him as His people is vital and fundamental to our love and obedience to Him and to our ability to trust and believe Him. Without this truth embedded in our hearts we will pursue the gods of the world we will create for ourselves idols. God is declaring that He is our God, the only God and we need no other, and that forms the context for the greatest commandment and he gives it next.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. There it is -- the greatest of commandments. Don't read it or hear it like you have read or heard it a million times. God demands our love. He is the only God who does. This is unique. The false gods never demanded love – only sacrifice and ritual. This is so different. The true

God commands out true devotion. He is not satisfied with mere dutiful service. God demands, "Give me your love." What does that look like? We will look more specifically at this next week, but look at the words that God gives Moses to say. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. The idea of "heart, soul, and might" is a total-person, all-consuming, love for God. Every area of our being must be consumed with and subservient to this great quest of loving God. The love of God is not some ethereal, mystical thing. Love for God is a matter of the heart – our passion and desire. It is a matter of our soul – the idea here being our mind and our will. And it is a matter of our strength – our physical power, the works our hands, the expression of our bodies. He calls us to find our joy and satisfaction in Him, to be thrilled with Him, to love His truth and to submit our lives and will to Him as our Lord and God. He is our covenant God and He demands a comprehensive love from us.

How can God command love like this? Well, consider the Israelites. God has done everything for the Hebrew people, bringing them out of Egypt and preparing for them a land flowing with milk and honey. God did all this because He loved them and He called the Hebrew people to love Him in return. Likewise, all of our love is a response to God's love. (1Jn 4:9-10, 19)

Do we love God to earn his love? Do we love God to earn his blessing or reward? Never. We love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength because God first loved us. We often think that God demands a million other things from us but God demands first our love. When we really love the Lord with all of our heart, soul, and might, then everything else will be freely given to Him.

Even more, Moses says: "And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart." (Deuteronomy 6:6, ESV) These are not just words to be heard, they are words that are to form your life and shape your heart and soul. These need to be weighty words, powerful words. It is to form the very atmosphere of your life. This commandment to love God is to encompass all that we do. We are to be defined by love for God. These words – the words that we have in verses 4 and 5 – are to be on the forefront of your hearts and minds. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. If this is right, all else will be right. That is why Moses is telling us that:

### 3) The Greatest Commandment must permeate the whole of our lives (v. 7-9)

This great commandment is to form the basis of our living -- that is what Moses is saying here. This commandment must permeate our lives beginning with our homes and our children. First - You shall teach them diligently to your children. You shall teach your children, God alone is God, your God and you shall love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. Teach your children to have a life governed by love for God in Christ. That word that is translated as diligently is a word that means "to sharpen, to whet." Now, we cannot pass on to our children what we ourselves do not possess. For that reason we must examine ourselves parents: Do you thirst for God as the deer pants after the water? Or is your own life sending your children a message of hypocrisy and spiritual indifference? Is our own commitment to Christ what you hope to see in your children's lives? Is your obedience to His Word the same kind of submission you long to see from your own kids?

We must be continually doing all that we can to write these words on our children's hearts, to pray that God would open their eyes and souls by His grace to see the holiness of God, the sinfulness of their hearts, and the beauty of the Christ and His cross, of the gospel and believe with all of our hearts that He will. As the people of God, we must sow this truth into our children and in our children's children so that they might come to believe it with all of their hearts and minds, that they may love God with a pure passion, that they may believe and live the gospel of God's grace, and live the truth in all of their lives. We must sow love for God in Christ in our children so that we may not miss the great joy, greater than any other joy and Christian parent may have, of seeing our children walking in the favor of God and sharing in the same salvation and same hope of everlasting life.

Moses goes on to say – you and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. In other words, the commandment to love God with all your being is to permeate the whole of your life. Home, community, work, waking, sleeping...

You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. These are picturesque words, figurative speech, but the meaning is clear – this commandment and the resultant obedience to His commands and statutes and rules are to define and characterize your life. It should be able to be said of you – there is a man, there is a woman

who loves God. It is written all over their faces, written over all they do. It literally marks the entirety of their lives.

You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. God's desire is that your house be governed by and defined by love for the Lord, your God. Both in your home and in the community – the gates of the city – devotion to God is to mark your lives. Then Moses proceeds to give some principles that we must heed in order to keep our hearts for the Lord. He says:

4) In enjoying the blessings of God, do not forget the God who blesses (v.10-12) The Israelites were going into a land that they had done nothing to deserve. They were going to be recipients of amazing blessings – cities, houses, cisterns, and vineyards, etc. – that they did not create. They were going to receive many great gifts from the hands of God and so Moses is determined to warn them. When you receive of God's grace, when you are enjoying the blessings of His favor, be sure that you do not forget the Lord and you do not forget the deliverance that He has wrought for you. Make sure that you remember where every good gift comes from. Be careful that the richness of the land and the goodness that you receive does not lull you into an attitude of forgetfulness but instead remember the Lord whose mighty hand delivered you and who has given you every good thing. Instead, let the gifts and the blessings of God drive you to thankfulness and love for the God who richly blesses you. The lesson for us is clear. When we are enjoying the blessings of grace and of salvation, do not forget Him. Protect your heart from forgetting God.

5) Guard your heart from idols, for God is a jealous God. (v.13-16) Moses reminds them that they are fundamentally different from everyone else around them. They had solemnly committed themselves to God in obedience and love. They were to worship Him exclusively. They were to serve Him alone. They were to swear by Him in the sense that they understood that God was their Lord and their king and that all of life was lived before His eyes. For that reason, Moses is saying: "Keep your heart for the Lord alone. Do not be dragged away by idols. Do not give your hearts to anyone else." And why? Because the Lord your God, the covenant God to whom you belong, is a jealous God. He is a jealous God – God had faithfully loved the Israelites and He demands faithful love in return. God is jealous in that He demands exclusivity as our God and hope and trust. He demands to have supremacy in our hearts and he will tolerate no rivals. The response of God to idolatry is holy anger and Moses reminds the Israelites of that truth.

God is not content to be one god among many. He is a jealous God and desiring of our supreme devotion. In our modern age we make Him compete with much. Idols like money, careers, families, marriages, vacations, pleasures, material security, sports, possessions. Most of us think of an idol as a statue of wood, stone, or metal worshiped by pagan people. But the concept of idolatry is much broader and far more personal than that. An idol is anything apart from God that we depend on to be happy, fulfilled, or secure. In biblical terms, it is something other than God that masters and rules us, or that we trust, fear, or serve. In short, it is something we love and pursue more than God. Sometimes our greatest idol is the god of our own making, the god that we make out of our imaginations. Here's the thing. God does not take the pursuit of idols any more lightly today because from His perspective it is an act of spiritual adultery, it is devaluing of His grace and a devaluing of His love expressed through the giving of His Son to be the propitiation for our sins and to establish the covenant with His people. It is a rejection of His love and His mercy and grace and so the best way to guard yourself from idolatry is to love and trust God supremely.

6) Delight in obedience to Him so you may walk in the power of His promises. (v. 17-19) The Promised Land was a great gift and it was good, but the only way that the Israelites would enjoy and experience the fullness of its goodness was through obedience from the heart, obedience out of love, to the Lord who had given them the land. They would only thrust their enemies out of the land and enjoy the fullness of God's blessing on them if they were obedient to God from the heart and loved Him with all their heart and soul and might.

The same is true of us. The only way that we enter fully into the enjoyment of abundant life and thrust out the enemy of sin from our lives is to seek obedience to God out of a heart that loves Him. That is the secret to consistent personal victory and power over sin – obedience that is rooted in love for God. It is what you have heard me call the expulsive power of a greater affection. The attraction of sin can be expelled only by a new love and affection—for God and from God. True Christian living, holy and right living, requires a new affection for the Father as its dynamic. Moses continues saying

7) Continually testify to God's gracious deliverance and full salvation. (v. 20-25)

Moses is telling them these things expecting that the time would come when their children would ask them in essence: “Why are we devoted to God? Why is pleasing God the ever-present desire in our home? Why are we like this?” He is anticipating this question because he knows that loving God with all of the heart and soul and might will set them apart from everyone else on the face of the earth. And the answer that Moses gives goes all the way back to the act of God’s love to deliver them from the bondage of Egypt. God’s signs and wonders were to be remembered and used to encourage the succeeding generations to know and to love God

This was righteousness to them – not saving righteousness – it was righteousness in the sense that it was the only right response to God and His love. And the same is true for us, beloved.

Our lives must be distinctly different from everyone else around us because we are different. We have been delivered from the bondage of Satan and sin by the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have been forgiven and brought from death into life. We have been given an inheritance in heaven that is undefiled and unfading. We have been made the children of God and joint-heirs with Christ. As Peter tells us, (we) are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that (we) may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called (us) out of darkness into His marvelous light. Once (we) were not a people, but now (we) are God's people; once (we) had not received mercy, but now (we) have received mercy...(and for that reason, we must) as sojourners and exiles, abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against (our) soul(s) (and seek obedience to Christ in all things). (1Pe 2:9-11)

Beloved, we must be different. We must live lives that witness to the faithful love of God, to His exclusivity as our Lord and God, to His ownership of our souls and our hearts. We must be different. We must walk faithfully with Christ and show our children what a great privilege and blessing it is to be counted among the people of God and to be a part of a body that loves God.

Let me ask you, do these words resonate with your soul? Do they describe your own life?

Do you know yourself to be a member of the covenant people of God by grace through faith in Jesus Christ? Are you certain you are saved – trusting in Christ for salvation?

Do you believe the heart of God for you? Do you believe that He desires to bless you – that He desires your worship so that your days may be long and your life may be blessed? Do you

understand that you belong to God and that He is jealous for your affections? Do you love Him with an ever-growing affection and desire to glorify Him? Are you striving, despite your failures, to love Him more? Does the command to love Him rest with weight on your mind and heart? Are you teaching your children to love God? Does a love for God permeate the entirety of your life? Are you looking behind the blessing of God to love the God who blesses? Are you guarding your heart from idols? Are you experiencing the expulsive power of a greater affection for God? Are you testifying, by your life, to the God's gracious deliverance and full salvation?

A people who love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and might – that is who we are. That is who we are to be. That is the heart behind the greatest commandment. By God's grace may this description be a reality in our lives.

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