

THE COMMANDMENT AND CHRIST

A Sermon on Deuteronomy 6:1–3

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We return today to our series on Deuteronomy 5–11, believing that Moses’s sermons are Christian Scripture that “is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). In chapter 5, the prophet stressed the responsibility of all to heed his charge to center life on Yahweh. He is readying to explain in the rest of chapters 6–8 what it means to center one’s life on God, but to transition to this he calls the community in Deuteronomy 6:1–3 to heed the singular supreme commandment that he is about to share and motivates compliance by clarifying the goals of his teaching and of their obedience. Listening to the great commandment leads to fearing God, which leads to following God, resulting in divine favor. Hearing leads to fearing, which leads to obeying and results in blessing. The passage in 6:1–3 has two parts: (1) The Need to Teach the Community to Do the Commandment (6:1–2); (2) the Need to Heed the Commandment That Is Taught (6:3). Let me read the passage and then ask God for help....

The Need to Teach the Community to Do the Commandment (6:1–2)

In chapter 5, Moses tells us in verse 31 how Yahweh told him, “I will tell you the whole commandment and the statutes and the rules that you shall teach [the people], that they may do them in the land.” Now, in our passage, Moses is obeying this directive, declaring, “This is the commandment, the statutes and the rules.” Because he says “This” and not “These,” his focus is on a singular, supreme command, which he here tells us is coming and which he will define in verses 4–5 in the charge: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” What Jesus calls “the great and first commandment” (Matt 22:38), Moses simply refers to as “the commandment” (singular), and then he says it includes “the statutes and the rules.” Loving God is what Israel was to do; the other commands, which are laid out in chapters 12–26, clarify how to do it. Today’s sermon doesn’t focus on the specifics, because Moses doesn’t yet give us details. Instead, our passage transitions readers, readying us for what is coming and giving a framework for rightly understanding what people are to be taught to do and why.

The ESV treats the people’s “doing” the commandment as the first of three goals of Moses’s teaching; he should teach “that they may do, that they may fear, and that they may live long.” However, the Hebrew treats Israel’s obedience as a complement to Moses’s teaching rather than as its goal. “Doing the commandment” is *what* he is teaching, not *why* he is teaching. “This is the

commandment ... that ... God commanded to teach you to do in the land,” or, as the NRSV renders it: “Now this is the commandment—even the statutes and the ordinances—that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy” (6:1). We don’t just teach the Word; we must teach people to obey the Word (cf. Matt 28:19–20).

The Israelites were about to secure the land Yahweh promised their father Abraham. They had to cross the Jordan River to enter Canaan, and Moses was informing them on how to live once they settled. The commandment they were to be taught to keep was to love God with all. And as Moses or others taught this (see Deut 4:10), they were to do so with two goals in mind, both listed in verse 2.

The first is “that you may fear the LORD your God, you and your son and your son’s son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life.” Encountering the Word of God should produce a fear of God, which should result in following God or “keeping all his statutes and commandments.” Elsewhere in Deuteronomy, Moses teaches that “Yahweh your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, the fearsome [*or* awesome] God” (10:17). Moses also repeatedly stresses that fearing God is foundational for any proper relationship with him. In 4:10, Yahweh says, “Let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.” In 10:12, Moses says, “And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (cf. 10:20).

At the head waters of right living, we will always find a fear of God (Prov 9:10). Paul asserts that one of the condemnable problems among the world’s peoples is that “there is no fear of God before their eyes,” so they live how they will instead of how God wills (Rom 3:18). In contrast, the psalmist says, “The LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love” (Ps 147:11). The fear of man may move us to flee (Deut 31:6; Matt 10:28), but the fear of God compels us to follow, confident that he is great, regardless of the potential earthly dangers. A proper fear of God brings “holiness to completion,” says Paul (2 Cor 7:1); it draws us *to* God rather than pushes us away from him. Paul charges, “Work out your own salvation *with fear* and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:12–13). There is a godly, proper fear produced from the recognition that the living God, who created all and controls all is the one who determines both our will and our work. Do you recognize how small you are and how dependent you are? We should fear God today, knowing that whether we will fear and follow is fully dependent on God who works in us.

Exodus 20 first records the story of Israel's encounter with God at Sinai following the exodus. Upon meeting Yahweh through the thunder, lightning, trumpet sound, and Mount Sinai smoking, the Israelite elders came trembling to Moses, declaring, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die" (Exod 20:19). The Israelites want to run from what they perceive as danger, but Moses says, "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin" (20:20). Here we see two different types of fear. Moses says, "Don't fear in a way that moves you to flee from God, but fear in a way that pushes you to follow him." There is a kind of fear that is not equal to terror but that still trembles at what could happen if we do not respect a given object. We fear the devastating effects of fire, but with care we do not hesitate to use a stove or fireplace. We fear drowning, but we still drink water, swim, and go tubing. A proper fear of God leads to faithfulness in our conduct. As our passage says, we fear "by keeping all" his instructions.

What does it mean to fear God? *It means to feel necessary and appropriate concern or awe before God's greatness that leads to wise living.* Within the old covenant, God's revealed purpose was that the people's encounter with his greatness through his word and presence would spark a reverent awe that would generate holiness. A proper fear of God would lead to following God. Israel failed to do this. Their complete lack of fear led through disobedience to destruction (Deut 31:16–17). Yet this was not the end of the story. For Yahweh promises through Jeremiah that in the new covenant he would generate a proper fear among his people, ensuring the covenant would not be broken: "I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me" (Jer 32:40). Jesus purchased the possibility for us to fear God rightly, evidenced in our keeping his instructions—not perfectly yet but truly and progressively over a lifetime.

All the days of the community's life, God wanted them to fear him by keeping his commandment. This was the first goal of teaching them to obey. The second goal, declares the end of verse 2, was that "your days may be long" (Deut 6:2; cf. 4:40). Long life or eternal life is the blessing of obedience. And while the nation's days were cut short due to covenant disloyalty, Jesus the king, representing Israel, secures through his perfect obedience and for all his children, the long life promised here (see Deut 17:19–20; Isa 53:10). Within the old covenant, people were to be taught to love the mighty and awesome God so that they would fear him and enjoy the blessing of long life. Where Israel failed, Jesus succeeds, first making us right with God through justification and then changing us through sanctification—a change that includes gaining a proper fear of God that leads to following God and long life in his presence. What helps us turn from

impurity, guard our hearts from bitterness, hold our tongues from sharp responses, and serve the weak rather than oppress them? A fear of God. We should tremble knowing that the God who is over all “will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Eccl 12:14). Fearing God moves us to follow God. Whenever we see sin rising its evil head in our lives, we must seek to encounter God through his Word, for only meeting the Word generates fear leading to obedience resulting in blessing.

The Need to Heed the Commandment That Is Taught (6:3)

The need to teach the community to do the commandment now gives rise in verse 3 to the need for the people to heed the commandment that is taught. “Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them” (Deut 6:3). The Hebrew does not include the object “them,” and the phrase “be careful” is same verb rendered “keeping” in verse 2. A more formal translation is, “And you should hear and keep by doing.” Thus, we are seeing a pattern established, which the book repeatedly reinforces. *Teaching* or *reading* leads to *hearing*, which leads to *fearing*, which leads to *obeying*, resulting in *blessing*. Consider 31:12–13, where Moses commands, “*Read* this law before all Israel in their *hearing*. Assemble the people ... that they may *hear* and *learn to fear* the LORD your God, and *be careful to do* all the words of the law, and that their children, who have not known it, may *hear* and *learn to fear* the LORD your God, as long as you live in the land” (31:11–13). Life is enjoyed when a true encounter with God’s Word produces spiritual hearing that awakens fear that generates holiness and results in life. One reason sitting under the preached Word is so important is because it’s only when we hear and fear that we will obey. We also must read the Bible daily because only when we receive the Word as one who is taught are we able to have a proper grasp of God’s greatness and rightly obey his commands (cf. Isa 50:4–5).

The supreme commandment that Moses is to teach and Israel is to keep is summarized in verses 4–5: “*Hear*, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall *love* the LORD your God with all” (6:4–5). When God’s Word is read or taught, a proper relationship starts with hearing and leads to loving. Yet most of Moses’s audience remained spiritually deaf, just like some of you in this room. Moses says in chapter 29: “To this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears *to hear*” (29:4). And because Israel remained spiritually disabled, unwilling and unable to hear from God, they never feared God, they never followed him faithfully, and they experienced curse rather than blessing, death rather than life. Reflecting on Israel’s history, Paul says, “Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were

hardened, as it is written, ‘God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day’” (Rom 11:7–8).

Some in this room are spiritually deaf. Jesus says, “Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God” (John 8:47). I think especially of some youth who are here almost every week. You’ve heard the truths that God is holy, that you are sinful, that hell is real, and that Jesus alone can save, yet so far you have refused to surrender your soul to Jesus’s Lordship, to trust him with your life, and to commit to follow his ways. You do not know how long you have on this earth, so I urge you to fear the one who does. I urge you today to listen to the call of the gospel, learn to fear God’s greatness, and come to Jesus for eternal life (John 6:44–45).

Moses now gives two motivations. Hear and be careful to do God’s Word, first, “that it may go well with you” (Deut 6:3). Similarly, the prophet says in verse 24: “And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, *for our good always*, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day.” What is “good” or what “may go well” is related to all God’s covenant blessings of provision and protection; the “good” is associated with lasting life, whereas “evil” is linked to death (see 30:16–18). All of Israel’s future wellbeing hinges on whether they will hear and keep God’s Word.

Yet left to themselves and left to ourselves, we will remain spiritually deaf. A great physician who specializes in overpowering spiritual disability must heal and restore. Those in Moses’s day could not hear, but God promised that his people would be able to hear in the future when God raised up a prophet like Moses to mediate a new covenant. Moses says, “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you.... It is to him you shall listen” (Deut 18:15; cf. 30:8; Matt 17:5). Similarly, Isaiah foresaw a time when “the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their ... darkness the eyes of the blind shall see” (Isa 29:13). His audience was “a rebellious people, ... children unwilling to hear the instruction of the LORD” (30:9), but he foretold a day of a healed people following a righteous king: “Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, ‘This is the way, walk in it.’ ... Behold, a king will reign in righteousness.... Then the eyes of those who see will not be closed, and the ears of those who hear will give attention” (30:21; 32:1, 3). Jesus is this king, and he says, “Whoever hears my words and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.... I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live” (John 5:24–25). That reality is being fulfilled today. Yet we must continually saturate our souls in Scripture, for we can’t hear what we never encounter, and only hearing leads to fearing, obeying, and life.

Moses gives a second goal of heeding the commandment: “that you may multiply greatly, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey” (Deut 6:3). The original commission of God was that mankind, made in his image, would “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth,” extending God’s glory to the ends of the globe. Then the fall happened, requiring that Yahweh purposefully overcome curse with blessing. He promised to do this through an individual male descendant of Eve (Gen 3:15) and Abraham (22:17–18). He also promised to multiply Abraham greatly—even like the stars (22:17; 26:4; Exod 32:13)—*if* he or his representative would walk before Yahweh and be blameless (17:1–2), keeping “the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice” (18:19). The blessing of multiplication would only come through obedience (Lev 26:3, 9). In Moses’s day, likely because Abraham obeyed (Gen 22:18; 26:5), God had multiplied Israel (Deut 1:10; cf. Exod 1:7), but the larger goal had still not been reached. Abraham was to become the father of a multitude of nations spanning generations, and Israel was not yet even in the initial promised land. The phrase “flowing with milk and honey” portrays an Edenic-like fertility from domesticated flocks and herds and the produce of the land. So much blessing would abound if they would but hear and fear and obey.

Yet no mere humans have this capacity until the Son of God takes our illnesses and bears our diseases, overcoming our disabilities (Matt 8:17; cf. Isa 53:4). Thanks be to God for his amazing grace shown in Christ that we can hear his Word, fear him rightly, obey him truly, and enjoy the blessing of eternal life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:27–28). Those who hear will fear, those who fear will follow, and those who follow will enjoy eternal life. Come to Jesus today. Jesus says, “Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me” (6:45). As your pastor, I have prayed that today would be the day of salvation for some of you—that God would open your ears, help you revere, empower you to follow, and then free you to enjoy eternal life both today and forever. Sovereign Joy is to be a people who love God with all we are, becoming ever maturing disciples in our homes, at school, in our workplaces. Some will go out for the sake of the name, but most will remain planted here. Yet may all tremble at his Word and greatness, may we love him with all, and may we enjoy lasting life in his presence. Pray with me....