

**LOVING THE NEEDY:
A SERMON ON DEUTERONOMY 10:16–19**

Jason S. DeRouchie, PhD
Associate Professor of OT and Biblical Theology
Bethlehem College & Seminary

I invite you this morning to join me on a journey. I am not a super experienced guide, but in the last several years the Lord has increasingly shown me from his word and in deed his unrelenting love for the broken, the outcast, the forgotten. I personally feel like I am only beginning to understand God’s heart for the vulnerable and oppressed. But what I have seen is beautiful, and I believe it is changing me. I pray that I can faithfully and compellingly portray from his word and through story just some of the beauty of our God and the care he has for the least of these.

Today we will look at a text from Deuteronomy that has shaped my thinking and that is progressively reshaping my life. It addresses both the Christian’s role and the church’s role in caring for the poor, whether orphan, widow, or sojourner. I invite you to taste and see the goodness of our God and to consider the implications for your own life. Let’s pray. . . .

[2–4] When I say, “Poverty,” *what* comes to mind? Most of you probably think like I did even a year ago of someone who is lacking material goods, and this is a true part of poverty. However, the book *When Helping Hurts* broadened my lens to see poverty as something far greater than physical want. Poverty relates to lack at numerous levels and is often accompanied by feelings of shame, inability, enslavement, guilt, burden, and loss. Poverty is not just the absence of stuff; it is a disposition of the soul—a brokenness, a hopelessness, an imprisonment. I have seen this first hand in the lives, in the faces, in the eyes of those to whom I have ministered in Ethiopia. I want to share some of my and my family’s journey with you today. I am increasingly certain that if we are to truly help others overcome the bite of poverty, we must do more than give handouts. We must address the whole person, bringing them healing physically, emotionally, relationally, and, most fundamentally—spiritually. Poverty is part of the curse that Jesus came to overcome in reconciling all things to God (Col 1:20).

[5–7] Now when I say, “Poverty,” *who* comes to mind? I said, “*Who?*” Do you have specific persons in view? What is his name? What is her story? Has it touched your heart, moving you to action? Since my family began the journey of international adoption around seven years ago, the Lord has been doing a work in our souls, moving us to care for the broken not simply as an abstract concept but as people, with feelings and names, with a personal narrative. My three youngest children came

to us out of deep poverty in Ethiopia, having experienced tragic loss through disease, death, and material lack. Now, in God's mercy, they are no longer orphans. Blood-bought grace has moved them out of that cursed status into being members of a family that loves them dearly and cares about the outcome of their faith.

Now, over the last couple of years, my family and I have become acutely aware that we are not done with helping the orphan and widow find new identity in Christ. Care for the fatherless, the widow, and the stranger is but one of the many expressions of the Lord's love in Scripture, but it is this focus that has captured our hearts, specifically with respect to Ethiopia. The wind of God has hit the flame of our souls, and we have seen the kindling of love within our own hearts turned into a blaze pushing us back to Africa's horn to engage in theological feminine relief and in holistic ministry. The Lord has given us faces and stories that find focus across the sea, and this has guided our own hearts for service. My prayer today is that you would find your own people, your own names to love. [8] And I pray this in the hope of seeing fulfilled the beautiful vision in Revelation 7:9–17, where a great multitude of worshippers from every nation, tribe, and language are gathered around the throne of the Lamb, and where the redeemed and cleansed will never more thirst, hunger, or cry.

Our text is found in Deuteronomy 10:16–19. We will begin reading in verse 12. READ DEUTERONOMY 10:12–19.

The Call to Love God (Deut 10:12–13)

What did Jesus say was the first and greatest commandment? “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” (Mark 12:29). He drew these words from Deuteronomy 6:5, and this command is repeated with different language in Deuteronomy 10:12–13. Just listen to how God centered the text is: “Fear *the Lord*, walk in *his* ways, love *him*, serve *him* with all your heart and with all your soul.”

Do you see anything lacking in yourself when you hear this? Do you fear the Lord today, or are other fears governing your heart? Do you want to follow him and love him and serve him with all your heart and soul? Our text today is going to help us. It is going to define what loving God looks like, and it is going to clarify how to love God more as he wants us to love.

I enter into this text with some caution, for in its original form Moses and later Paul recognized that it bore “a ministry of condemnation” (2 Cor 3:9; cf. Deut 31:29). When the call to love God falls on a sick and dead heart, the law kills, and this is what it did for Israel. For them the call to love was burden not blessing; it resulted in curse

not life. I don't want our working through this old covenant text to kill us today, discouraging us with more duty. Rather, I want us to read this text through the lens of Christ who purchased our justification, our sanctification, and our glorification so that all is a gift flowing from grace. At the end of the book Moses envisions a day when, by the grace and power of God, the people would love the Lord, keeping all the commands he gives in these pages (Deut 30:6, 8). We are not made perfect over night, but we experience progression in holiness over a lifetime. I want us to see the character of God that is displayed in this text imaged in our lives for God's glory and our good and the good of those we will love.

The Backdrop for Loving God: Amazing Love (10:14–15)

How many know that we are called to love a big God? He is not weak. He is not small. Verse 14 says, “Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it.” The God of the Bible is the one who causes the sun to rise and commands the summer rains. Everything in the heavens is his because he made it. Not only that, every spiritual power, every angel, every demon in the heaven of heavens is underneath the Lordship of God. And the Lord also owns the whole earth. Your bread, your water, your clothes, your shelter—it is all a gift from his hand. We are fully dependent on God for everything. Today, gathered together as middle-class Americans, it is often easy to forget how desperately needy we are. [9] But many of the 800 Ethiopian Christians to whom I preached three Sundays ago truly know what it means to pray for daily bread. We have a big God. What is amazing is that in all his bigness, he loves the small things.

Verse 15 tells us, though he is the sovereign of all creation, “Yet the LORD set his heart in love” on the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and he “chose their offspring after them”—the very ones through whom the Messiah Jesus would rise. The God we are called to love is both big and loving, and this amazing love shapes the backdrop for the commands in our main passage.

Obstacles to Loving God (10:16–18)

Let's look at verse 16: “Circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.” Obstacles! A bad heart is an obstacle to our loving God. It's a barrier, a wall. It's like a road block, and as long as it is there we cannot move ahead. [10–11] During my drive to school this morning I did not see one donkey. Do you know why? Because they are all in Ethiopia—thousands of them mixing together with various sheep and oxen. Agrarian societies know what it means to have a stiff-necked animal that does not want to go where you want it to go? God wants us to love him with all, but we are often like stiff-necked beasts. We are stubborn. To Israel, Moses just

commanded, “Don’t be stubborn!” But stubbornness often stops us from loving God.

From the days of Abraham forward in ancient Israel, all boys at eight-days old had their foreskin removed, and the surgery distinguished Israelite men from every other people group. All the nations surrounding Israel had foreskin; Israel did not. Because of this, God used the image of circumcision as a picture of being different from the world. A stubborn heart is an unresponsive heart. It’s like there is a hard shell around the heart that does not allow it to move toward God. Every person in the whole world is born with an unresponsive heart. It has a shell that keeps it from receiving God’s word, and we can only love God when the shell is removed. Moses calls Israel to do spiritual heart surgery. Verse 16: “Circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.”

I hear this, and I feel the weight of inability. For when my heart is sick, I can’t fix it on my own. How many of us can perform open heart surgery on ourselves? If we try, we will die. Yet something must change, for we will not love God rightly unless our hearts get fixed.

[12] Why is it so important that we deal with our heart problem? 10:17 says, “For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, the awesome God.” God deserves our love; he deserves our hearts, because he is *the* God of gods and Lord of lords.” This text recognizes that there are other spiritual and earthly powers and authorities in this world. Those in the Ethiopian church seem to know far better than most of us that angels exist; demons exist. The Old Testament calls them small “gods.” But they do not compare to Yahweh. He is the one who created all the heavenly beings. He alone is “God of gods.” He is the sole judge and causer of all. All things must bow to him. He alone is supreme, and no power in heaven compares to him. Similarly, no earthly ruler can stand against him, for he is “Lord of lords.” Every president, every governor, every tribal chief has authority only because “the great, the mighty, the awesome God” gave it to him. As Paul says in Romans 13:1, “There is no authority that exists except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (cf. Dan 2:20).

When you picture God’s throne room, don’t picture anyone else there but him. No other being stands in his presence, and any other power is merely his servant. And because Yahweh alone is God, he deserves our hearts, our love, our loyalty. **Loving God is a heart issue (Deut 10:16), but loving God is also an idolatry issue (10:17a).** When we don’t love God with all our heart, it is because something else is in control of our heart. In that moment, we have a different lord or a different god. In Matthew 6:24, Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.”

Hearing Moses' words rightly should move us to cry, "Lord, work in me! My heart is an idol factory, and daily it seems I don't love you as I should. Overcome my stubbornness. Overcome my coldness, my hardness. Help me God."

Where Moses goes next is surprising and unexpected and really makes his call to love God personal. Remember that in verses 12–13 we are called to fear God and to love God and serve God with everything we are. But it also called us to "walk in all his ways." Loving God means that we will follow God where he leads, that we will go where he goes. So where is God going? Where will loving God take us? **[13]** The rest of verses 17–18 tell us that "the great, the mighty, and the awesome God" is one "who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing."

What does it mean that God is "not partial and takes no bribe"? To say that God is "not partial" means that the Lord doesn't show favoritism. Whether you have dark, beautiful skin or have pale skin like me, God can love us both. He does not show preference to those rich with money or to those with power. If you are poor or weak, you can come to God. He is "not partial." But he also "takes no bribe." The so-called "Prosperity Gospel" is rampant throughout Ethiopia, yet this text stresses that God's love can't be bought. The bread of life and the living water are free to all who will receive them. Do not think that you can manipulate the living God to action. We neither pay money nor do good deeds to enjoy God's blessings. This is bribing God—trying to put God in your debt. The Lord does not need your money, nor does he need you to accomplish his task. Verse 14 says that to him "belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it." Yet he chooses to bestow love on all who turn to him, and he chooses to use clay pots like you and me. If you have a desire for hope and help today, God is ready. God is willing. And he is one who, we are told in verse 18, "executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing." God's heart is for the bruised, for the dependent, for those who cry, "Father, give me bread." And he is the kind of Father who, when you ask for bread, will not give you a snake. But he opposes the proud and the self-reliant.

The curse of Adam has brought great turmoil to our world. The curse infects and affects everything and everyone. In Ethiopia disease and divorce, accident and war, have rendered many men and women without spouses, children without parents. Material need has brought massive strain on families. The lack of land, lack of education, and lack of opportunity have forced many to wander away from family for work and life. We have orphans, widows, and sojourners today because the world is broken. But take heart, Jesus said, "I have overcome the world."

We are worshipping today in this beautiful building with full bellies and lives full of hope and a future. Most of those to whom I was ministering two weeks ago in Ethiopia knew far better than we do the pain and shame of poverty, the humiliation of oppression, the desperation of what feels like hopelessness. But to them and for us there is good news. Wherever you are today there is hope if you look in the right direction. The God who created the universe is one who “is not partial and takes no bribe” and his heart reaches out to “the fatherless, the widow, and the sojourner.” **[14]** He is not looking for the strong. He is looking for the weak. Jesus came like a doctor to heal the sick and to save the sinner (Mark 2:17). He came “to proclaim good news to the poor” and “to set at liberty those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18). He can meet us in our pain. The God who controls all cares for the small, and he works justice for the oppressed.

But now we must ask, How is it that God works justice for the widow and the orphan and the sojourner? He does it through his people. Clothes and food do not just appear before the poor. They must be given. Verse 12 said that those who love God will “walk in all his ways.” So if God’s heart is for the poor, the helpless, the downtrodden, then our hearts should be for the same. Deuteronomy 10:18 is one of the verses that the Lord has used to show my wife and me areas where we have lacked a proper alignment with God’s character. So we’ve prayed, “Lord, make our hearts like your heart; lead us to the broken; show us what it means to love.” In the last couple of years this prayer has pushed us to return to Ethiopia to proclaim the good news of a God who in Jesus cares for the vulnerable, the weak, and the broken. God wants his church to love the least of these in order that they might know his love. Jesus often had to prove that he had the power to relieve eternal suffering by showing his love to relieve present physical suffering (e.g., Mark 2:9). We as the body of Christ are called to do the same.

[15] Six years ago my family was matched with a little boy named Cherinet. He was three. His mother was a beggar in the streets of a small Ethiopian town with no husband and no means to care for her boy. He became sick, and out of love, she placed him up for adoption. We were matched with him, but when we were only a week away from his becoming a DeRouchie we were told he was no longer adoptable. Various complications would require him to remain fatherless. We fought for 1.5 years while he remained in the orphanage, but in the end, the doors were closed, and we were told that the state returned him to his mother.

For six years now we have prayed for that boy and his mother. When we were first matched with him, my wife Teresa took one of the white roses that we have at Bethlehem on Mother’s day to grieve this mother’s loss. Teresa dried it, and has had it ever since as a constant reminder to pray for Ab. As a family, we have celebrated

Cherinet's life every birthday, and we have prayed weekly, if not daily, for his and his mother's protection. We figured that we would never hold Cherinet as our son, but God let our hearts feel parental responsibility and moved us to pray out of the heart of love for him and his mom.

Three weeks ago the Lord granted that I return to the very town where we knew Ab and Cherinet last resided. We prayed that God would open the door for me to connect with them, but finding them both after six long years with only a neighborhood name seemed almost impossible. **[16]** But God was so kind, for two Fridays ago I and two of our Bethlehem students met this beautiful mother and her son in a shack off a dusty street in southern Ethiopia. Through a pastor friend who translated I shared God's love with them and our deep love for them. While her heart was initially cold, having been so wounded and so alone for so long, the Lord began to soften her to fresh love. She invited us to her home the next morning—a single room with only a bed, some stools, and some dressers left by her former husband. No bathroom, no kitchen, but it was her home, and she welcomed us in.

Cherinet was at the mosque, where she sends him to be protected from the harsh environment and influences of their neighborhood. Daily she makes coffee, fills a thermos, and walks around offering a drink for small coins. This is her income, and this morning she was giving to us out of her lack. She has no education and no family. She felt alone, abandoned, and rejected by God and man. Yet I shared with her the love of Christ, the divine Son of God, who for seven years had been moving a family across the ocean to pray for her and her boy. It is not just that a family loved her. No, the living God had not forgotten her, because every prayer that we have made was orchestrated by his hand. He has never forgotten her, and we see his love for her in the fact that he has embossed her and her son so deeply on our hearts. Every prayer that we have made was a testimony of our sovereign God's care, who "executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing" (Deut 10:17).

[17] What Teresa and I feel inside for Ab and Cherinet I can only explain as a fierce love. It's like I just found a lost sister—so vulnerable, without care, without provision, without protection, feeling alone and hopeless, experiencing abuse, and longing for love. Like a big brother I just wanted to surround her to protect, to provide. I believe that one reason God would not let us adopt Cherinet was so that she would not be alone and so that both her and her son could gain a family. A relationship has started, and it seems possible that we will be able to send Cherinet to a Christian school in the fall. As we were leaving I asked Ab if she was okay having a brother and sister with pale skin on the other side of the ocean. She said with a smile, "This is good."

[18] Teresa and I prayed that God would show us his love for the gospel and the nations, and this pursuit blossomed into a new longing to follow him toward the fatherless, the widow, and the sojourner. Now he has allowed us to love a person—a mom and her son, each with names, a story, and lives full of possibility. When Jesus came into the world, he did not break bruised reeds, and souls with faintly burning wicks he did not blow out (Matt 12:20). My prayer this morning is that God would increasingly move us to follow him in his love for the poor and brokenhearted. We are to be his hands and feet to work justice for the needy, and to clothe and feed the poor. We testify to his love for them and his power to save them when we follow the Lord in this way, and in doing so we gain so much more of him and his lavish love.

The Test of Loving God (10:19)

Verse 19 is strait-forward in its charge: “Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.” Verses 12–13 called us to love God and serve God with all our hearts and all our being. Verses 16–18 identified some obstacles to loving God, but now in verse 19 we get a test for seeing if we are loving God. Moses says, You might say you love God with your lips, but I tell you to show that you love God with your lives. Test yourselves today: **If you love God, you will truly love the least of those around you.**

Look at how he motivates this love: “Love the sojourner for you yourselves were sojourners in the land of Egypt.” Now you and I were never sojourners in Egypt. This is old covenant material written to ancient Israel. When they were in Egypt, they were foreigners in a foreign land, and the Egyptians mistreated them. God called Israel to love the vulnerable, the oppressed, the hurting because were it not for his miraculous, redeeming love, they would be no different. They knew the shame and the pain of being a sojourner.

[19] Jesus opened his ministry on earth citing Isaiah 61:1–3: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18–19). If we exalt ourselves at the expense of others or distance ourselves from the broken, we are not acting like Jesus. Jesus was the most important, but he came down to earth to love us. “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Jesus gave us the perfect example of love. “He laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers” (1 John 3:16; cf. 4:11).

Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. We have experienced this salvation, and as Jesus' church drinks in this living water the natural overflow will be to proclaim that God reigns, God saves, and God satisfies through Jesus. He is our hope; he is our help. When we care for the least, we are imaging the same love that Jesus had for us.

We desperately need Jesus because we cannot save ourselves. We were like Lazarus in the grave. His family could not keep him alive, and when he died, he was fully dead. He could not get up and walk out of the tomb. He was dead. But when Jesus cried, "Lazarus, come forth," he came forth. We were all like Lazarus—poor, having nothing to give. "We were dead in our trespasses and sins. . . . But God . . . made us alive with Christ—by grace you have been saved" (Eph 2:1, 4–5).

[20] Poverty comes in many forms. Certainly lacking material goods is a form of poverty. But lacking family and loved ones is also a form of poverty. Lacking skills to do work or lacking education is a form of poverty. And lacking any relationship with God is the deepest form of poverty. All of us have been poor in some way, so we can all relate in some way to Israel's experience of slavery in Egypt. Moses says, "Love the sojourner for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt." "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). We were all separated from God, separated from love. We all lacked. But God initiated love, and "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19)

James said, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (James 1:27). This sermon is calling for us to engage in what God calls "pure religion." May all of us increasingly pray that the Lord will pour into us his heart for the vulnerable and the oppressed, and then may we trust him to lead and to give us all we need to love well, even as mere vessels of clay.

The Impossibility of Loving God Without His Help

Let's review our passage to see what we have learned.

1. **Verse 16 said that loving God is a heart issue.** To love God rightly we need the sickness of our hearts fixed by heart surgery. We need circumcised, unstubborn hearts.
2. **Verse 17 said that loving God is an idolatry issue.** The sign that our hearts are sick is that we let other powers and pleasures master us than the true God.
3. **The end of verse 17 and verse 18 declared that loving God is about caring for others like God cares—**never showing prejudice, offering free mercy, and caring for the fatherless, the widow, and the sojourner by helping to meet their daily needs.

4. Verse 19 then said that loving God is about loving others as God has loved us.

As I already noted, the rest of Deuteronomy and the whole history of Israel testifies that Israel's hearts remained stubborn. Moses commanded in verse 12, "Love God with all you are." Verse 16 assumes that Israel was not doing it, for Moses says, "Perform heart surgery on yourselves. . . . Circumcise your own hearts!" But heart change is a work that only God can do. The very command should move us to plead for grace and help.

Moses says exactly this in Deut 29:2–4: "You have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great wonders. But to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear." Are you like Israel? In your past you have heard a lot of God's words and even witnessed his works of power, and yet you are not loving him by loving others like you should. Though Israel knew a lot about God, they didn't really know him in their hearts. Though they had seen God at one level, at a deeper level they remained blind. They had heard God's voice, but in reality, they were deaf. Their hearts were hard, their senses dull, resulting in no hunger, no fire, no love. They remained stubborn, rebellious, and unbelieving; they were unloving *and condemned*. And they couldn't change it! That is what's amazing. Verse 4 says that the right kind of heart is a gift of God. "The LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear." Left to ourselves, we will never have the desire, the longing, the impetus to love others like God does, because we can't perform heart surgery on ourselves.

[21] But the good news today is that the one who said, "Lazarus, come forth" (John 11:43), is here. He is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, and he does not show prejudice or take bribes. He will take you as you are. We give him nothing; he gives us everything. Deuteronomy does not stop by declaring Israel's hearts to be hard and loveless. It does not leave hearers hopeless. While God hadn't worked in his people yet, he promised that one day he would. Turn over to Deut 30:6: "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul." This is the new covenant hope, and we are living in the day of fulfillment! Jesus, the great physician, has come to bring healing. He has come to help us love.

Today God can do heart surgery on you, making you a person who cares deeply about him, which will naturally overflow in loving like he loves. Perhaps you have already experienced this heart surgery, but you realize today that there are still

areas that are sick. God can change your heart. God can become your master. God can help you want to follow him in a life of love. Remember how God first loved you and then love others in this same way. Pray that he will give you people with faces, with names, with stories. In my own life, I have not arrived. No, I feel like I am just a toddler learning what it means to love God by loving our neighbor. But it is a beautiful journey.

“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (James 1:27). These loving actions—visiting the orphan, caring for the widow—are an overflow of worship toward God—of love for God. By caring for the broken we display the love Jesus has for a hurting world. We show people that Jesus cares not only about their freedom from eternal suffering but also their freedom from present suffering. He does not want them to be hopeless and helpless. He wants them to have identity and purpose and life for his glory and their joy. When we care for the poor we ready their hearts for the only one who is ever strong and ever faithful and who promises to one day overcome all this curse and establish right order for those finding refuge in him. May God help us love him by loving the needy. . . .