

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Love God

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Love is . . . We could spend the next 30 minutes coming up with ways to finish that sentence. And then carry the discussion on into next Sunday, and the next Sunday, and the next Sunday. According to one source, there are over 10,000 songs on file at the U.S. Copyright Office that begin with the words, "Love Is . . ." These include: "Love Is Like a Dizziness" (1905), "Love Is Good for Anything That Ails You" (1936), "Love Is a Glass of Champagne," (1952), "Love Is Groovy" (1969), "Love Is a Funky Thing" (1976).¹ And on we could go.

Some might even say, "Love is god." Note that that's "god" with a lower case "g," in the sense that love itself can become an idol. In his book, *Love: A History*, Simon May calls human love our "new god." The book includes a chapter titled, "Love Plays God," in which May writes, "Human love . . . is now tasked with achieving what once only divine love was thought capable of: to be our ultimate source of meaning and happiness." He goes on to lay out some of the core beliefs for this new "religion of love":

- Human love is the universal form of salvation available to all of us.
- We don't need "long and disciplined training" to learn how to love because most of us can love spontaneously and without effort.
- Human love is always benevolent and harmonious—a haven of peace.
- Human love transports us beyond the messy imperfections of the everyday world into a superior state of purity and perfection.
- Human love delivers us from all of life's losses and sufferings.

May writes, "These sorts of ideas saturate popular culture . . . To its immense cost, human love has usurped a role that only God's love used to play."²

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (vv. 4-5). Another way to render that opening imperative is: "Listen up!" or "Hear this!" The Hebrew word is *sema*. The Shema is the most important prayer in Judaism. But it's more than just a prayer. It's also a confession of faith, a declaration of allegiance to one God. It's the centerpiece of Jewish morning and evening prayer services. It's said upon arising in the morning. Parents teach their children to say it before they go to sleep at night.

Many Jews say the Shema as their last words. Rabbi Akiba, one of the great scholars and saints of the Jewish tradition, died as a martyr, killed by the Romans when he refused to stop teaching the Torah. As he was being executed, he recited the Shema, saying that he now knew the meaning of the verse, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength . . ." Akiba said it means you are to love God even if he takes your life.³

The Shema actually includes more than just the first two verses of today's Scripture reading. But these two capture the essence of faith in one God, to whom we should give

our full love and loyalty. That's actually the heart of what we know as the first of the Ten Commandments: "You shall have no other gods before me." From there, we sometimes think of the rest of the commandments as a series of "Thou shalt nots." But notice that the command in today's text is actually a positive rearticulation of the first commandment. Instead of "You shall have no other gods before me," the command is reformulated as "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." It's not just about what you don't do. It's also about what you do, namely, to love God with your whole being.

To go back to what I was saying a few moments ago, that means loving God rather than loving the idol called "love." If it's true that we've taken human love and turned it into an object of devotion, thinking it can ultimately save us and fix us, then the command for us to love the Lord our God pushes back against that and calls us to remember the true source of our deliverance and our hope.

In fact, we need to continually remember that God's saving love for us is what makes it possible for us, individually and together, to be in relationship with God in the first place. One of the reasons we gather on Sunday is to recall the story of how God has come to us in Jesus Christ, revealing his love for the world and his will to forgive us and make us new. And today, along with all the other familiar parts of our worship, we also use the Lord's Supper as a way of calling to mind again the reconciling, redeeming, restoring love of God. What we do here on the Lord's Day, and what you do in your own daily disciplines of Scripture, prayer, worship, and ministry help ensure that we don't forget that the reason we are able to love God and love others is because God has loved us first. Without his saving love for us in Christ, there would be no congregation to gather, no gospel to preach, no bread to break, no cup to share.

As Christians, the way we understand who God is and what we are commanded and empowered to become is crystallized in the metaphor "God is love." In 1 John 4, we hear the life of the Christian fellowship described this way: "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (vv. 7-11). So our central Christian affirmation is, God is love. Not love is god. The love we exhibit in our lives isn't to be idolized. It depends upon and derives from God. Love starts in God, and works out its purpose in the way that we love.

And one of the ways we love is by loving God. That's not just a biblical aspiration or expectation. It's a commandment. You can't separate loving God from keeping his commands, including the command to love him. In the chapter right after today's Scripture passage from Deuteronomy, Moses reminds the people, "The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands" (7:7-9).

So back up into today's text, and it's no surprise that God's people are commanded to love God. Now at first glance, that may strike us as an odd or impossible pairing. After all, how can love be a matter of law? Why should love be commanded? Shouldn't love be

something that's freely chosen and freely practiced? Shouldn't love of God and love of others be something that happens spontaneously and voluntarily?

But that way of looking at it hinges on a faulty understanding of our human capacity to love. True, we human beings are capable of loving. But what if we only love when we feel like it? Or what if we only love when it seems to come naturally to us? What if we love based solely on our own instincts? The fact is, in order to form solid fellowship and lasting community, we need to be commanded to love. We need to be instructed by God to love our neighbor. Especially in situations where love for another person is hard, painful, or seemingly impossible, we need to remember that love really is a matter of being obedient to what God teaches us. Not obedience that flows from our own determination and willpower, but obedience that comes from having Christ dwelling in us.

Christ is the way that God's love takes form among us. Christ is the one who was fully and faithfully obedient to the command to love God. Christ is the one who fills and empowers his people so that we're able to love God. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." Or as one person has tried to capture it, "Love God with everything."⁴ In the command itself, everything includes the "heart." In the Hebrew understanding of a human being, this corresponds mainly to the "mind," and not as much to "heart" as the location of emotions, the way that we often interpret it. Next comes love the Lord with all your "soul." This has to do with what we often think of as your essential "self," the core of your being. Then comes love the Lord with all your "strength." This has to do with your "might" or "capacity," all the things you have available to you, all the things at your disposal, for doing what is good and right in the eyes of God.

Mystic and theologian Julian of Norwich once said, "God loves us and delights in us, and so he wishes us to love him and delight in him and trust greatly in him."⁵ God doesn't intend love to be a one-way street. True, his love for us isn't based on our merit or worthiness. He reaches out to us first in divine grace. But his purpose is to do more than just reveal his mercy. His larger purpose is to bring us into covenant love with himself, so that he will be our God and we will be his people.

And being covenant people means loving the God who has loved us. Loving him with everything. So love God with your whole being. Love him with your mind and thoughts. Love him with your affections and emotions. Love him with your job. Love him with how you spend your money. Love him with what you read and watch. Love him with your schoolwork. Love him with your talents and abilities. Love him with your marriage. Love him with your family and friendships. Love him with your parenting and grandparenting. Love him with the way you dress and the places you hang out. Love him with the way you drive. Love him with the kind of food you eat. Love him with your politics. Love him with the way you speak to others. Love him with the way that you speak to others. Love him with what you do on the internet. Love him with your church life. Remember that the one true God has loved you with his all. He desires, and commands you, to love him with your all.

¹ "Love Is," *Harper's Magazine* (February 2003). 28.

² Adapted from Simon May, *Love: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) 1-2.

³ Leonard S. Kravitz, "A Martyr for Love." *The Living Pulpit* (July-September 1992) 18.

⁴ Brent A. Strawn. Commentary on Deuteronomy 6:1-9. Working Preacher website. Accessed February 2, 2017 <https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=462>.

⁵ Quoted in "Women in the Medieval Church." *Christian History*, no. 30.