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## “Love Transforms”

May 1, 2022

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

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Jesus was asked one day, “What is the greatest commandment?” He replied:

*Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai echad. V’ahavta et Adonai Elohecha B’chol l’vavcha, uv’chol nafshecha uv’chol me’odecha.* “Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” (He also added a second commandment from Leviticus, but you’ll have to wait for next week to explore that with Rabbi Cohen.)

Jesus’s answer is a reminder of his Jewishness; that he was unmistakably, undeniably, and unambiguously Jewish. Jesus knew the scriptures. As a faithful Jew, he would have recited the Shema twice a day. Indeed, the Shema is more often spoken in the Jewish faith than the Lord’s Prayer is in the Christian faith. The commandment to love God is to be heard, kept, taught, and honored. And that’s as true for us as Christians as it is for our Jewish siblings. *You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*

It’s not a suggestion – it’s a commandment. But can we actually be commanded to love? We think of love as a feeling, an emotional attachment between people. Either you feel it or you don’t. I think we can all agree that it is a good thing to love God. But how can we be commanded to feel love toward God?

In the Ancient Near East, treaties between nations often included a requirement to express love in relation to a sovereign ruler. To “love” in that context was to promise loyalty, to be obedient, to fight against his enemies, and to faithfully pay tribute. And it’s undoubtedly true that this cultural expectation is reflected in the biblical commandment. But loving God goes beyond fealty. In the very next chapter, we read about God’s love for the people:

It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord *set his heart on you* and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was *because the Lord loved you* and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 7:7-8, *emphasis mine*)<sup>1</sup>

God’s heart was set on God’s people from the beginning. God’s love *precedes* our love. Love for God is not predicated simply on loyalty. Our loving relationship with God is mutual; love for God is possible because of God’s love for God’s people. It’s the same sense that would be echoed centuries later by the Christian community in the First Letter of John: “We love because God first loved us.” (1 John 4:19)

So, what does it mean to love God in the way the scripture commands us? Let’s take a closer look at *how* we are told to love God. “Love the LORD your God *with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*”

*Heart.* We associate the heart with emotions today. But biblical scholar Robert Alter describes the heart as “the seat of understanding in biblical physiology.”<sup>2</sup> Though it was also associated with feelings, the heart was where wisdom resided, the place from which decisions were made. Loving with our heart means we are to love not only with our emotions, but with understanding and intellectual assent, to thoughtfully devote ourselves to God.

*Soul.* The Hebrew word here is *nefesh*, which means “life-breath” or “essential self.”<sup>3</sup> Translating it as “soul” is misleading because of the later understanding of the *soul* as separate from the *body*. That was not the case in ancient biblical times. The soul was understood as the integrated core of one’s being. Loving God with our soul means we are to love God with the very essence of who we are.

<sup>1</sup> Kathryn M. Schifferdecker. *Working Preacher*. Online: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-31-2/commentary-on-deuteronomy-61-9> (Accessed April 27, 2022)

<sup>2</sup> Robert Alter. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. Volume 1. New York: W. W. Norton (2019), 641.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, 641.

*Might.* This is especially tricky in translation, because the Hebrew word here is not used this way anywhere else in scripture. It's actually an adverb similar to "very" or "much." A literal translation is to love God with our "muchness" or our abundance. Loving God with our might means we are to love God plentifully, not just with our *effort*, but with our *resources*.

Perhaps the most important word in the commandment is *all*. "Love the LORD your God with *all* your heart, and with *all* your soul, and with *all* your might." Hold nothing back. Be completely devoted in your thoughts, your being, everything you have.

*What would it be like to have this kind of radical, fully committed love for God?*

Loving God in this way completely transforms us from orientation to self, from pursuit of wealth or success, even from our misguided notions of what it means to be happy or satisfied. As the very first Psalm declares, "Happy are those...whose delight is in the law of the Lord," (Psalm 1:1-2) the law that includes the commandment to love God more than anything else.

Loving God transforms our orientation toward God and the things God loves – the world that God created and all who dwell in it; and God's values of justice, healing and wholeness, truth, kindness, humility, compassion. We live in that love by honoring the commandment, teaching it to our children and handing it down to future generations, memorizing it and repeating it day and night, when we are at home and when we are away, etching it in our memory and displaying it prominently in places that will remind us every day that we are God's own and how we are to love.

Love for God isn't something we simply feel. It is a choice to reorient ourselves toward loving action. Love doesn't just *feel*, love *acts*. Love devotes our whole selves to the God who first loved us. Love shares generously in the way we live. Or, to put it more simply: *Love does*.

My prayer for us is that we will be more attentive to God's movement in us and in the world around us. May we learn to practice the love that we have been given, to love God with all our being, and to live our devotion in loving action toward the world that God so loves. Know the love of God for you this day and live that love fully. Amen.