

SPEECH 2B—SERMON ON THE FIRST COMMANDMENT (DEUT 6–11): The What and the Why (Deuteronomy 6)

Remember the context...

Deuteronomy is comprised of three main speeches given by Moses to the people of Israel on the Plains of Moab just before they enter the promised land.

We are currently working through the second speech (Deut 5–26), which includes (a) the Ten Words (Deut 5), (b) a sermon on the first commandment (Deut 6–11), and (c) specific application of the Ten Commandments (Deut 12–26).

Today, we continue to unpack Moses' sermon on the first commandment, picking up in Deut 6.

The What and the Why (Deut 6)

Recall our structure of Deuteronomy 6:

- Defining the what and the why (vv. 1–5)
- 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).

Last week, we defined the what and the why (vv. 4–5). Now, Moses gets even more practical, teaching the people about remembering (vv. 6–9) & forgetting the what and the why (vv. 10–19).

Remembering the What and the Why (vv. 6–9)

Are you a forgetful person? Have you ever experienced the consequences of forgetting key information? What sort of tools do you use as reminders?

In vv. 6–9, Moses provides three means of remembrance, telling the people that remembering the what and the why...

- begins in the heart (v. 6)
- demands discipleship (v. 7)
- requires reminders (vv. 8–9)

(1) Remembering the What & Why Begins in the Heart (v. 6)

In reading v. 6, three questions arise...

Q.1: What are “these words”? Some say Deuteronomy as a whole (i.e., the words commanded by Moses and recorded in the book). Problem: in vv. 7–9, “these words” are to be memorized and written on various surfaces. This has led others to understand “these words” as a smaller subset of the book, perhaps the Ten Words or even just the Shema. Regardless, the entire “law” (and prophets!) can be summarized by the Shema in Jesus’ mind (see Matt 22:37–40). Even if “these words” here refers to the Shema alone, they reflect the central what and why, and thus, stand as a summary of the whole.¹

Q.2: What does it mean that these words must “be on your heart”? Remember how the heart was understood in OT worldview. It’s close to how we understand the mind—where we make decisions, where wisdom dwells, where we discern truth from error, etc. Moses’ command here is to internalize the words, to commit them to memory, to drive them into the fabric of their being.² Note: even in the OT, the ritual wasn’t primary—the heart was. Rituals were meant to reinforce internalization.³

Q.3: How might we ensure these words are on our hearts? See Psalm 1. Consider also the diagnostic question for whether these words are in your heart in Luke 6:45.

(2) Remembering the What & Why Demands Discipleship (v. 7)

Verse 7 turns outward: as important as personal internalization of the words is, any hope of future remembrance requires instructing the next generation. Moses offers some practical tips...

First, teach *diligently* (i.e., persistently, thoughtfully, drill these words into your children). This involves intentionality—recitation and application to life.⁴

He continues with two *merisms* (giving two opposing sides to imply everything in between). The first merism is *spatial*, instructing diligent teaching whether at home or walking by the way.

What does this imply? The second is *temporal*—at the end and beginning of the day. **How might this be applied?** Point: these words aren’t only the fabric of our own life, but the fabric of our family life—no matter the time, no matter the place.⁵

Who is it that Moses calls to be the primary disciplers? How might we go about doing this in our own families? What does this mean for the unmarried and/or childless? In the church, we are all called to a *comprehensive culture of discipleship*.⁶ To follow Jesus is to help others follow

¹ See Nathan MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of Monotheism*, FAT, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 128. *See Pastor Jake on this resource!

² See Bill T. Arnold, *The Book of Deuteronomy Chapters 1–11*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), 395.

³ See Christopher J. H. Wright, *Deuteronomy*, UTB (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 100; Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy*, Interpretation (Louisville: WJK, 2012), 104.

⁴ See Jack R. Lundbom, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 313.

⁵ See J. Gordon McConville, *Deuteronomy*, AOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 142; Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 100.

⁶ See Mark Dever, *Discipling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus*. Building Healthy Churches (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016).

Jesus, and there are countless ways of doing so. Verse 7 calls us to leave time and energy to engage in this. ***What are some practical ways to disciple others?***

(3) Remembering the What & Why Requires Reminders (vv. 8–9)

Even if we seek to have these words on our hearts and diligently disciple, we are still prone to forgetfulness... Verses 8–9 provide us with more practical helps.

There is debate re whether Moses intends for these reminders to be taken literally or symbolically. The latter is more likely.⁷

There are four commands here. The first set of two revolve around the individual.

First, the words are to be “bound as a sign on your hand” and as “frontlets between your eyes.” Cf. different “signs” in the OT (Gen 1:14; 9:13; 17:11). In Exodus 13:9,16, the same language appears to be symbolically applied to the Passover feast and dedication of the firstborn to the Lord. See also Prov 6:20–22. ***How might we apply this?***

The second set of commands moves from the individual toward family and community with the command to inscribe the words on doorposts of homes and city gates. This was to symbolically cover one’s home in YHWH’s words and to serve as visible reminder in the most public place of the Shema. Likewise, to inscribe on city gates was to attest that YHWH was Lord of the city.

Significance of city gates? How might we apply this?

Even before the NT period, Jews were taking these commands literally (e.g., phylacteries, mezuzot). Before dismissing this as “unnecessary literalism,” we should ask “whether we are any more serious or successful in flavouring the whole of life with conscious attention the law of God...as a personal, familial, and social strategy for living out our commitment to loving God totally.”⁸ While I believe these commands are to be taken symbolically, we too need constant reminders to keep these words on our hearts...

In all, did the people of Israel heed these instructions? No. They forgot, turned their backs on YHWH, and were ultimately exiled. While we have been given all things in Christ, how often do we neglect God’s Word?

God never forgets us. Yet, in Christ, God took our place as though he did, so that by faith in him we can stand before God as if we never forgot. This empowers us now to repent of our forgetfulness, and press on in taking these words to heart, discipling our children, and actively creating tangible reminders that we might remember, and saturate our lives with his instructions.

⁷ On vv. 8–9, see Arnold, *Deuteronomy*, 399–401; Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 105–6.

⁸ Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 100.

Forgetting the What and the Why (vv. 10–19)

After providing several reminders to help Israel, in vv. 10–19, Moses recalls two instances highlighting the people’s tendency to forget. Such stories serve as a caution against the forgetfulness of God’s people today.

Two experiences that tend to cause forgetfulness among God’s people...

- Fruitfulness can cause us to forget God’s grace (vv. 10–15)
- Famine can cause us to forget God’s faithfulness (vv. 16–19)

(1) Fruitfulness Can Cause Us to Forget God’s Grace (vv. 10–15)

Remember the scene: the people of Israel on the plains of Moab, awaiting entry into the promised land. While this is the land that had been promised long before (v. 10), Moses issues a warning to not forget their Lord when they take possession of it (v. 12).

Why might they forget? Because this wasn’t just any old gift. Four phrases describe the goodness of the land God was giving his people (vv. 10–11)...⁹

- It had “great and good cities,” i.e., developed settlements in ideal locations—easily defended, surrounded by fruitful land, access to fresh water.
- It had “houses full of every good thing,” i.e., turnkey homes with fully stocked pantries.
- It had pre-dug cisterns, i.e., artificial reservoirs cut into the bedrock and lined with plaster to catch rain for the dry season.
- It had mature vineyards and olive trees, one of the principle crops of the ANE (along with grapes and grain).

From public settlements to private residences to vital resources, this was a rich and fruitful land that God was giving his people. It had all they needed and more (v. 11, “satisfied”). Moses isn’t shy about the goodness of God’s abundant blessing.¹⁰ Yet v. 12 urges caution, “guard yourself!” Why? Because fruitfulness has a tendency to cause forgetfulness...

It can cause two kinds of forgetfulness: (a) We may forget God entirely, blinded by the stuff...***Why does Moses bring up idolatry in v. 14?*** (b) We may forget that we didn’t earn or deserve anything in the first place (“you didn’t build...fill...dig...plant...”). Cf. Deut 8:17–18. Israel’s claim to the land wasn’t that they earned it. It was God’s grace from start to finish...Cf. Eph 2:8–9. We too have a tendency to think that God owes us something. What do any of us have that we haven’t been given?

Such forgetfulness has consequences...see v. 15. ***How is such forgiveness combatted?*** Verse 13, i.e., “a covenant-centered reverence.”¹¹

⁹ On the following, see Arnold, *Deuteronomy*, 408–9.

¹⁰ See Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 101.

¹¹ Arnold, *Deuteronomy*, 412.

(2) Famine Can Cause Us to Forget God's Faithfulness (vv. 16–19)

On v. 16, see Exod 17:1–7. Verse 2: “Why do you test YHWH?” ***What is a test? Are there amoral and immoral tests?*** Verse 3: “Why did you bring us up...to kill us...?” Moses cries out to the Lord, who tells him to strike the rock. The place received two fitting names: Massah (“testing”) and Meribah (“quarrelling”), for it was there that the people tested YHWH by saying, “Is YHWH among us or not?”

What kind of test was this? It was not amoral...It was a direct assault on God. Famine can cause us to forget God's faithfulness. While blessing may cause us to forget our great God by becoming distracted or prideful, times of famine, i.e., times of need and trial, have a tendency to create doubt that God is really there or that he is there but not faithful to provide.

Why was this a sinful test? A test isn't necessary if we know the outcome. No one tests 8th graders on counting to ten or law students on their ability to read. To question these things would be an assault on their competency. Imagine calling God's competency into question. This is exactly what the Israelites were doing at Massah—despite all that they had seen and experienced. A time of trial, pain, and panic led God's people to forget who they were dealing with. ***How often do we do the same? What are some examples of trials that cause us to “test” God?***

The issue with the testing runs deeper...They aren't merely questioning God's competency—they have seen his sovereign power. What they were questioning was his faithfulness to provide.

Of course, there are many lament psalms in the Psalter which use strong language to call God to act in seasons of trial. However, the psalmists' trust in the Lord's sovereignty and goodness just about always remains (see Pss 6, 10, 130). In seasons of trial, remember two precious truths: God is sovereign, and God is good. Remember also that Christ entered into our sufferings (see Heb 4:15). Christ himself quotes these very words from Deut 6 while experiencing famine and being tempted in the wilderness. In times of famine, when we are tempted to put God to the test or make our worship of him contingent on his acting, remember that he has already proven his sovereign love to us supremely in sending his own Son to work salvation for his people. See Rom 8:32.

In Deut 6:17–19, Moses offers other practical means of combatting forgetfulness in seasons of famine, namely, obedience. Obedience is among the best antidotes to forgetfulness.¹² In seasons of famine, we don't run from God's instructions, we lean into them. We have the road map for what it means to do “right and good...” Note also the motivations given...

Does v. 18 suggest the people earned the land through obedience? Cf. vv. 10–15. Two interwoven threads: God's sovereignty & human's responsibility. “The grace of God is the presupposition of the divine demand and at the same time the promised reward of fulfilling that demand...”¹³ Israel did not earn the land, yet possession of the land without divine blessing would be worthless.¹⁴

¹² Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 103.

¹³ Miller, *Deuteronomy*, 106.

¹⁴ Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 103.

Unfortunately, the people of Israel did allow both famine and fruitfulness to lead to forgetfulness, and the judgment spoken of in v. 15 did, in a sense, come to pass. However, Christ brought about a new covenant, one in which such sins are forgiven because he took the judgment in our place. Those who repent and believe receive such forgiveness and through the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are given a new heart and empowered to remember and diligently keep God's commands. Such obedience is not rooted in the mere avoidance of judgment but is to find satisfaction as we walk in God's ways, knowing our judgment has been borne by Christ.

So, in times of fruitfulness and famine, let us remember.