

Loving God

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, all thy soul, and all thy might” (Deuteronomy 6:5).

Jesus said that this is the first and greatest commandment (Matthew 22:37-38). Why is this verse, one that is easily passed over in the Book of Deuteronomy (a book of the Bible that few people actually read anyway), so important?

But first, what does the verse in Deuteronomy *mean*? (It is repeated in Deuteronomy chapters 10 and 30.) The “heart” in Scripture is our innermost being, so it refers to our thoughts, values and priorities as well as our emotions and will. The “soul” is our life, our very existence. And our “might” is all our resources and assets, everything that we have. So the verse says, essentially, that we’re to love God supremely with all we are and have, even if it costs us our life.

Scripture here in Deuteronomy and elsewhere goes on to explicate “love.” What does “love” mean? First, to know God is to love Him. To “know” God is not something cognitive. In Scripture, “know” often means to intimately experience someone. (See Genesis 4:1 and 25, for example.) So to know God is to be in a deep, loving personal relationship with Him. And God is a lovely Person. He’s beautiful in all His attributes, in His goodness and love, indeed, in all His perfections. To love God is to want to be with Him, to be close to Him, and even to want to be like Him. We should want to be just like the altogether lovely Being who made us and who loves us.

Loving God glorifies Him. It acknowledges His goodness and His love. To love God as our Deuteronomy verse commands therefore is to fear Him, to submit to Him and obey Him, and to trust Him and be dependent on Him. To love God is to be devoted, faithful and committed to Him, to serve Him, to worship Him and to honor Him. Loving God repeatedly says “Thank You” to Him for His goodness to us. It also eschews idols and, more than just idols, it rejects and loathes any idea, value or priority that comes between us and Him that disrupts or distracts from the intimate fellowship.

Let’s first observe that in Scripture, love is not just an emotion, a feeling. Love is as love *does*. Love is how we live, what we do. It’s specific acts, such as doing His revealed will. That’s why love can be commanded! To refuse to do His will, to refuse to trust Him, to refuse to serve Him, to refuse to honor Him, even to have no fear of Him, is to not love Him.

Now, it’s true that only Jesus could love God as Deuteronomy commands. Because of our sin nature, no one else could possibly fulfill this command. That’s why Jesus’ perfect humanity has to be imputed to us for us to be able to be in heaven in God’s presence. Justification by faith and the resultant indwelling of the Spirit of Christ is the only way we can satisfy this command. Yet . . . the command is there! We’re expected to love God. It’s a creational obligation, and God made us so that we’re able to love Him.

In Psalm 106, the author reviews all the many ways that the Nation of Israel did not love God. The psalmist rehearses the many ugly ways that Israel either failed or deliberately refused to love God as they should have. And as a result, in wrath God handed them over to Exile. God punishes those who refuse to love Him as commanded. The psalmist himself was aware of these sins and rebellions but, as is evident from the beginning and ending paragraphs, he loved God.

In Romans chapter 1, beginning in verse 18 and going to the end, Paul takes the message of Psalm 106 even further. (First, let’s note that Paul substitutes “worship and serve” for “love.” That’s a figure of speech commonly used in Scripture.) What Paul does in this passage is generalize God’s wrath, saying that God’s fierce anger is upon *all humanity* for not loving Him as they should. All humanity refused to glorify God, refused to give Him thanks. And so, as a result, God handed all humanity over to sin. Sin is a power. It’s not merely the bad things we do, as we (wrongly) suppose. It’s worse. Sin is an enslaving, dominating power that results in all manner of idolatries, sexual lusts, depraved thoughts, lies and evil and wicked deeds. What Paul is saying here, easily missed, is that the prior refusal to love God resulted in God’s judgment of handing humanity over to sin. (And to Satan’s control, we might add from other Scriptures.) The sins we see going on in our nation and the supposed “culture wars,” all these *are* God’s judgment upon a people who refuse to love God, who refuse to honor Him or glorify Him or give Him thanks.

In the Garden, at the beginning of history, the first man and woman were given a test. They were specifically commanded to not eat the fruit of a certain tree. There was nothing special about the fruit of that tree that it gave moral attributes to the one who ate. The “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil” means that if they ate of it, they would intimately experience good, or evil. The “good” would be the blessings that God had in store for them. The “evil” would be that which befell them in God’s anger for their disobedience and refusal to love Him. In other words, the tree was simply there as a test. Would Adam and his wife obey God or not? If they obeyed, that was an expression of love. God

wanted to see them show, by their willed obedience to Him, that they loved Him. If they disobeyed, God would punish them horribly. Forfeiting good, what that first couple got for their disobedience was the evil that was promised. Death.

At the end of Torah, at the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, the theme of “good and evil” recurs. Here in Chapter 30, from verses 11 to the end, God makes it explicit and stark. **“I have set before you life and good, or death and evil. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commands, decrees and laws, then you will live . . . Choose life . . . For the Lord is your life.”** Wow! Let’s discuss this. Because according to Paul what is written here to the people of Israel applies to all humanity.

There are two and *only two* options. No one is “neutral” and there’s no in-between. It’s life, or it’s death. If one chooses life, then “good” will result. If death, then terrible, horrible badness results. (That there are only two options is going to recur again and again in Scripture. Jesus, for example, said in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:13-14 that there are only two paths anyone can take in life.) Every person thus is faced with the same test that the first couple did in the Garden. Obey God, or not. Obedience means choosing to love God. Or let’s put it this way, if we love God, we obey Him. If we don’t obey Him, it’s manifest that we don’t love Him, and so we’ve chosen death.

The “life” that is promised in Deuteronomy 30:15, 19 and 20 is something in the future. The hearers already were alive biologically. But the “life” that’s on offer in this passage here is a future life, a glorious existence, a kind of life totally distinct from what they already had. It would be a life that comes specially and uniquely from God. So what they already had, indeed what we already have, is death. Everything we experience – everything! – is death. And evil, meaning that practicing sin now and terrible, eternal judgment to come necessarily result from our choice of death.

The New Testament reveals that the “life” that is being offered is a Person. Trusting in Christ and depending on Him to rescue us from sin and from God’s wrath is our only path to life. Only thru the offer of the Gospel is Christ’s resurrection life imparted to us. That is the “life” that God places on offer. That is how we experience God’s “good,” and it’s in the future that it will be fully realized. It’s the blessing that God promised in Genesis 12:3 to Abraham would be available to all thru Abraham’s seed, i.e., Jesus. John 3:36 builds on this understanding of God’s deep dealing with humanity.

But now let’s notice what it is that results in life. This cosmically important text in Deuteronomy 30 couldn’t be clearer. It’s loving God. And how specifically do we do that? By obedience to His revealed will, by obeying His Word. It’s why Paul writes in Romans 1 that the Gospel calls people *hupakoēn pisteōs*. From the rest of the Letter, this phrase must mean **“to the obedience that comes from faith”** (v. 5, NIV). Paul is not saying that believing in Christ *is* our obedience, although the phrase is usually (mis)understood that way. What Paul is saying, it seems, is we believe *in order to be* obedient. And the Holy Spirit was given to enable us to obey God’s will. Paul ends his letter to the Romans the same way, writing that he proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ **“so that all nations might believe and obey him”** (16:26, NIV). Paul had very clear understanding of God’s eternal truths. If we love God, we trust Him, which in this era is trusting the Son and His saving work, which is *the essential requirement* for eternal life, we must also obey Him. Believing in Christ and justification by faith is the starting point from which we go on thru obedience to a life of righteousness. The goal of the Gospel is a transformed life. We’re to be radically different, Christ-like people by living out God’s Word. It’s our responsibility; we have to want to do it. It’s *this* that puts God’s lovely Person and His goodness and righteousness on display. And we should *want* to do this because we love Him. We obey God’s revealed will not *to be* saved, but because we love Him who in love for us already did everything necessary to save us. Notice: Paul says (Colossians 2:9-10) that all the fullness of the deity has been given to us in Christ, yet he then gives two chapters of God’s will that we’re to obey!

Dear reader: Christ Jesus, the Lord God incarnate, willingly and lovingly submitted to a ghastly cruel flogging and then an agonizing death on a cross, taking the punishment for sin that we all deserve. His infinitely valuable life substituted for the eternally horrible death we, in perfect justice, should experience because of our sins. Christ then rose from the dead so that His resurrection life can be ours too. He deserves our love in all the many and varied ways that love is expressed.

We don’t have the option of failing to put to death our indwelling sin nature, or of repudiating our bondage to Satan and the innumerable lusts of the world that Satan puts on offer. We do not have the option of living this existence as we please. We do not have the option of ignoring God’s revealed will for us, which is our sanctification. Church attendance on Sunday mornings does not substitute for obedience to God or for serving Him as He specifically directed us to do. We need to repent of indifference, and self-will, and foolish reliance on the influence of ungodly others, and of presuming on God’s grace and offer of forgiveness. And instead resolve, indeed commit with all our heart, soul and might, to love God and do His holy, revealed will. Hey! Do we love God? Or not really.