Deuteronomy 4-11: Love the Lord Your God Part 1: Why We Love God

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Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I teach you to observe, that you may live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers is giving you. "You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you. Your eyes have seen what the LORD did at Baal Peor; for the LORD your God has destroyed from among you all the men who followed Baal of Peor. "But you who held fast to the LORD your God are alive today, every one of you."

-Deuteronomy 4:1-2

As we continue our study through the book of Deuteronomy we see Moses shift topics in his final series of teachings to the nation of Israel before his death. Last week we studied the opening chapters of Deuteronomy in which Moses summarized the journey that Israel took to get from Egypt to the precipice of the promised land. In that section, the main point that Moses kept returning to was the cowardice of the previous generation that prevented them from facing the Canaanites and caused them to die in the wilderness without seeing the land of their forefathers. By doing this, Moses was able to emphasize the importance of courage in the midst of fear and their need to depend on the provision and protection of God as they prepared to do what their parents failed to do.

Now the subject matter has shifted from the journey they took, to the commandments that they were given. The next large section of Deuteronomy, from chapters 4 to 11, Moses will be repeating the primary commandments of the Law, not the more obscure ritual Laws which we will get to next week, but instead a reiteration of the ten commandments and the general purpose of the Law, which is an instruction on how to love God and love your neighbor as yourself. While he is repeating this part of the Law, Moses continuously reminds the people of what we can call the spiritual infidelity of their parents.

We need to remember that the type of relationship that God is wanting to enter into with His people is not that of a master and a slave or even a king and their citizens, but it is most like a marital covenant. A relationship like this is not primarily joined through

convenience or law, but it is instead bound by love and fidelity. Which is why, as Jesus later states, the first and greatest commandment given by God to His people is contained in this section:

"*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength."*
-Deuteronomy 6:4-5

The call of the people of God is not primarily to obey God, but to love Him. And it was this commandment to love God that was violated in the two main events that Moses repeats in this section, the construction of the idol of the golden calf in Exodus 32 and the idolatry of the people of God in Numbers 25 where they worshipped Baal of Peor. This means that Moses' primary exhortation in this section is not merely to be faithful to the commands of God, though this is an important part of this section, but to be sure that they are being faithful to love God and to be devoted to Him alone. Since this point is so monumentally important we will take two Sunday's to cover this section of Deuteronomy. In this paper we will talk about the reasons that Moses gives to love God, and next week we will discuss how the nation of Israel was to love God.

"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 and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, "and to keep the commandments of the LORD and His statutes which I command you today for your good?"
-Deuteronomy 10:12-13

Why We Love God

"And because He loved your fathers, therefore He chose their descendants after them; and He brought you out of Egypt with His Presence, with His mighty power, "driving out from before you nations greater and mightier than you, to bring you in, to give you their land as an inheritance, as it is this day."
-Deuteronomy 4:37-38

One of the more interesting components of this section, and of the Bible in general, is that this commandment is not given without reason supporting it. Meaning that it would be more than acceptable for God to *demand* the love and devotion of His people as His due. But instead, Moses goes to great lengths to explain to his people *why* they should love God. This is an incredible act of humility by our God, but it also is a necessary component of the kind of relationship that He desires for His people. In order to enter into a truly loving relationship, we can't demand love or affection, we can only ask for it:

“So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “Feed My lambs.”

-John 21:15

This is an important point because, as we talked about last week, Christians tend to “reinterpret” the emotional commandments of the Bible since they feel that it is unjust for God to command our emotions. And so, when they read God’s command to “love the Lord your God…” They interpret that as to “obey” God or to “honor” God. But these interpretations are attempts to explain away a very clear commandment, God wants genuine love from His people. And this love needs to *precede* and motivate our obedience to Him. As the apostle Paul points out:

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.”

-1 Corinthians 13:1-3

To speak with the tongues of men and of angels, to prophecy with the wisdom of God Himself, to believe so fervently in God that we can move mountains, and to bestow all our physical goods on the poor constitute the highest and most extreme ends of what it would mean to “obey” God with all our hearts, souls, and strength. And yet, Paul tells us that these acts of obedience, if they are not motivated by love, are insufficient to please God and therefore profit us nothing. But, like courage, while we can exhort ourselves towards an emotion, we can’t force ourselves to feel a certain way, or to be moved by a particular affection. In order to “have love” it must be authentic and genuine, which means that it has to be fed by a genuine appreciation for the other person and affection for them.

God Loves Us

“For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. “The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; “but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers,

the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt."

-Deuteronomy 7:6-8

One of the major reasons that Moses gives for loving God is His love for the people of Israel. This sounds like a small detail, but it is profound and important. Part of the obstacle that we face normally in terms of love is the fear that we will be rejected or that we are unworthy of the affections of the one that we care for. This fear can cause us to close ourselves off to love. As the apostle John puts this point:

"Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love."

-1 John 4:17-18

In this passage, John not only acknowledges our fear of judgement as an obstacle towards us loving God, but he even suggests that this fear is valid. Most of us have experienced something like this, and this usually happens during our teenage years. We develop an attraction, or a "crush", on someone, and usually this person is well "out of our league". This first crush is usually on someone who is already an adult, or the most popular and attractive member of the opposite sex that we are familiar with. The reason why this love never turns into a genuine affection, and why it usually turns into a type of infatuation, (which is far different and more destructive than actual love), is because of this fear that the person that we care for will "judge" us to be unworthy of them and reject us.

This is an interesting dynamic because the normal "fuel" for desire and attraction are appreciation of the "worthiness" of the other person. We can't generate genuine desire without meditating on the desirability of the other person. In most human relationships though, we can place people on pedestals, ignoring their faults and exaggerating their good points. By doing this, we have merely fallen in love with our own imagination of the other person, and not the person themselves. Genuine love in a regular relationship requires us to love people in spite of their faults, to love them as they are not as we imagine them to be.

It reminds me of the old Roman myth of Psyche and Eros. In the story, Psyche is the youngest of three daughters, and she is so beautiful that those around her actually think that she is the embodiment of the goddess Aphrodite. But because they are so

infatuated with her, all the men want to do is worship her and adore her, but none actually ask for her to marry them.

This leads her to be lonely. She eventually is chosen by a god to be his wife and live in his palace. But, due to interesting elements in the narrative that I won't get into here, he won't allow her to see his face. Because of the idea that a beautiful god would want to marry her, she gives in to the temptations of her sisters and begins to believe that he is actually a monster that is merely preparing to devour her when the time is right. When she successfully conspires to see his face, she finds that the god of attraction himself, cupid, or eros, is her husband and is genuinely in love with her, but her act of unfaithfulness towards him fractures their marriage and she has to undergo various trials to restore the relationship.

This is a pretty good representation of this principle. Her astounding beauty caused men to see her as, in some ways, less than human, an object of devotion or praise, but not a flesh and blood human being who desired to be loved and cared for. And it was her understanding of her own frailties that prevented her from believing that she was loved by a worthy "man" who actually wanted her and cared for her.

While this is a problem for human relationships, a relationship with God is far more difficult. In this case, our imaginations are incapable of conceiving of how good God really is. No matter how worthy we think He might be, He is far more worthy. He is more beautiful than our wildest dreams, He is more good than our greatest acts of morality, and He is more pure than any person ever could be, and as such, He is entirely "out of our league". This is why the commandment to fear God is in some ways at odds with the commandment to love God:

"'And the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that He might preserve us alive, as it is this day. 'Then it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to observe all these commandments before the LORD our God, as He has commanded us.'"

-Deuteronomy 6:24-25

By "fearing" God, our intentional devotion to Him and our desire to know Him as fully as we can, to revere and glorify Him with all our hearts, we learn just how unworthy we are in His presence. Therefore, it is only if we *know* and believe that God truly loves us that we will be able to approach Him in genuine love and not constant fear. For the Israelites this comfort came from God's desire to deliver them from slavery:

“Did any people ever hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and live? “Or did God ever try to go and take for Himself a nation from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great terrors, according to all that the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes?”

-Deuteronomy 4:33-34

But for us as the church, our example is far higher:

“In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

-1 John 4:10-11

God didn’t just deliver us from a physical slavery using His immense power, God has demonstrated His love for us by saving us from sin and death itself, and He has done that by humbling Himself and becoming a frail, mortal human being, and then laying down that mortal life, tasting death itself, that we might be joined to Him for all eternity. It is knowing His glory and majesty that causes us to fear God properly, but it by knowing His incredible love that allows us to love Him properly. To quote from the classic hymn “Amazing Grace”

T'was grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fear relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.
-John Newton - “Amazing Grace”

It’s Wise

“Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. “Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ “For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the LORD our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him? “And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day? “Only take heed to yourself, and diligently keep yourself, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. And teach them to your children and your grandchildren, “especially concerning the day you stood before

the LORD your God in Horeb, when the LORD said to me, 'Gather the people to Me, and I will let them hear My words, that they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children.'

-Deuteronomy 4:5-10

Although that should be enough reason to love God, He graciously gives us another reason, the wisdom of His commandments. Once again, going back to my example of our first crush. Unfulfilled longing can be enough of a curse, but what can be worse is if we actually manage to enter into a relationship with our crush only to discover that they aren't who we thought they were. In such cases, because we have put these people on such a large pedestal, we might be largely blind to their faults and therefore, if the person truly is deviant or morally corrupt, we will end up participating in their faults to maintain our relationship.

Since the religions, philosophies, and ideologies of man are a combination between our own fallen conscience and influence from principalities that have rebelled against God, while they do contain moral truth, they also contain perversion. This is why, the more faithful we are to these ideologies, the more corrupt we will become. This is true of even the highest and most noble of all human ideologies, in the end they all fall short and therefore they can't rightly be the final and great desire of our souls.

When God demands the total devotion of His people, He points out that He is so worthy, and He is so good, that the more we choose to honor Him, the better we will become. This is sometimes hard for us to understand. Oftentimes we consider religion to be a trade-off, that we give God our devotion so that we can avoid Hell, or so that we can gain heaven, but we believe that our worship is ultimately against our own best interest. This is why we see it as such a large sacrifice. But the Bible makes a completely separate argument:

"The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover by them Your servant is warned, And in keeping them there is great reward."

-Psalm 19:7-11

According to the Scriptures, when someone chooses to follow God, they aren't actually "giving up" anything, they are sacrificing things of temporary value to gain things of

eternal value. Take a successful human relationship as an example. If we set our love on someone who is good, the more we love that person, the better we become. All the various sacrifices that we make in order to care for them, we find out that all of these have actually made us more faithful, more loving, more generous, and even more successful than we were before. A good romantic partner doesn't drag us down, they build us up, they push us to become a far better version of ourselves.

If this is true for human relationships, how much more true should this be for our relationship with God? Part of the evidence that God gives for Himself has to do with the wisdom of His law. He contends that if the Israelites are faithful to keep His commands and devote themselves to Him alone, the neighboring peoples will be in awe of the wisdom of God's commandments, that they will see the prosperity of the nation of Israel and they will conclude that the God of the natural world must be their King.

"And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."
-Romans 12:2

Far from separating us from our true joy and satisfaction, it is only in serving God that we find our true joy and satisfaction. As the early church father Augustine of Hippo said:

"Great art Thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is Thy power, and Thy wisdom infinite… Thou awakest us to delight in Thy praise; for Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee."
-Augustine of Hippo - "Confessions"

God is the center of our satisfaction and all our joy, in Him alone can we find rest for our souls, and in Him alone can we find the wisdom behind the creation. This means that the Israelites are promised that even in hardship and difficulties, they could find their ultimate satisfaction in God. Which is why Moses tells them:

"And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. "So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD."
-Deuteronomy 8:2-3

It was in fact through adversity and scarcity that the nation of Israel was taught their spiritual need for God. That even if everything in their lives has gone bad, even if they are stuck in the wilderness with nothing to eat but bread, they will still be satisfied in God and sustained by His word. But this truth does not contradict the promise for *physical* prosperity in loving God, it compliments it and explains it more clearly. In fact later in the sermon, Moses is even more emphatic about this earlier point:

"Then it shall come to pass, because you listen to these judgments, and keep and do them, that the LORD your God will keep with you the covenant and the mercy which He swore to your fathers. "And He will love you and bless you and multiply you; He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your land, your grain and your new wine and your oil, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flock, in the land of which He swore to your fathers to give you. "You shall be blessed above all peoples; there shall not be a male or female barren among you or among your livestock. "And the LORD will take away from you all sickness, and will afflict you with none of the terrible diseases of Egypt which you have known, but will lay them on all those who hate you."
-Deuteronomy 7:12-15

If we aren't careful to harmonize these verses together, it would be easy to take Scripture like this at face value and assume a more karmic view of the world. That if we are faithful to honor God and love Him with all that we are, then He will be faithful to physically bless us at all times and in all ways. But if we read it this way, then we lose the meaning of the manna, and even the coming conflict with the Canaanites. That God will, at times, subject His people to scarcity and adversity so that, among other things, they might remember that their blessedness is more than skin deep. That our true joy is not in "bread alone" but it remains within the words that precede from God.

"...who led you through that great and terrible wilderness, in which were fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water; who brought water for you out of the flinty rock; "who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end—"then you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.' "And you shall remember the LORD your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day."
-Deuteronomy 8:15-18

However, and this is the complicated bit, this doesn't mean that our spiritual blessedness doesn't sometimes manifest itself in physical blessedness. Remember that the Laws of God are good, they perfectly harmonize with the physical universe, to such

an extent that their wisdom proves the reality of God and in following them there should be a physical blessing attached. Let's just take two commandments in order to understand this.

"Then I commanded your judges at that time, saying, 'Hear the cases between your brethren, and judge righteously between a man and his brother or the stranger who is with him. 'You shall not show partiality in judgment; you shall hear the small as well as the great; you shall not be afraid in any man's presence, for the judgment is God's. The case that is too hard for you, bring to me, and I will hear it.'"

-Deuteronomy 1:16-17

For most modern people, this law seems pretty straightforward, but this is only because we have grown up in a culture that was previously shaped by Biblical wisdom. Most pagan nations wouldn't consider this wise, and would in fact, at surface level, think of it as foolish. Since most ancient nations had some sort of karmic view of virtue, meaning that the wealthy in the society were that way because they were morally good and the poor in the society were that way because they were morally corrupt, it would have been obvious that they should favor the wealthy in a court proceeding. Beyond that, it also seemed obvious that the nation would be enriched if they accepted bribes from those who were accused, which is why many third and second world nations still function like this.

For our culture we are now tempted to think the opposite. We are conditioned to believe that the wealthy in our society only get there by ripping off other people and therefore we are more likely to favor the poor and consider them to be victims of the oppressive crimes of the rich. In both circumstances however, the wisdom of this command becomes more and more clear. When justice systems show partiality, the people no longer trust the institutions to administer justice. And if we can't trust an institution to administer justice, we cease to believe in it, and when we cease to believe in it we become more tribalistic and less communal. As Jesus says:

"And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold."

-Matthew 24:12

Not only will we cease to love our neighbors, but we will cease to love the very nation that we are a part of. Once we truly believe that all institutions are corrupt, we start believing that we would be better off without them. We might even believe that the nation itself must be corrupt to allow for such institutions to grow and exist. This is exactly what we see happening right now in our country.

“You shall not eat anything that dies of itself; you may give it to the alien who is within your gates, that he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner; for you are a holy people to the LORD your God. You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk.”
-Deuteronomy 14:21

At first glance, this seems like a random and a not too particularly helpful command, and the way that Jewish people follow it seems annoying and unhelpful, namely by forbidding cheese to be served with any meat, meaning no cheeseburgers, among other things. But this law actually has some astounding wisdom embedded in it that is repeated throughout the Law.

In essence what this Law is forbidding is the mixture of life and death. A “mother's milk” is a powerful and obvious symbol of new life and prosperity. However, to “boil a young goat” is obviously a sign of death. This means that the wisdom contained in this commandment is present throughout the Law, including the fact that exposure to death, including blood makes someone ceremonially unclean and therefore unable to partake in the rituals within the temple.

While death is a natural part of this fallen world, the Israelites are being conditioned to see death as a negative thing, the antithesis to life itself. They are being asked to see life, especially young and innocent life, as being sacred and worthy of protection and veneration. This is also why the beginning of the commandment forbids the Israelites from eating anything that “dies of itself”. If they were to eat meat, it should be killed intentionally, and sacrificed to God, not merely dying of age or an accident.

The sacrificial system was meant to highlight the inherent contradiction in their worship. Though death defiled them, the temple and the Israelites were made holy *through* the shedding of blood. This showed the strange idea that the God of life was appeased through the offering of death. This demonstrated to the Israelites that while God was the God of life, they lived in a fallen world in need of redemption, and God gave them a hint that the creation would be redeemed through a worthy sacrifice.

This principle seems simple enough, but one that humanity has not practiced very well. For most ancient societies, death was not seen as that negative, merely another facet and form of life. As a result, they don't have an account like the biblical idea of original sin and the original creation being devoid of death. They also have means of “worshipping” death, since almost all of them have a god of death and the afterlife whom they served. This is why ancient societies tended to be fairly blase about life and death. They were fast to declare war, they were flippant in disregarding infants, and they practiced large scale human, and even infant, sacrifice to their gods. And Israel was

judged most harshly by God when they failed to remember this commandment and practiced this type of wanton sacrifice within their own borders.

“So I will forsake the remnant of My inheritance and deliver them into the hand of their enemies; and they shall become victims of plunder to all their enemies, ‘because they have done evil in My sight, and have provoked Me to anger since the day their fathers came out of Egypt, even to this day.’ ” Moreover Manasseh shed very much innocent blood, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another, besides his sin by which he made Judah sin, in doing evil in the sight of the LORD.”

-2 Kings 21:14-16

A culture that venerates the sanctity of human life is a culture that will flourish and find prosperity. A culture that has a casual disregard for human life is a culture that is doomed to die. When Israel remembered this lesson, and even at times when the pagan nations seemed to grasp this lesson to an extent, they experienced prosperity, but when they forgot it they experienced calamity. Once again, we only have to look at our own culture to see the wisdom of these commands.

When the Christian west really venerated life, the most depicted image in all of Europe was the image of Mary and Jesus. While mistakes were made, life was considered overall to be sacred. It was during this time that America was founded and these words were enshrined: “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. Among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Such statements would have been unthinkable for our pagan ancestors, but through the Christian west, such a sentiment was considered “self-evident”.

However, we have recently gone back on this wisdom, which is why the topics of abortion and euthanasia are increasingly discussed among the western countries, including, and maybe especially, our own. This change has not made us more prosperous, but it seems to be killing Europe and America.

These are just two examples of how the wisdom of Scripture can, and often does, result in physical prosperity. But we have to remember that this isn’t the purpose of loving God. We don’t love God in order to love ourselves, we love God because He is worthy, the fruit of loving Him can be physical prosperity. But it is equally important to know that this isn’t always the case. Since we live in a world that is fallen and unjust, following the commands of God doesn’t always equate to physical prosperity, in fact, sometimes the opposite occurs.

The best example of this would obviously be Christ Himself, but in the Old Testament, this is the whole point of the book of Job. Job lives a life fully devoted to God, wise in every imaginable way. And yet, he suffers a reversal of fortune in every aspect of his life. His children die, his health fails, and he loses all his money. Because this all happens to him, his friends believe that he must be secretly engaging in sinful behavior, but this isn't the case. At the end of the book God vindicates Job and reveals that Job is innocent, not perfect, but that his behavior didn't merit the outcome he was suffering. So if physical prosperity isn't guaranteed by loving God, why are we encouraged to do so? This goes back to the passage from Deuteronomy 8, "man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that precedes from the mouth of God.

Even if we had the entire world, without God we have nothing. But even if we lose the world, if we have God, we have everything we need. This is the main ministry of Christ. To show His people that to love God, even if it cost Him a life of prosperity and ensured for Him a short life of poverty and persecution, this "exchange" was infinitely worthy. This is a lesson that Moses knows better than all of Israel. Moses himself was raised in luxury, a prince of Egypt. And yet, he gave all this up in order to return to his people, and most importantly, the God of his people. This has been the constant in his life and the source of his obedience, even when that obedience cost him and even when it was difficult. So for the Christian, this is what we must focus on, to love God is to understand that He is more worthy than the entirety of what the world has to offer us.

"By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward."

-Hebrews 11:24-26