

**“Deuteronomy: The Gospel according to Moses,” Sermon 7 – “The Heart of the Covenant”****Introduction**

We’ve seen so far in our study of Deuteronomy that this book is very highly structured: it follows almost perfectly the set pattern of the ancient treaty-covenants of its day, those documents that would spell out the details of the relationship that was to exist between some great king or suzerain (in Deuteronomy’s case, God) and some other lesser king or vassal (in Deuteronomy’s case, Israel). So far, we’ve seen that Deuteronomy has a preamble, a historical prologue, and now we’ve begun to look at the stipulations, at the commands, the laws by which Israel is expected to abide in order to gain the blessings of this covenant and avoid its curses. These stipulations make up the heart of this covenant: they fill no less than 23 of this book’s 34 chapters, just a little over two-thirds. We’ve seen also how these stipulations in these ancient covenants are generally divided into two groups: first you have the basic, broad, general commands, and then you get more specific, detailed commands that are based on and flow out of the basic commands.

Well, Deuteronomy follows this pattern remarkably closely; and as such, it is highly structured, very carefully organized, and a consensus among Biblical scholars has been growing that such is indeed the case for the book as a whole. But when it comes to the organization of all of the individual laws, all of the commands found in Deuteronomy, there has also been a scholarly consensus about their organization within Deuteronomy: the consensus has long been that there is no organization, that there is no structure to them, that they are thrown together haphazardly and there is absolutely no logical arrangement whatsoever. And as you look at the wide variety of the many, many commands in this book, at first glance, it does look absolutely chaotic. Apart from the broad outline that chapters 4-11 contain the more basic stipulations and that chapters 12-26 contain the detailed ones, there really doesn’t seem to be much more organization to them at all. As one frustrated scholar put it, “While any order into which the laws may be placed is sure to be unsatisfactory, none can be quite so bad as the order in which they appear in Deuteronomy . . . .”

But given the highly structured arrangement of the rest of the book (and of the rest of the Bible, for that matter), such carelessness in the arrangement of these laws would seem quite drastically out of character, would it not? Given what we’ve seen about the book already, I think that it makes much more sense to approach this section of stipulations with the assumption that it too will be carefully organized, and as you begin to look for that organization, a fascinating pattern begins to emerge: you’ll find that all of the various commands in Deuteronomy 6-26 are arranged in order of their relationship to each of the Ten Commandments. In fact, what you have in chapters 6-26 turns out, on closer inspection, to be nothing less than one long commentary on the fuller meaning and application of the Ten Commandments. What this amounts to, then, is Biblical proof of what Reformed churches have always argued: that the Ten Commandments really are a concise yet comprehensive summary of God’s Moral Law with implications that extend far beyond their mere letter.

Now, full demonstration of this point will really have to await further sermons; but this whole idea will be dominating and guiding our study of Deuteronomy for the next several months, so you will have ample opportunity to examine the merits of this claim as we go along. But here up front, I thought that it would be beneficial to give you at least one commentator's attempt at dividing chapters 6-26 according to the order of the Ten Commandments. You can look those passages up later, if you like, but realize that I'm not committing myself now entirely to his outline. There is some debate about the exact divisions, and I retain the right to come to different conclusions as I myself study each section more closely than I've been able to do so far. But this gives you a good general idea of what I'll be arguing for: the various stipulations of Deuteronomy are arranged according to and are to be understood as expositions of each of the Ten Commandments.

But we come this morning to chapter 6 and to a passage that has long been recognized to play a key part in the book of Deuteronomy. Especially in vv. 4 and 5, we find what many, including Jesus Christ Himself, have acknowledged to be the greatest and most fundamental of all of the commands that God has ever given to men. Here we find a demand for total and wholehearted devotion to God. We will be focusing our attention this morning on vv. 4-9, but take a look with me quickly at Moses' introduction to this first and greatest commandment in vv. 1-3 (read). Here we read what are already by now familiar words of exhortation to obedience: fear God and keep His commandments so that you will be blessed in the Promise Land. But notice especially the very first words of v. 1: "Now this is the commandment." Verses 1-3 function actually as an introduction, not just to vv. 4-9, but to all of chapters 6-26; and yet Moses begins by saying, "This is the commandment," singular. Granted, he does go on to add, "and these are the statutes and judgments"; but it is significant that he begins by drawing the Israelites' attention to some one singular "commandment" first, and only then to other "statutes" and "judgments." But this is entirely in keeping with the nature of a treaty-covenant: the most basic, fundamental requirement is given first, and then all of the others flow out of it. Here, I believe, Moses is giving his outline in brief: "First, the greatest commandment in chapters 6-11; second, all of the other statutes and judgments that flow from it in chapters 12-26 (read 12:1)." And what is that first and greatest commandment? It is the demand for total and wholehearted devotion to God. So let's give our attention to verses 4-9 now and notice for the rest of our time this morning three characteristics about this devotion that God here demands: the devotion that God demands is exclusive, it is exhaustive, and it is exacting. So first . . .

#### **I. The Devotion that God Demands is Exclusive (v. 4).**

That is, it excludes all others; it is to be reserved for God alone. This principle is expressed primarily in v. 4 (read). It is really impossible to overstate the importance that the Jewish people have attached to this verse down through the centuries. This verse was taken as their most fundamental creed, and even to this day an observant Jew will quote this verse and the following five verses at least twice every day. They call it the "Shema" from the first word in Hebrew of v. 4, "Hear." The Jews take this verse primarily as a statement of monotheism, that there is only one God, not many gods as in polytheism.

But is that really what this verse is seeking to communicate? Really, what you have here are really just 4 words in Hebrew: “Yahweh, our God, Yahweh, one.” These four words can be and have been arranged in several different ways, all of which are grammatically possible. If you translate this as the NKJV or the ESV does (The Lord our God, the Lord is one), it reads either as a statement of monotheism or of God’s essential unity. Now those ideas are certainly at least implied in these words, but I don’t think in context that either is the real focus of the verse. I think that, in context, a better translation is what the NKJV has in a footnote: “The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.” In other words, this is primarily a statement that God is to be considered Israel’s one and only Lord.

Why do I say this? Well, primarily because of the idea that I just introduced, that chapters 6-26 are commentary on each of the Ten Commandments in order. What is the First Commandment? “You shall have no other gods before me.” The rest on chapters 6-11 focus on working this commandment out in greater detail, warning the Israelites again and again of the dangers of worshiping other gods, which means that the First Commandment is the most basic and fundamental of all of the rest of the Ten Commandments. And here in 6:5, you have what is essentially just a positive restatement of the First Commandment: stated negatively as a prohibition, the First Commandment is, “You shall have no other gods before me”; stated positively as a command, it is, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength.” This is still the central demand of the covenant, just as it was with the secular treaty-covenants of the day. The most basic, fundamental demand of those covenants on the vassal was exclusive loyalty and devotion to the suzerain. The height of covenant-breaking was for the vassal to betray that loyalty by entering into a covenant with another suzerain. So here in Deuteronomy, the most fundamental of all of God’s demands was for exclusive devotion to Him, for recognition of Him as Israel’s one and only God, before whom and beside whom there is no other god. Therefore, there foremost creed was to be, “Hear, O Israel, The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.” This demand for exclusive devotion to God really is the heart of this covenant, and that is seen here clearly even by the structure of the book as a whole: if the stipulations of chapters 4-26 are the heart of the book, and if the Ten Commandments in chapter 5 are the heart of all of the stipulations, and if the First Commandment is really the heart of the rest of the Ten Commandments, then this positive restatement of the First Commandment here in chapter 6 really is the heart of the heart of the heart of this entire covenant. In other words, Christ had abundant good reason for labeling this as “the first and greatest commandment.” So the devotion that God demands is to be, first of all, exclusive. Secondly . . .

## **II. The Devotion that God Demands is Exhaustive (v. 5).**

It is exhaustive in the sense that it is demanded of a person in the entirety of his being: read v. 5 (read). Here is quite the demand, indeed. Here we discover what God really demands of His creatures. Up to this point, Moses has again and again and again called upon the Israelites to obey God’s Law; but here we discover what kind of obedience is really required of them. Mere obedience is not enough: what is demanded of them is loving obedience, an obedience that springs from a far deeper love for God, a love that does not just include one part of their being but a love that involves every last fiber of who and what they are. “All of your heart, soul, and strength” is simply a way of saying “with the entirety of your being.” This is truly an exhaustive devotion.

But notice here especially how Moses describes this loyalty, this devotion that God demands: he does so with that simple and yet vastly profound word, “love.” This is what God truly desires of His people. And in this word, we discover that what God demanded of the Israelites is really the exact same thing that He still requires of His people. God does not just require obedience, He does not just require outward conformity to His will, He does not require a mere going through the motions of His worship and service, even here in this Old Covenant, this covenant of law. No, he requires love. The obedience that Moses keeps demanding of Israel over and over again in Deuteronomy is to be based on love, is to flow out of whole-hearted love for God. Here we see that the connection between true love and true obedience was the same under the Old Covenant as it is today under the New Covenant: absolutely nothing has changed in this central-most demand, and that is to be expected if this truly is the heart of God’s never-changing Moral Law. Then just as much as now, obedience to God without love for God is not true obedience, just as love for God without obedience to God is not true love. To them just as much as to us it could have been said, “If you love me, keep my commandments.” Many have caricatured the Old and New Covenants as though obedience was commanded in the Old while only love is commanded in the New, but that is a false and dangerous dichotomy in every way. In both the Old and the New Covenants, there is no distinction between true love and true obedience: what is demanded in both and what has always been demanded by God of His creatures is loving obedience and obedient love, and a love that is absolutely exhaustive of every last part of our beings. That, and nothing less, is what God demands. The devotion that God demands is exclusive, it is exhaustive, and thirdly . . .

### **III. The Devotion that God Demands is Exacting (vv. 6-9).**

Read vv. 6-9 again (read). Not only does this absolute devotion to God involve every last part of our being, it also demands every last second of our time and every last drop of our energy: it is exacting. Here, the Israelites are commanded to talk of God’s commands, especially of this central command, whenever they’re sitting or walking (in other words, no matter what they’re doing), and when they lie down and rise up (in other words, no matter when they’re doing it). The instructions in vv. 8-9 were probably intended to be figurative and not literal, though later Jews certainly did take them literally. They were to bind these words on their arms and on their foreheads; they were to write them on their doorposts of their houses and on the gates of their cities. All of this, every instruction given here in vv. 7-9, means that the Israelites were to live in constant awareness of the exacting and all-encompassing demand of their God upon every aspect of their existences. No matter what they’re doing or when they’re doing it, they are to be consciously and constantly reminding themselves that they are to be loving the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, and strength in it. They could not let up or let their guard down for one single instant.

But all of these constant reminders in vv. 7-9 were still external: they were written on their foreheads and arms, their doorposts and their cities. But the ultimate goal, the thing that God really desired is revealed in v. 6: God wanted these words to be written on their very hearts. He didn’t just want them to be motivated to keep His laws externally, from without; he wanted that impetus, that motivation, to come from within them, from the very center of their beings, from their heart. The word “heart” is a vitally important word in the book of Deuteronomy. Moses understood very clearly that the only way that the Israelites would be able truly to keep God’s Law and receive His blessing was for them

to have the proper heart. He knew that no amount of external poking and prodding is ever sufficient to motivate sinful men and women to give God true obedience, to give God that exclusive and exhaustive and exacting devotion that God demands of them. Their only hope would come from the Law being not just on their foreheads or arms or doorposts or gates, but in their hearts. So we see that, at the most fundamental level, at the heart of this covenant is the demand for a covenant heart (repeat), a heart that is exclusively and completely devoted to God, that truly loves God with all of its strength.

## **Conclusion**

This, then, is what God demanded of the Israelites in Deuteronomy: a wholehearted devotion to Him that was exclusive, exhaustive, and exacting – shared with none other, involving the totality of one’s very being, and demanding every last second of one’s time and every last drop of one’s energy. And this is still exactly what God demands from every one of us. There are many today who seem to think of this central-most law of God as though it were some kind of lightening-up of God’s demands, as though in the past God demanded absolute obedience to each and every one of His laws, but today all He asks is that we love Him with all of our heart, soul, and strength. But you know what? There is no more damning law in all of the Scriptures than this one. God is not lowering the bar with this command; He is not lightening up His demands. No, here, He is making them infinitely more impossible for sinful creatures. If we were to be honest with ourselves, we would have a much better chance of obeying the mere letter of the Ten Commandments than we have of obeying this one. It is at least conceivable that we could go through life without at least outwardly worshiping another god or without killing someone or stealing something. But once you tell me that I have to love God with all of my heart, soul, and strength, I’m damned. I have no hope of ensuring that I do that consistently every second of every day for all my life – no hope even of ever doing that fully for one whole minute put together. How can we make ourselves love, how can we change our own hearts? That is every bit as impossible for us as it was for the Israelites.

I mentioned that the “heart” is a key concept in Deuteronomy. Turn to chapter 29. Here Moses is predicting Israel’s failure to keep the covenant that he is in the process of mediating for them, and he explains cause of their failure in 29:4 (read). The reason why Israel will fail to keep God’s covenant and gain its blessings is that they don’t have the right heart yet, and God has not yet chosen to give it to them. But when Moses goes on to predict Israel’s future restoration and blessing and obedience to the covenant, he explains the reason for such a drastic change in 30:6 (read). At some point, Moses predicts, God’s people will finally obey this most fundamental of God’s commands, they will love God with all their heart and soul: and how will they be able to do that? God will circumcise their hearts; God will give them a new heart. A when did this prophecy come true? Well, never with national Israel; only with the true Israel, the true people of God, the people of the New Covenant. When the New Covenant is prophesied in Jeremiah 31, one of its chief blessings will be that God Himself will write His Law on His people’s hearts, exactly what He commands in Deuteronomy 6.

How is it that we can have any hope of loving God with all of our heart, soul, and strength? Only by God’s choosing to give us a brand new heart. And when does God give us a new heart? When by faith in Jesus Christ we become members of the New Covenant. Jesus Christ is the only man who has ever

fulfilled God's Law in all of its damning weight. He alone loved the Lord His God with all of His heart, soul, and strength. And by shedding His sinless blood, He has ratified a New Covenant and secured for all of His people a new heart on which is finally written the Law of God. Believe in Him, trust in Him today, for salvation can only be found in Him. And once you have received that new heart from Him, then you finally have what you need to give to God that loving obedience and that obedient love that He truly desires and that He truly deserves. May He give us all a true covenant heart so that we might finally fulfill the heart of the covenant.