

A Matter of the Heart

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Sermon Series:
Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy 6:4-6

To appropriate the Word of God into our lives, God's people must assume a posture of active listening.

A New York radio station ran a contest a few years ago, inviting listeners to set their clock radios to FM106. “Just for fun,” the morning drive show host said, “when you wake up to the sounds of FM106, call and tell us the first words you speak when you roll out of bed. If you’re the third caller, you’ll win \$106.”

On the first morning of the contest, a buoyant disc jockey asked caller number three, “What did you say when you rolled out of bed this morning?” A groggy voice said, “What day is it?” On the second day, the third caller said, “Oh, no, I’m late for work.” On the next day, the third caller said, “Honey, did I put out the dog last night?” A muffled curse was heard in the background, and then a man was heard to say, “No, you didn’t.” It was a fun contest, and it began to grow in popularity.

One morning however, the third caller said something unusual. The station phone rang, “Good morning, this is FM-106. You’re on the air. What did you say when you rolled out of bed this morning?”

A man with a heavy Bronx accent replied, “You want to know my first words in the morning?”

The bubbly DJ said, “Yes, sir, just tell us what you said?”

The man from the Bronx cleared his throat and responded,

“Shema, Israel, the Lord our God is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might.”

There was a momentary silence on the other end of the phone. Then the DJ said, “Sorry, wrong number” and cut to a commercial.

I love it when God’s Word breaks into unsuspecting arenas of public life! This DJ happened upon an observant Jew, whose morning ritual began with reciting the words of the Shema, “when you lie down and when you rise up” (Deuteronomy 6:7).

Shema is the Hebrew word for hear. To appropriate the Word of God into our lives, God’s people must assume a posture of active listening.

The Shema is the most famous Old Testament text. For faithful Hebrews, it acts as a virtual pledge of allegiance to God. It serves as their most sacred creed and heartfelt prayer.

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one” (or alternatively, “The Lord is our God, the Lord alone”). The belief that God is one was altogether novel in Moses’ day. Israel’s neighbors were polytheists. They believed in fertility gods, storm gods and sun gods. Every region was under the jurisdiction of a local deity. These gods were in charge of everything from crop production to human fertility.

What can God give us outside of Himself to make us happy?

Israel's neighbors couldn't understand the attraction to a single God. It would be like saying "You can have only one friend."

The essence of the Shema is expressed in the words, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength."

The command to love God was radical in its day. Israel's neighbors lived in fear of their gods. Their gods quarreled and fought amongst themselves. They were fickle and capricious. It was no small feat to appease these gods. You wouldn't want to provoke these gods to anger and get on their bad side.

The Shema teaches this One, true God can be loved rather than feared. You can love this God "with all your heart, all your soul and all your strength."

It strikes some people as self-serving for God to summon people to love Him. Isn't it egocentric for God to command our worship? Isn't it vain for God to say, in effect: Love me! Worship me!

But if God is God, then there is nothing we can contribute to God's sense of self. If God is perfect and complete, lacking in nothing, God's ego is not inflated by our adulation.

What can God give us outside of Himself to make us happy? Since God is God, nothing outside of God can offer such supreme joy. Since God cannot give us anything beyond Himself, God gives us Himself.

C. S. Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*, "A car is made to run

on petrol [gasoline] and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He is the fuel our spirits were designed to consume. There is no other. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion. God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing."

St. Augustine spent the greater part of his life in a futile attempt to find pleasure in material, sensual pursuits. After he had exhausted his pursuit of temporal pleasures, he discovered the most supreme joy in loving and serving God. That's what led Augustine to utter that immortal prayer, "Thou hast made us for thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee."

What do we long and yearn for? What do we think about when the curtains are drawn and the lights go out, when the blanket is pulled up under our chin and it's 2 am in the morning? Our busyness distracts us from reflecting on our deepest longings. Every once in a while, something calls us up short. A memory or experience interrupts our everyday thoughts and triggers our yearning for something more. Suddenly, the mundane nature of our work-a-day world seems tawdry by comparison. It reminds us beyond this moment in time that we pine for something else.

We've been created with an existential longing to know God. We've been fashioned with hearts

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which yearn to love God and serve God. There's a hole in our God-shaped hearts that only God can fill.

Why don't more people recognize this yearning for God? People recognize the yearning, but they mistake it for something else. Our mission, folks, is sharing with people that only God can satisfy our deepest longings.

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength." It may be possible to parse the terms "heart, soul and strength," but I suspect this trio of words is meant to be cumulative. We are made to love God with our whole being. We are created to serve God with our entire self. Essentially, the great Shema is a positive restatement of the first commandment about having "no other gods."

I'm currently leading a book study as a sequel to the class I taught this spring on how to read the Bible. We're studying Philip Yancey's book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*. I asked class members to purchase *The Jesus I Never Knew* book from our bookstore. One person who went to the bookstore to buy the book could recall the author, but not the title. He told the woman behind the counter that he thought the book was titled, "The Jesus You Don't Want to Know." She looked at him with the most quizzical expression until she figured out that he wanted the book *The Jesus I Never Knew*.

The question this study group has been wrestling with is what it means to love God. What does it

look like when people love God? Will we feel warm and fuzzy inside? Will we still have doubts? It seems much more definitive to love family and friends than to love God. But perhaps loving God isn't a whole lot different from loving people. How do we love people? We love people by spending time with them, by doing things for them and by accepting what they want to give us. Maybe we love God the same way? Let me be more specific.

We love people by spending time with them. We invest significant time in relationships that we value.

Likewise, we invest time in cultivating a relationship with God. The first three disciple-making covenants in our church—pray daily, worship continually and study regularly—are instructive here. We talk to God in prayer, we hear God's Word in Scripture and we encounter God in worship. We establish contact with God the same way we do with people—by investing time in the relationship.

We love people by doing things for them. We derive pleasure out of loving people the way they want to be loved. One of the books explored in our marriage preparation class is Gary Chapman's *Five Love Languages*. The five love languages include words of affirmation, quality time, receiving gifts, physical touch and acts of service.

Similarly, we learn to love what God loves. God loves justice, so we learn to love justice. God loves forgiveness, so we learn to love

***God loves us
because God is
love.***

forgiveness. God loves obedience, so we learn obedience by keeping his commandments (1 John 5:2-3).

We love people by accepting what they give us. We love people by acts of receiving as well as giving. Some of us are good givers but lousy receivers.

God wants to give us the extraordinary gift of salvation. We can't earn God's favor. In reality, we do not merit God's love. Jesus Christ is God's means by which sin is eliminated and people are brought back into relationship with God. Have you received God's gift of salvation in Jesus Christ?

"We love," John writes, "because God first loved us" (1 John 4:19). God doesn't love us because we are loveable. God loves us because God is love.

In his autobiography, *Timebends*, Arthur Miller chronicles his disintegrating marriage to Marilyn Monroe. During the filming of Arthur Miller's award-winning screenplay *The Misfits*, Miller watched Marilyn Monroe descend into the depths of depression and despair. He feared for her life as he witnessed their growing estrangement and her escalating dependence on barbiturates.

One evening, after a doctor had been persuaded to give Marilyn another shot and she was sleeping, Miller stood nearby watching. "I found myself straining to imagine miracles," he writes. "What if she was to awaken and I was able to say, 'God loves you, darling,' and

she was able to believe it! How I wished I still had my religion and she had hers."

Arthur Miller was an avowed unbeliever but once said about religion, "I have no formal religion, but there is a space in my head for it. Maybe I would believe in God if he believed in me."

I wish somebody had communicated with Arthur Miller that God believed in him. God demonstrates his love for people like Arthur, "for while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

There is a place in everybody's head and heart for God. That's the way God made us.

