

A SERMON ON THE FIRST COMMANDMENT: DEUT 6–11
The What and the Why (Deuteronomy 6)
Defining the What & Why (vv. 1–5)

Remember...

Deuteronomy is comprised of three major speeches given by Moses to the people of Israel on the Plains of Moab just before entering the Promised Land. A brief introduction opens the book (1:1–5), and an epilogue concludes it (31:1–34:12). Thus far, we have covered the introduction (1:1–5), Speech 1 (1:6–4:43), and the first section of Speech 2—the Ten Commandments (Deut 5).

Today, we move out from the Ten Commandments into the second section of Speech 2—an exposition of the first commandment, which spans Deut 6–11. We will begin this section by covering **Deut 6:1–5**.

Introducing the Commandment (Deut 6:1–3)

In Deut 5:28–33, Moses recounts the events immediately following the giving of the Ten Commandments. The people were afraid, and requested Moses to serve as their mediator.

In 5:31, God informs Moses that God would tell him, “...the whole commandment, the statutes and the rules...” which Moses would then teach to the people. In 6:1, Moses informs the people that he is about to deliver what he has learned to them.¹ **Point:** Moses is about to play the role of mediator and communicate the information God gave him to teach the people.

Verse 1—Moses is sharing the actual torah (instruction) that YHWH told him to teach the people (i.e., the commandment, the statutes, and the rules). As always, this wasn’t intended to be mere head knowledge, but the people were taught these instructions “that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it...”

Verse 2—adds a clarification about what it means to do the Lord’s commandment, namely, “that you may fear” him. God longs for his people to maintain a reverential fear of him (cf. Deut 5:29).

What does this fear look like? How does one actively go about fearing God? The text tells us, “...by keeping all his statutes and commandments...” God desires that such fear be passed on generationally. ***What are some practical ways this might be carried out?***

Verse 3—several motivations for the people’s obedience are given: “that it may go well with you” (general flourishing), “that you may multiply greatly” (fertility), “in a land flowing with milk and honey” (rich land).

¹ i.e., “Now *this is the commandment...*”

Notice the crucial statement: “as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you...” This reminds us that obedience *is not the means of earning the blessing*. In Chris Wright’s words, “the lush future in the land will be theirs because of God’s faithfulness to the promise made to their forefathers. It was a gift of grace, but to be appropriated and enjoyed through obedience—a constant biblical pattern in both testaments.”²

*Verses 1–3 tell us that Moses is about to communicate the commandments, statutes, and judgments that we have been waiting for. In vv. 4–5, he begins this teaching with *the Shema*...

The What and the Why (Deut 6): Defining the What & Why (vv. 4–5)

These verses kick off a very important section of Deuteronomy. The rest of Deut 6 may be structured as follows:

- Defining the what and the why (vv. 4–5)
- Remembering the what and the why (vv. 6–9)
- Forgetting the what and the why (vv. 10–19)
- Instilling the what and the why (vv. 20–25).

Defining the What and the Why (vv. 4–5)

Young children love to ask two important questions: “What are you doing?” and “Why are you doing that?” Profound questions when you think about it. ***Do we ever take the time to question what seems to be our central purpose as God’s people and the motivations that drive it?***

The so-called Shema could be seen as a starting point for defining what the people of God are to do (the what) and why they are to do it (the why). But, like we often see in Scripture, we begin with the why...

(1) The Why: The Supremacy of YHWH (v. 4)

Begins with a call for Israel to “hear” (*shema* in Hebrew). This is where the brief prayer/creed gets its name. The term implies more than just audibly hearing the words spoken...

- Genesis 18:10—When the Lord was speaking to Abraham re Sarah having a son, we are told she was listening (*shema*) at the door (implies hearing).
- Job 13:1–2—Job declares, “Behold, my eye has seen all this, my ear was heard (*shema*) and understood it” (implies understanding).
- Exodus 18:24—where we are told, “Moses listened (*shema*) to the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said” (implies obeying).

² Christopher J. H. Wright, *Deuteronomy*, UTB (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 93.

Thus, *shema* can imply hearing, understanding, even obeying depending on the context. **Point:** Moses calls out to the congregation of Israel on the plains of Moab and tells them to “*shema!*” i.e., to listen to him carefully—to *hear and heed* what he is about to say.

And what does Moses tell them? “The LORD our God, the LORD is one.”

Hebrew		Wooden Translation
יהוה אלהינו יהוה אחד	6:4	YHWH our God YHWH one

The verse is a bit tricky to translate...Different potential translations include...³

- YHWH is our God; YHWH is one.
- YHWH is our God, YHWH alone.
- YHWH our God, YHWH is one.
- YHWH our God is one YHWH.

Which one is it? Let’s break it down...There are two main phrases/clauses:⁴

(a) “The LORD our God...”

The LORD = YHWH, i.e., God’s name. *What’s significant about this name?* Consider Exod 3 & Exod 6. Ultimately, “YHWH our God” is more than just a name, it’s a reminder of a God who had covenanted to redeem his people from slavery, establish a relationship with them, and bring them into a land of their own where he would dwell in their midst. By Deut 6, this was taking place! God’s people had been redeemed from slavery, and they were standing on the edge of the promised land. In just two Hebrew words, the people are given an identity: they are the ones who can say YHWH is “our God.” In Christ, we too can say this too (see Gal 2:20).

(b) “...the LORD is one.”

Difficult to translate. *What does it mean that YHWH is one?* Several suggestions...

- It refers to **monotheism**...i.e., that there is one God in existence. While there are other divine beings, there is only one true God. True, but is this what this verse is referring to?
- It refers to **monolatry**...i.e., not only is there one God, but only one God deserved Israel’s worship. This view usually translates the verse, “YHWH [is] our God, YHWH alone.”
- It refers to **mono-Yahwism**...i.e., there is only one manifestation of YHWH, not different personalities and manifestations of YHWH that changes in different regions (e.g., a YHWH of Jerusalem, a YHWH of Damascus, etc.).

So, which one is it? Yes.

Yes, there is only one true and eternal God. Yes, he alone is to be worshipped. Yes, he does not change.

³ See Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 105.

⁴ Whether these are *phrases* or *clauses* depends on which interpretation one takes.

However, these are merely implications of this verse. Too many interpret v. 4 focusing on numbers. The Shema isn't about numbers; it's about categories. By declaring that YHWH is one, Moses is saying YHWH our God is supreme—that he is in a category all by himself. He and he alone is worthy of the title “God” and all that entails...namely, that there is one true God (monotheism), that only he should be worshipped (monolatry), and that he does not change (mono-Yahwism).⁵

Verse 4 provides a feast of Moses' theology of God—a summary of what is for the people the very foundation of who they are and therefore all that they do. It is a call to hear and remember that YHWH, the covenant making, covenant keeping God has redeemed his people and established a relationship with them. And the one who has done this is supremely God.

Transition: Now, think back to our main questions: *what are you doing? why are you doing it?* We see now that we are asking them backwards. The Shema actually begins with the why and then moves to the what. But this is the common biblical pattern...The Bible most often begins with the propositional motivation—i.e., redemption freely given by a supreme God—and then moves to the proper response... *So, what is the response?*

(2) The What: The Call to Love (v. 5)

Given what we know about Deuteronomy, we may be tempted to think that the foundational command would be a cold and distant call to obedience. But what follows couldn't be more personal: “You shall love...”⁶

What does Moses mean by “love”? Many look to ancient treaty texts and define this love as robotic, unemotional, forced love.⁷ But elsewhere in the OT, the same word is used for Abraham's parental love for Isaac (Gen 22:2), Elkanah's marital love for his wife Hannah (1 Sam 1:5), Jonathan's brotherly love for David (1 Sam 18:3), and even the people's reverential love for an anointed king (1 Sam 18:16). This doesn't sound like mere unemotional, robotic submission. It sounds like affection.

While this love is not void of emotion, it is not mere emotion either. Remember, this love is a response to the love YHWH has for his people—a covenantally committed love. See Deut 7:7–8. God's love isn't dependent upon anything great about his people, but his own commitment to uphold his promise. He has chosen to love Israel. And that love is expressed in action for his people's good.

That's what love is according to the Bible: the sacrificial commitment to the good of another.⁸

⁵ For this discussion, see Bill T. Arnold, *The Book of Deuteronomy Chapters 1–11*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), 376–89.

⁶ See Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 95.

⁷ See discussion in Arnold, *Deuteronomy*, 389–90.

⁸ For this definition of love, see Tim and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 81.

That's the kind of love God has for his people. And that's the kind of love his people are called to offer back to God in a response of gratitude—a response that is expressed in wholehearted, full-bodied commitment.⁹ A response that sounds a lot like John 14:15 or 1 John 4:19.¹⁰

This whole-hearted, full-bodied, active love is further qualified in v. 5. ***How shall you love the LORD your God...?***

First, “with all your heart (lēv)...,” i.e., the seat of intellectual activity. It includes thinking, as well as character and decision making, along with affections. Cf. Mark 12:30. ***How might we love God with our “heart”?***

Second, “with all your soul (nephesh)...,” i.e., with your whole embodied life—inner and outer “self.” Cf. Gen 9:5; 2 Sam 23:17. ***How might we love God with our “nephesh”?***

Third, “with all your might (me’ōd).” The word is an adverb, i.e., with all your “very-muchness,” or your resources.¹¹ The goal is to be expansive, referring to physical strength, natural abilities, as well as time, possessions, etc.¹² ***How might we love God with our “very-muchness”?***

The movement: loving God from the inside-out: with all internal, cognitive faculties, embodied lives, as well as gifts and resources. The foundational “what” that God’s people are called to is a response of love for him with all that we are and all that we have.

Do you love God like that? Of course not... We have all fallen short here. But praise God that our redemption isn’t rooted in how perfectly we love God, and our love is a joyous response to the love he has shown us. Remember: the what follows the why.

The *Shema* defines for God’s people the foundational “what” and “why.” It begins with the motivation: the supremacy of God and his relationship with and redemption of his people. We then turn to the only proper response: whole-hearted, full-bodied love expressed in active obedience. The same foundational principles remain true for the NT people of God.

As we consider these foundational questions—what are you doing? why are you doing it? —they may strike each of us differently.

- They may be **reorienting**—convicting you that your pursuits and motivations are out of check.
- They may be **revealing**—offering you the discipleship compass you have been looking for.
- They may be **revitalizing**—confirming that you are on the right path and making progress, even if it appears to be slow going.

⁹ For this language, see Daniel I. Block, *A Commentary on Deuteronomy Chapters 1–11*, Hearing the Gospel According to Moses vol. 1 (Hong Kong: Inspirata, 2023), 228.

¹⁰ Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 98.

¹¹ See Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 99.

¹² Block, *Deuteronomy*, 228–9.