

The Great And First Commandment.

Text: Deut 6:4-15

Suggested Hymns:

360, 344, 170 R&S, 355, 377

- 1) We Accord God Our Full Love
- 2) We Honour God's Word
- 3) We Remember His Goodness
- 4) We Serve Him With Reverence

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Deuteronomy 6:4-5, ⁴ ***“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.*** (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Three prepositional phrases denote the Israelites' 40-year journey to nation-hood under God: From Egypt, through the wilderness, to the Promised Land.

At the time Moses spoke the words of our text in the land of Moab, phases one and two of that journey had been completed. There yet remained the arduous tasks of crossing the Jordan and taking possession of the new homeland.

In chapter 5 of this book Moses not only restates the Ten Commandments - hence the name “Deuteronomy,” or the second giving of the Law — but also comments on, and applies God's Word to the forthcoming life of the Israelites in the Promised Land.

In chapter 6 he begins such instruction, stressing the relationship between God and His people as they enter Canaan. There God promises to bless them if they obey His Word and remain true to Him as their one and only God.

The verses constituting our text are a commentary on the truth with which all truth begins: *To let God be God in our lives, as both the First Commandment and the First Table of the Law require.*

In seeking guidance as we in our time continue our pilgrimage from bondage to sin, through much tribulation, to freedom under the Gospel, let us consider

how we are to observe “*the great and first commandment.*” May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. We Accord God Our Full Love

The Lord Jesus was aware of this passage in Deuteronomy and used a part of it to good effect. On one occasion He was asked by a Pharisee, who was also a lawyer, “*Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?*” Jesus replied, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.*”¹

Our Lord was quoting from Deuteronomy. He cited this Mosaic writing not only when the Pharisee tested Him, but also at the time of His threefold temptation in the wilderness. Then and there Jesus overcame Satan by citing three significant passages from Deuteronomy. By restating and applying what Moses had said on the need of loving God, Jesus not only made this commandment His own, but also fulfilled it to the utmost as our Substitute.

Obedience to the great and first commandment, so both Moses and Jesus make clear, is not fixed in habit or routine, not in legalistic necessity, not in paralysing fear, but in love to God. We can readily see why Jesus, the Revealer of God to us, would speak of the great and first commandment in terms of loving the Lord our God.

The Source Of Our Love

Our love to God is not self-generating. It does not proceed out of the heart of man as he is by nature, for that heart is a sin-polluted fountain yielding all the sins Jesus mentions in Mark 7:21-22.

And lest we think this description no longer befits mankind of the 21st century, we need only consider that the same ancient sins, perhaps in modern garb, parade across the front pages of our newspapers and televisions in a sickening procession.

There are street muggings, murder, sex exploitation, rape, robbery, drunkenness, drug abuse, while behind the facade of respectability the same old envy, greed, pride, and self-love continue. Out of such sinful hearts no love to God can spring.

Our love to God is the Holy Spirit's accomplishment in us, as through the Gospel and the sacraments He creates and sustains faith in Jesus Christ. Love is God's great gift. The tide of divine love, cresting in the sending and sacrificing of His Son for our salvation, is the source of our love to God.

The apostle whom Jesus loved puts it very plainly, "*We love Him, because He first loved us.*"² Our Lord, who joined Moses in designating man's love to God as the great and first commandment, taught also the prior truth that all love begins with God, who "*so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.*"³ God's love to us moves and compels us to love Him in return. In response to God's love in Christ we are equal to the charge, thanks to the new heart the Holy Spirit has given us: "*You shall love the Lord your God.*"

The Strength Of Our Love

The love that both prompts and performs obedience to the great and first commandment of letting God be God must be deep and strong. It is not a shallow sentiment, not a leftover love that remains after distributing love here and there, not an emotion that is never anything more than an emotion.

It is true love in that it is total commitment, that is, loving God "*with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*" All we are and have is involved. It is a love that enlists all talents of heart, soul, and mind. It calls for heart power, soul power, mind power, and will power. Certainly body power is included also, for St. Paul appeals by the mercies of God "*to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.*"⁴

Even with total-person commitment love does not stop but proposes to make also the total-goods commitment to God. Loving the Lord with all our might implies love expressing itself also in money power, position power, profession power, and reputation power among one's peers.

The Lord asks us to love Him with everything we have or represent — our effectiveness and good influence, our earthly possessions, place in life, and good standing in the community.

Loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, might, and earthly means, thus describes a love that is strong for reason of its "*breadth and length and height and depth*"⁵ and that is strong because it is undivided.

Our love to God is to be all of one piece — not fragmented, not divided into many portions the way a pie is cut — for God is not fragmented and divided. He is one; He is unique and united. Moses writes, “*The LORD our God, the LORD is one!*”

While among the heathen there are “*gods many and lords many*”⁶ thus dividing and diffusing the love of those who want to serve them, our God is one — one in being and one in number.

This God we love with undivided hearts, even as we worship Him. The hymnist wrote, *Trinity sacred, Unity unbroken, One perfect Godhead, love that never faileth.*⁷

2. We Honour God’s Word

Moses further articulates the great and first commandment by showing that our relationship to God consists not only in loving Him, but also by demonstrating this love in honouring His Word. He writes, “*And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart.*” We honour the Word of God by receiving it into good and honest hearts.

Taking The Word To Heart

How do we honour God’s Word? Some think it is by giving a deluxe-edition of the Bible a place of honour on the living room table but never reading it. Others regard arguments in defence of the Bible as doing honour to the Word of God, even when such arguments become mere mental fencing in which human intellects show their skill.

The way to honour the words of God is to hear and heed them, to take them to heart, to believe and obey them, and to let them circulate.

Young Samuel revealed the proper attitude toward the Word when he said, “*Speak, for Your servant hears.*”⁸ He accepted in faith what God revealed and then acted on it. Taking the Word to heart assures us of all the blessings St. Paul mentions at the beginning of Romans 5: growth in the justifying faith, peace with God, joy amid suffering, suffering that produces perseverance; perseverance that produces character; and character that produces hope which never lets us down. Scripture says, “*Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.*”⁹

Teaching The Word To Others

Having taken the Word to heart, the believer is now called on to pass it on to people around him. Moses visualises a family setting as he tells parents, ***“You shall teach [these words] diligently to your children.”*** Here is a Biblical basis for Martin Luther’s directive at the beginning of his Small Catechism: *“As the head of the family should teach it in a simple way to his household.”*

Fathers and mothers who teach the Word of God to one another and to their children show love and honour to God, as the great and first commandment calls for.

Furthermore, having been brought to faith in Jesus Christ through the Gospel, they also fulfil the law of love to one another, as the apostle bids them: ***“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”***¹⁰ It is a blessed family that lets the Word of Christ dwell in them richly, teaching and admonishing one another.

Home instruction in God’s words, of course, does not stop with teaching the children short mealtime and bedtime prayers. That is evident from the following: ***“⁷ You ... shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.”***

Indeed there are many teaching opportunities that come in the course of the day. At home or while on holidays in God’s great outdoors parents can call attention to God’s works of wisdom and glory, pointing out what God has revealed of Himself not only in nature but also in His Word. Again, a birthday celebration lends itself well for a recall of our Lord’s baptismal promises.

Growing children at all times ask religious questions, often while the family is seated around the table. This gives parents a golden opportunity to reply and to witness of the hope that is in them.¹¹ As daughters help mothers in the kitchen, and as sons work alongside their fathers in the shop or yard, conversations often turn to spiritual topics. Doors are opened for Christian instruction.

Teaching God’s words diligently to the children can be done both formally and informally. It is not only a matter of listening to the children recite the catechism — although that is important — but also of using everyday experiences to help form Christian attitudes.

Keeping The Word In Sight

Honouring God's Word takes yet another form, namely, giving visibility to what God has said. Moses states: ⁸ *You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.* ⁹ *You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

In a very literal understanding of these words, orthodox and conservative Israelites wore phylacteries, that is, little leather cases on their left arms and on their foreheads during prayer. They contained Scripture passages. They also posted such texts on their doorposts.

It was one way of keeping God's Word before one's physical eyes and through them before the eyes of faith. It is not unlike our use of religious wall plaques, posters, and banners, or of the fish (ichthus) and other religious symbols on doors to designate ours as Christian homes.

For children especially they are visual aids; they are not ends in themselves or the objects of superstition. There is no substitute for first of all having God's words *"upon the heart."*

3. We Remember His Goodness

Loving God with all one's faculties, as the great and first commandment requires, means also to remember His goodness. This too, Moses stresses in the text. The special nature of the Deuteronomy discourses, namely, to prepare the Israelites for their life in Canaan, becomes evident as Moses now makes direct reference to their impending occupancy of the Promised Land: *"And when the Lord your God brings you into the land which He swore to your fathers ... to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob . . . then take heed lest you forget the Lord."*

Nearly 40 years had passed since the Law was first given to Israel on Mount Sinai. This Law needed to be repeated to the present generation and applied particularly to their conduct in the land God was shortly to give them. The key words in this section are, *"... lest you forget."* Positively speaking, they call for remembrance of the goodness of the Lord as declared in His promises.

God's Goodness Promised

The covenant God made with the patriarchs, notably with Abraham, provided for the birth and growth of a nation which God had chosen as His own. Through

this nation, descended from Abraham, God planned to bless all the nations of the earth, for from its midst was to emerge the Messiah.¹²

To this people God *“has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings,”*¹³ and had assigned a land flowing with milk and honey. This land, says Moses, God had promised by oath to the patriarchs and their descendants.

The land was overflowing with ready-made blessings, *“to give you large and beautiful cities which you did not build,¹¹ houses full of all good things, which you did not fill, hewn-out wells which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant.”*

The Israelites, for many years a wandering, nomadic, desert people, were now to reap all the benefits of a settled agricultural life. How good was the Lord!

The blessings God had promised to the children of Israel were not only temporal and physical but also spiritual, as St. Paul points out, *“to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises.”*¹⁴ The promises pertained to divine grace and forgiveness proclaimed in and imparted through the Gospel in the Old Testament.

The promise of life under His grace and forgiving love in Christ has also been made to us. This promise was fulfilled with the coming of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, to live, suffer, die, and rise again as our Saviour.

St. Peter stresses this in his Pentecost sermon when he calls on his hearers to repent, be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ, and receive forgiveness. He goes on: *“For the promise is to you and to your children.”*¹⁵

Do we recognise as we should God’s great goodness in giving us Christ, in whom *“we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace⁸ which He made to abound toward us”*?¹⁶

God’s Reminder

On receiving God’s promised blessings, let the children of Israel remember from whom these gifts came. Let them recall how greatly their life was changed when God led them out of slavery to freedom. Moses urges, *“¹² then beware, lest you forget the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.”*

Let us too remember the goodness of God in bringing our forefathers into a good land — a land of clean earth and water, of abundant natural resources, of many opportunities and new beginnings, and of religious freedom. We ourselves did not work for this land; it was here when we came on the scene. We were born into its ready-made blessings. As we recall God’s kindness we are moved to thank Him, expressing our gratitude also in keeping our God-given natural environment clean and pure.

We were the recipients also of many personal blessings which we did nothing to earn: our bodies and souls, eyes, ears, and all our members, our reason and all our senses, our native talents and endowments. All are God’s outright gifts to us, and all arouse us to hold their Giver in thankful remembrance.

4. We Serve Him With Reverence

When God brought His people into the Holy Land, it was not only to give them a homeland but also —and more importantly — to establish for Himself a kingdom with a permanent seat of worship. Israel was to serve Him as *“a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”*¹⁷ This meant all the people, not only the members of the tribe of Levi, for Moses said to all, ¹³ ***You shall fear the LORD your God and serve Him, and shall take oaths in His name.***

What Serving Him Means

But how can fearing the Lord be comprehended in the great and first commandment which calls on us to regard Him our highest good and to love Him? There is no conflict, for love to God is not a sentimental feeling. Love involves recognition of and respect for God because of all He is and does. It expresses itself in obedience, loyalty, the reverent use of God’s name in proper oaths, undivided worship, and wholehearted service.

To serve God means to worship Him, as is seen from the rephrasing of verse 13 quoted by Jesus, *“You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.”*¹⁸

Serving God includes also the “worship” of doing our everyday work faithfully, witnessing for Christ by word and deed, working for the enlargement of His kingdom, caring for the least of His brethren, helping and teaching one another in the family.

All this, Martin Luther would declare, is service to God. We were redeemed by the Lord Jesus that we might *“live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him.”*¹⁹

God Exclusively Ours

“Him only you shall serve,” stated Jesus. Moses said this at greater length: *“¹⁴ You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are all around you.”* Because He loves us, God wants to be exclusively ours, and He desires that we be exclusively His.

The great and first commandment leaves no room for rivals, whether idols that are directly worshiped or things taking the place of God in our hearts.

God does not hesitate to make known His judgement on man’s disobedience of the great and first commandment: *“(for the LORD your God is a jealous God among you), lest the anger of the LORD your God be aroused against you and destroy you from the face of the earth.”*

This God, so zealous for the undivided love and loyalty of His people, is for all that not a tyrant but a loving Father who, as Luther would say, holds the rod in one hand and the apple in the other. He shows *“steadfast love to thousands of those who love Me and keep My commandments.”*²⁰

So in summary, the great and first commandment, which is the foundation of all other commandments calls for total commitment to God. We will in consequence give Him our full love, accept and transmit His Word, remember His goodness, and serve Him with reverence.

May God grant us a full measure of His Holy Spirit that He may arouse greater love in us and with it the grace to *“do on earth our Father’s will As angels do above.”*²¹ Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Matt. 22:36-38

² 1 John 4:19

³ John 3:16

⁴ Rom. 12:1

⁵ Eph. 3:18

⁶ 1 Cor. 8:5

⁷ Hymn 135 v 2

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- ⁸ 1 Samuel 3:10
 - ⁹ Romans 5:5
 - ¹⁰ Eph. 4:32
 - ¹¹ 1 Peter 3:15
 - ¹² Romans 9:5
 - ¹³ Acts 17:26
 - ¹⁴ Rom. 9:4
 - ¹⁵ Acts 2:38-39
 - ¹⁶ (Eph. 1:7-8
 - ¹⁷ Exo. 19:6
 - ¹⁸ Matt. 4:10
 - ¹⁹ Second Article of the Apostles' Creed
 - ²⁰ Exo. 20:6
 - ²¹ Hymn 355