

The Greatest Commandment

Deut. 6:1-12

Introduction:

I admit there are times, when someone is speaking to me, that something shiny distracts me and my attention is averted away from the conversation. I can still hear their voice but I usually have stopped listening to them, hearing what they are saying to me. Can you relate? In those moments, we usually need a strong, "Hey! Are you hearing me?" Maybe you have been that person, speaking to your spouse or children, working to keep their attention. Or you may say something like, or "if you hear anything I have said hear this" right before saying something very important. Or growing up, when my sweet mother gave me instructions and then asked, "Do you hear me, Andrew Craig?" She wasn't interested in knowing if I audibly heard her voice.... She was interested in knowing if I was going to obey her. This is a hearing of understanding, a hearing that leads to obedience.

The book of Deuteronomy is essentially a long sermon that Moses speaks to God's people, Israel. In it, he reminds the people of all that the Lord has done for them in delivering them, guiding them through the desert and providing for them. Moses then recounts the whole of the law and urges the people to live in obedience. So at this point in the sermon, lest Israel gets distracted by something shiny, or really, to help them hone in and hear this really important thing he is about to say, Moses utilizes the same technique to get their ears. "Hear O Israel!" "If you hear anything I've told you, hear this!" "Are you listening to me?"

This really important thing that Moses is about to say is what I want to focus on this morning! Old Testament people refer to this passage as the *Shema*: meaning, hear this; understand this; obey this! It is a couple of verses which Jesus himself refers to when approached by a scribe. Mark 12.28-30 says, "One of the scribes came up and asked him, 'Which commandment is the most important of all?' Jesus answered, 'The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'" It is a passage that one commentator calls: "the fundamental duty of Israel's religion, and the fundamental truth behind it."

So this morning I want us first to look at and better understand this fundamental duty of our faith! How many of us have stepped back before and wandered, 'So I am a Christian, what am I really supposed to do?' 'What does God require of me?' 'What is my fundamental duty?'

The Fundamental Duty of Israel's religion

Well, when we hear the word 'law' we automatically think, something I have to keep or else I am in trouble. Oftentimes, in Jesus' ministry, he would speak of 'the law and the prophets.' Here, the law is the first five books of the Bible. Within this section,

there are some six hundred laws given to Israel by God. These laws cover every aspect of the Israelites life: family life, sexual purity, economics, leadership, showing forgiveness and mercy, implementing justice and the list goes on. It can be easy to be overwhelmed by the vast number and details included in the law. However, included in this law are the Ten Commandments. These are essentially a 'Spark Notes' version of the many laws given by God. Then to narrow the focus even more, Jesus refers to this *Shema* as the greatest commandment. Imagine with me, if you will, a funnel: wide at the top, you have the whole law; in the middle, then Ten Commandments; and at the nose, the Great Commandment, this fundamental duty of our faith:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and with all your strength."

We are to love God with our entire beings! With our **every essence**: heart, soul and strength.

You may have noticed, in the passage I read earlier where Jesus quotes this as the greatest commandment he also includes the word "**mind**." The reason the word is not in this passage here is simply a matter of the vernacular. When it says '**heart**' it includes the mind. 'Heart' is speaking not of the physical organ but of the head/heart connection: our emotions and our reasoning: our emotional and mental energy! We are to love God with all of our emotions and all of our reasoning skills!

All your **soul**: our soul is our deepest part of us. It's who we really are at the core, without all the masks and false ideas of our selves. It's the true self that God knows us as: all the broken parts, all the good parts too! He knows us as we really are and we have nothing to hide from him. He knows us better than we even know ourselves and we are invited here to love him with our full, true selves.

All your **strength**: love is expressed not just in emotional and mental energy but also in physical energy! Earlier this year, Meb Keflezighi, was the first American since 1983 to win the Boston Marathon. To win the race, Meb had to commit himself to running 3 times per day, eating a high protein diet and getting enough rest as he prepared for the marathon. More so than simply a love for running, Meb had to willfully discipline his body as he trained and so reaped the benefit of winning the Boston Marathon, something anyone who loves running could dream of! So too our love for God can be expressed by exerting of physical energy – how we work, how we spend our time, how we discipline ourselves and the things we commit to putting our selves to.

We are to love God fully! With our every essence!

Now, while this one great commandment seems more achievable than trying to hold all those six hundred laws in order, it still can seem quite daunting! How am I to love God with my every essence? The next few verses give some helpful ideas and commands as we seek to grow in loving God with our every essence.

“These commands are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”

It is all about expression! We can grow loving Him with our every essence by loving Him in our **every expression!**

One way we see this is that we are to love him with **expression to ourselves**. Verse six states, “these commands are to be on your hearts” and then verse eight, “tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.” This is meant to be a personal expression as a reminder to the individual of the Great Commandment to love God with their whole being. In fact, back in the biblical times and still even to this day, there are members of the Jewish community who take this individual expression quite literally. They wear a little box around their head and they wear bands on their forearms. This box contains slips of paper with different important scripture passages on them. (Usually the Ten Commandments, this *Shema*, and a narrative of God delivering them from slavery in Egypt.) So to, these bands would have the law written on them so that the person wearing them would have them on his person at all times. Now I am not saying that you all need to go home and attach a box to your head or put ribbons on your arms, that’s not the heart of the rule! At one point in his ministry, Jesus even rebukes the Pharisees because they had missed the point. In Matthew 23 Jesus is speaking to the crowds and he says, The Pharisees teach Moses’ law, so do what they tell you to, but do not do the works they do. For they love to preach but they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy burdens and put them on people but do not move themselves. They do everything to be seen by others. They make their boxes big and their fringes long and wide... Jesus is pointing out that they have missed the point. It’s not about public recognition; it’s about loving God and knowing Him more. Express this love for God in you personally.

Another way we see that we can love God is through **expression in our homes**. Verse seven says, “Impress these commands on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home... when you lie down and when you get up.” And in verse nine, “write them on the doorframes of your houses.” Again, you’re not stamping your doorways or even worse, your children’s foreheads with these commands! It is about creating an atmosphere of love for God and obedience unto God in the home. Parents this is an awesome task you have in your homes and for the rest of us, we too can play a part in impressing this love for God on the young people in our community and in our homes as well. The word ‘impress’ here, is the same word used for an engraver who etches wording or and image into stone. He does so with precision and exactness with gentle and consistent hammering, *tink, tink, tink,* being very careful not to damage his beloved piece. Impress these commands on your children! May it be evident in your homes! Express this love for God in your homes!

And then thirdly, we see the love of God as an **expression in our community**. Verse seven, “talk about them when you walk along the road,” and verse nine, “write them on your gates.” This great commandment is for you, it is for

your family, it is also for those who see us from the outside; those among whom we shine as bright lights in this dark world. Earlier in Deuteronomy, the Lord says through Moses, “Keep my commands and do them, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.”

I was able to spend some time in Kosovo this summer with a mission organization who used these verses as key tools in their mission model. We came up with a list of what we called *Shema* statements and *Shema* actions – little phrases and actions that we could say and do to display our love for God and his commands. These provided many opportunities to converse with the locals and to identify as Christians. Whether it is praying before a meal in public or saying things like, “God bless you” to someone, we can live out our love for God in expression in our community.

May loving him with our every expression: in ourselves, in our homes, and in our communities, help us as we seek to love him more with our every essence! So Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind. Put a box on your head and bands on your arms (metaphorically of course!) Commit yourself to memorizing some of God’s word to store it in your heart! Call out to Him in prayer! Love Him with all your soul. Tell him what he already knows about you and what you are struggling with! Cry out to Him in prayer and spend time in silence in his presence. Love Him with all your strength! Think intentionally about how to set the tone of obedience and love for God in your homes and in the community here in Essex! Think of ways you could serve others, ways you could bless others with your words, and visible ways you can identify as one who loves God! Pray before a meal, ask people how you can pray for them.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength.” This is the fundamental duty of our faith.

And I will admit: I am terrible at this! I often get overwhelmed at the all-encompassing nature of this great commandment and despair. How can I even begin to love the Lord with all my heart, soul, and strength? What about the dark days, when I am lost in my own struggles, or when the pain of being in this world is too much to handle? What about then?

Well there is hope. Thankfully, we are not left with just this fundamental duty alone. There is in this passage a great fundamental truth behind it.

Conclusion: The Fundamental Truth behind this duty

“Hear O Israel, the Lord *your* God, the Lord is *one*...”

He is God, there is no other besides Him. He is *our* God, and we are His. He loves us so much that he gave us this law in the beginning, for our good. The end of this chapter in Deuteronomy says it this way: “The Lord commanded us to do all these

laws, to fear the Lord our God, *for our good always*, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day.

Not only did he give us the law for our good, but also when we broke the law he remained faithful. We were to have this law written on our hearts and we have erased it many times, we were to love Him with our whole essence and in all expression yet we have forgotten Him.

But, hear this good news. The gospel: through Jeremiah, the Lord declares, "I will make a new covenant with my people, not like the covenant I made with their fathers on the day when I took them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their faithful husband. For this is the covenant that I will make with my people after those days: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God and they shall be my people."

As verse twelve says it, God is the one who chose his people and delivered them from slavery out of Egypt. Friends, this God is the only God. He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and in Christ, He is our God and in Christ, he has too delivered us from slavery.

Friends, Jesus Christ, obeyed this Great Commandment. He loved God His Father with every essence of Himself and in every expression, (especially in obedience unto death on the cross for our sins.)

God loves you so much, just as you are. Heart, soul and strength. Let us go forward from here with this knowledge of God's love for us that we might love him with our every essence and in our every expression.

"Hear O Israel, (Hear O Church of Essex), the Lord our God, the Lord is one! Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength!