

This morning, we're putting aside our parables series and taking a look at the book of Deuteronomy. It's a series break that I'm titling "Classis Wants Me To Preach on This Passage." But it's not too far removed from some of the things we've talked about in the parables series! Two weeks ago, we looked at the parable of the Good Samaritan. In the lead up to that parable, Jesus is asked a question by a Jewish teacher of the law, a question that Jesus spins back on the man: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" The answer is going to sound pretty familiar in reading our passage today. Let's begin with a time of prayer.

PRAYER

DEUTERONOMY 6:1-9

Picture the scene with me for a minute this morning. The Israelites have seen and done a lot in the last number of years. Many years ago, they were brought out of Egypt; God displays his power to them and to the Egyptians through ten plagues. They were trapped against the Red Sea and expected to be taken back into captivity, but God worked powerfully again, parting the waters of the sea and allowing His people to pass through on dry ground. The Egyptians, chasing behind, were washed away. They journeyed through the desert to Mt. Sinai, where God again showed his power and holiness to them when he gave them the law. God brought them through battle and desert to the edge of the Promised Land, to the precipice of the land that he had promised to their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

But, of course, that's only part of the story. In there, the Israelites had frequently grumbled and complained about their lot. At times, they yearned to return to slavery in Egypt. At times, they lost trust. When Moses was up on Mt. Sinai, receiving the law of God, the Ten Commandments – the people were below, pressuring Moses' brother Aaron to melt down their gold and to make an idol from it, a golden calf. When the people were about to enter the Promised Land, they sent

twelve spies into the land. Ten spies reported that the people there were large and fearsome, and that Israel could never stand against them such as they were.

They're too big and powerful, they said. Two spies appealed to the Lord, telling the people that they could do it, because God was with them, because YHWH their God would fight for them. But the people turned away, and they were cursed to wander in the wilderness for forty years. Even Moses, their great leader, was not immune! In response to more grumbling from the Israelites, God told Moses to speak to a rock, and God would bring forth water for the people to drink. Moses, in his own trustless moment, doesn't do as God told him to, and strikes the rock with his staff. The water comes forth regardless, but God informs Moses that he would not lead the people into the Promised Land, because he too had not trusted God.

And now, forty years have passed. Moses is preparing to die. His brother Aaron has already passed away. The ten spies who had inspired Israel to rebel against God had died, as had that whole generation; only the two spies who had professed faith were left. The people of Israel were just days away from the end of their forty years, in fact, Deuteronomy 1:3 tells us that Moses began speaking to the people on the first day of the eleventh month of the fortieth year. November 1, if you will – and on January 1, the people are heading into the promised land of Canaan. And Moses, knowing what's about to happen to him, knowing that his days are numbered, speaks to the people, reminding them of all that has happened and all that God has commanded them. Deuteronomy is, in a sense, Moses' farewell address to the people of Israel. He starts by recounting the history, the cowardice at Canaan's edge, his own inability to enter the promised land. And then he makes sure to repeat to them the words, the law that God gave to them. He starts by reminding them of the holiness of God, and warns them against idolatry. He recounts the Ten Commandments to them, reminding them of God's words to them. And then we come to our passage here this morning.

These are the commands, the decrees, and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess. With those words, Moses reminds the people that they are bound to God. They are given all they currently have by the grace of God, who redeemed them, brought them out of slavery in Egypt, and is bringing them into a good and fertile land. All they have, and all they will ever have in the future, comes from the hand of their good and gracious God. He is, to the people of Israel, the Lord YOUR God – that word shouldn't be lost on us. Everything that is about to follow in this dying speech – all these commands, decrees, and laws – are from God, and therefore are binding upon the people of God.

God tells them, as well, that it's for their benefit: “so that you, your children, and your children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you.” There's a couple of things in there even that stick out. The first is the promises of God that are referenced here. Israel was God's chosen people, but more than that, they were God's covenant people. Because God loves the people of Israel, he has entered into a covenant with them through the promise he made to their ancestor Abraham in Genesis 17: “The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.” God's promises are good and sure – the land will be given to the people of Israel. It's a done deal, even if it hasn't happened just yet. But now Israel must do what is required of them in this covenant – serve God, and God alone.

The second thing that sticks out to me is the enduring nature both of the promises of God and of the commands for Israel. Moses here makes reference to

you, your children, and their children after them. This is not just a one-off deal with the current generation. This is to be an enduring piece of Israelite life – full obedience to the Lord their God. It's not the last time we'll talk about the importance of children in this passage, either, but God makes it clear what his goals are for them – that they, too, will learn to fear the Lord as long as they live by keeping the decrees and commands of God.

Third – God wants the Israelites to grow as a nation! It's part of the promise he made to Abraham – that his descendants would outnumber the grains of sand on the shore and the stars in the nighttime sky. Again, the land is theirs. They will take it. But what will come after that? It's a rich land, a bountiful land. Will they be distracted by the dangers of having plenty, as so many in our world today are? Or will they remember always that they are God's people, that all they have received and will receive comes from him, and will they then give him the glory and honour that God is so rightly due?

Then we get to what is commonly known as the Shema – the greatest commandment. Shema comes from the Hebrew word that kicks off the phrase here, the word for hear. Shema, Israel: YHWH Elohim, YHWH ehad. Hear, O Israel – the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Again, the central point that is being driven home here for the Israelites is that the Lord, YHWH, He is YOUR God – he alone is God. He alone should be worshipped. That in and of itself was weird enough when compared with the nations surrounding them: the Canaanites, Egyptians, everyone around them worshipped a pantheon of gods – they had gods for everything. They had gods for rain, for war, for fertility, for the sun. God is putting an absolute stop to that with his people Israel. He is the one, indivisible, all-powerful God, and there could never be another like him. The syncretism – the worship of multiple gods at the same time – of the people around God's people must not and cannot be repeated within God's people.

But that is also a message of hope for God's people – that this all-powerful, all-knowing, all-encompassing God has chosen you, Israel; has called you by name and has blessed you richly. He has brought you through your many trials in the wilderness outside the promised land, and you will now enter into that land he is giving you. He is your God, and he cares for you.

Verse 4, then, highlights the relationship of God to his people – verse 5 now highlights the response of the people to God's provision for them: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. Because God is who he says he is, because he does what he says he will do, and because, Israel, he loves you – you are called to respond with loving obedience. But this is not just a passing thing, a nominal obedience. To love God with all your heart, soul, and strength is not a small thing – in fact, it's a call that will take up the entirety of your life. It's not an easy life, this Christian walk. But we are called to commit to it, not just show up when we think it works for us.

There was a study done some years ago that asked people whether or not they identified as an evangelical Christian. Now the term has picked up some controversy over the years, especially in the last ten years or so. It's become more associated with a political viewpoint for many people than a religious one. This study would then follow up with some questions about their faith and life practice, asking questions that for Christians, should be basic realities that the gospel gives to us: things like, is your faith important in your life today; is Satan real; do you believe that salvation is attained by grace and not by works, did Christ live a sinless life on earth. Things like that. There were nine of these questions – again, very very basic things. Of these people who identified themselves as evangelical – just 19% answered yes to all of those very basic questions. Less than one in five of those who called themselves an evangelical Christian followed through with some of the most basic things in the life of the believer. Even weirder – at least to me –

was that only 73% of those who identified themselves as evangelicals would say they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today and also believe when they die, they will go to Heaven because they have confessed their sins and have accepted Jesus Christ as their saviour. Truly basic things! Here's the thing, though – anyone can claim a label. Anyone can claim the label of Christian. Not everyone who claims that label fits that label. Not everyone who calls themselves Christian can say that they love God with all their heart, soul, and strength. And, as is made clear in the history of Israel – they would claim to be God's chosen people, and they would not follow this command. They would acknowledge that God brought them out of Egypt, but would not give God the kind of commitment that kind of freedom would deserve. The point of this phrase, for Israel, is not just to talk a little about God every now and again – but to have a single-minded devotion towards the One who has rescued them and called them His people.

What does that single-minded devotion look like? Luckily enough, the last verses we read today were meant to give Israel a sense of what that looked like. These commands were to be upon the hearts of the people. Psalm 1:2 tells us that blessed is the one whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates upon it day and night. This was to make sure that obedience to these commands was not just some form of legalism – some sense of do the right thing, or else – but a response to God based on understanding. By having these commandments upon their hearts, by reflecting on these commandments, they are reflecting on the very words of God; and so by understanding the path of life that is set before them by these commandments, they then discover how the love of God for them is given expression.

Understanding these things, then, Moses tells the people to ensure that this knowledge and understanding is passed down to the next generations. Impress

them upon your children, says Moses. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk upon the road, when you lie down and when you get up. These commands from God are meant to permeate the home life of the Israelites, from the beginning of the day to the end of it. The importance of the covenant community ensuring that their children are taught these things is emphasized again, as well. The promises of God are for the children of the community, too, and in time, the responsibilities of passing the commands and laws of God down to their children will fall to them as well. We have this idea that's sort of popped up in the last few years that we need to just present our kids with all the options, and they'll choose what's right for them. That's easy, but that's not wise. We know from Scripture that even at a young age, our hearts are inclined away from God. We will start our kids on the best path for them if we do our best to give them the truth of God's Word from an early age, and at all times, whether sitting at home or travelling, whether starting another day or going off to bed. Those phrases were designed to let Israel know that at all times, in all situations, they should be people who meditate on the law of the Lord.

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. I don't know that those words were meant to be taken literally, but there was a certain subset of Israelites who did. Some of the discoveries made in ancient Israel include these little boxes called phylacteries. These were little boxes that some groups of Jews literally tied to their foreheads, and they would contain pieces of the Torah. Often it would be the Shema, the "Hear, O Israel" part of what we read this morning, but sometimes it would contain other parts of the law. They literally took the words and bound it to their foreheads. Many of these same Jews would have boxes attached to their doorframes, containing words of the law. That's the seriousness with which a number of Jews would follow the law. I'd think it would be more likely, though, to

see this as another way for God to ask his people to show just how central He is to them. When people see your work, Moses says, let it point to who God is. When they speak with you and look at your life, let it glorify God. When they enter your home, may they understand that a love of God permeates every facet of your life.

So how do these words to ancient Israel speak to us today? These words were given to ancient Israel, in their specific context. But there are underlying principles that are unchanging here. The first thing is to understand the centrality of God in the life of the believer. God's place in our lives is not negotiable – we as Christians are to love God with all our heart, soul, and strength. Part of the purpose of the law is to reveal the standards of God and to show us the holiness of God. God is perfect, righteous, and holy – and our mission, through the law, is to be exactly like that.

Secondly – the importance of teaching our children to love and obey God. The promises of God endure – then, and now. And so for this message to continue to reach the generations after us, it is crucial for us to ensure that we keep the promises that we make to our children when we baptize them. The apostle Peter reminds us of the need for this in Acts 2, when he tells the people in Jerusalem that the promise of God is not only for them, but for their children. We don't do our kids any favours when we don't give them the truth that is contained within the Scriptures and impress upon them the importance of a love for God. We commit together to raising the children of this church in faith when they are presented for baptism, and it's important, then, for us as a whole church to commit to that.

And third – the fact that our lives should reflect the reality of God's love. I don't think we need to start wearing little boxes with Scripture. They will do us little good if the Scripture we profess to know has not changed our hearts and minds. If our lives don't have love, as Paul tells us in I Corinthians 13, all our words and actions, however graceful they may be, are meaningless.

But there's a fourth thing that sort of hangs over all of this, the thing I think we're all aware of in the back of our minds, and that is the fact that we, each of us, have failed in this. We know that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. There's no sense in which one of us is better than another – we've all failed to meet the standards of holiness that God has given us in his law. We have not loved God with all our heart, soul, and strength. Our lives have not always reflected his holiness. And, left to our own devices, we know that we would not be able to love God, and so a passage like this can leave us feeling guilty and burdened. We can read a passage like this and leave feeling a heavy weight, the burden of trying to live up to a standard of holiness and the burden of our inability to do so. The law does, in part, reveal to us both the standards of God and our own failure to meet those standards.

But it does so in order to point us to a place of hope, to point us to the one who so loved the world that he gave His one and only Son. Before we knew what the law was, before we could understand how unable we are to please God based on our works – Jesus Christ came to this world to live, to die, and to rise again so that the relationship between us and God might be restored. May the mercy displayed in the work of Christ be reflected in our lives as we continue the work of the kingdom of God here on earth. May the love that God has displayed to us be reflected in our love for him and for His people. And as we, each of us, seek to grow in grace and in holiness, may we be encouraged that the work is finished; that Christ has conquered sin and death. And may words like this encourage and strengthen us all for the tasks we have ahead of us. Amen.