

Listen and Obey: “The Shema”

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Lesson #1: Introduction

“Hear O Israel...”

As the children of Israel were getting ready to enter the Promised Land, their leader, Moses rehearsed the teachings of the Law with them. Referring back to the Ten Commandments outlined in Exodus 20, Moses reminded them to listen and obey Yahweh.

In Deuteronomy 6, he began his instructions with the command, “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God...” The Hebrew word that means “to hear” or “to listen” is “shema.” So, this important passage came to be known as the “Shema.”

These words were and still are the centerpiece for the daily evening and morning prayers for all Jewish men and women. They pray these words with one hand over their eyes and deep sincerity in their heart. They concentrate on loving the Lord with their whole heart, soul and strength.

Jesus was a good Jewish man and He too recited these words several times a day. When He was asked what is the most important commandment, He quickly mentioned the “Shema.” And as He quoted this passage in Deuteronomy, He added the words from Leviticus 19:18, “...and love your neighbor as yourself.”

The passage teaches us to listen and to obey. It is not enough for us to just hear the words of the scriptures. It is not even enough to hear them and give them serious consideration. We need to listen and respond. As James says, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” (James 1:22)

Reflective Thoughts/Comments:

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think it is so difficult to “hear and obey” God’s word?
2. What are some of the obstacles we all have when it comes time to obey the Lord?
3. Is there something specific that the Lord wants you to do this week? Are you listening? Are you willing to obey?

Action Steps:

1. “Active listening” requires some real focus. Choose one word or one short phrase in the scriptures to mull over in your mind today. It might be a word like “trust” or “rejoice” or “submit.” You might choose a phrase like “live a life worthy of the Lord” (Col. 1:10) or maybe “let no unwholesome word come out of your mouth” (Eph. 4:29). Keep that word or phrase on the front of your mind all day long.
2. Listening is not just an activity of our ears and minds. Sometimes, writing things down helps us “listen.” Find a recording of a devotion or gospel message and “listen” with your pen in hand. Take notes and review those notes. What did you “hear?”
3. Hearing God’s word preached or reading it for ourselves, is the first step towards becoming more like Christ. The next step is to take action. As you “hear” God’s word this week, make some commitments. Let Him know that you will obey. It might be a great time to start a journal and record your thoughts and your promises.

Lesson #2 Love (“ahavah”) the Lord

In the Old Testament, there are three Hebrew words for “love.” They are roughly equivalent to the three Greek words for love in the New Testament. One refers to the tenderness you might have for a friend or companion. Another conveys a physical love you might show for your spouse. The third is “ahavah,” and it means to have a profound, deep affection for someone.

These kinds of intense, close emotional bonds can be extended to friends (see Lev. 19:18), family members (see Gen. 22:2), lovers (see Gen. 24:67) and even your own soul (see Prov. 19:8).

This portion of the “Shema” is referring back to the first commandment when we are told “You shall not have any other God’s before me...” (Ex. 20:3) Our “ahavah” (our deep, intense, focused love and affection) is to be concentrated on Yahweh and Him alone.

That kind of affection is expressed with profound feelings and it will result in some very specific action. Consider the question posed in Deuteronomy 10:12-13:

“And now O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and to observe the Lord’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?”

Reflective Thoughts/ Comments:

Discussion questions:

1. How does this kind of love differ from the love expressed by a mother or father, a friend or lover?
2. Is this kind of love an emotion, an action, an attitude or a combination of all three?
3. Is loving God on a consistent basis easy for you? Why or why not?

Action Items:

1. Make a list of the ways you express your love to those closest to you. Do some of those behaviors take some effort or planning?
2. Make another list of the ways you express your love for the Lord? How do you show that love? Do you give it a sustained effort?
3. Take a trusted Christian brother or sister out for coffee and discuss how believers can express their love for God. Choose one new way (something practical) and accomplish it this next week.

Lesson #3: With all your heart (“lev”)

In the Hebrew culture, there are a number of anatomical terms that refer to one’s heart. Terms like “inner parts,” our bones, our bowels and even our liver are used synonymously with our heart.

When the term “heart” comes up in the Old Testament it is referring to the center of our emotions and the source of our thinking. It is the idea of the brain working alongside our heart.

That inner part of man includes our passions, our appetites and our personality. Our heart expresses our joy (“...the cheerful heart has a continual feast”-Prov. 15:15). Our heart is the source of our thinking (“Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life.”-Prov. 4:23). And our heart is the foundation from which we make choices (“In his heart, a man plans his course...” -Prov. 16:9)

Our heart thinks (Matt. 9:4); it remembers and meditates (Ps. 77:5-6) and it functions as our conscience (I Sam. 24:5). It is the “home of our personal life.”

Reflective thoughts/Comments:

Discussion Questions:

1. What all is included in the Hebrew concept of our “heart?” Is that more or less than what we usually attribute to our heart?
2. What kinds of things does God expect us to do, say or obey with our heart?
3. Is loving God with our whole heart a command or a suggestion? What are the implications of how you answered that question?

Action Items:

1. Since this section of scripture is intentionally directed to the Israelites as a group and not an individual, get together with some friends and discuss the health of your hearts. Make some notes about “healthy” spiritual hearts in the group. Emulate them.
2. Loving God with our whole heart is a difficult thing to evaluate. But since He is to be our priority, take your calendar and financial statement and observe how He is being honored with your time and money.

Lesson #4 With all Your Soul (“nephesh”)

The English language contains about 100,000 words. The Hebrew vocabulary only has 8,000 words, so a single word can convey many meanings. Such is the case with the term “soul.” This little word, “nephesh” is used more than 780 times in the Old Testament and it is translated 28 different ways.

The term literally means “throat.” It is trying to express the concept that your whole life depends on what goes in and out of your throat. So, the word can be translated “life,” “soul,” “person,” “me,” and “creature.”

The Hebrew term for “heart” reflects our will and affection. And the term, “soul” conveys all physical things that are a part of our being.

With such a broad definition, the Lord is trying to teach us that we don’t HAVE a “nephesh” (soul), we ARE a “nephesh” (soul). We are to love the Lord deeply with everything we have. We are to devote our entire being to our creator. He is worthy.

Consider Psalm 119:175 “Let me “nephesh” (live) that I may praise you...”

Reflective Thoughts/Comments:

Discussion Questions:

1. What kinds of things are involved when we love God with our whole “soul”?
2. When and how do you show your devotion for the Lord? Is it only during worship services or with your Christian friends? Why?
3. Can you think of an activity that you do that can’t be done for the glory of God?

Action Items:

1. Invite a few friends over for a meal. Pretend that you are a court of law. Is there enough “evidence” to convict each of you as Christians? List the “evidence.” Can people in your life see that “evidence?”
2. Look at your calendar. Think about the activities of the past week. What did you spend the most time on? Who did you spend the most time with? Make some notes about how you expressed your love for the Lord each day.
3. Figure out how to get some time alone with God (even a few hours will be enough). Ask Him to reveal the priorities of your heart. And then make a concrete plan for the next month. Commit to love Him with your whole “nephesh.”

Lesson #5 Love Him with All your Strength (“meod”)

“Meod” is another multifaceted Hebrew word. It is used over 300 times in the Old Testament and it is almost never translated “strength.” It is an adverb that intensifies the meaning of another word. It literally means “very” or “much.”

In “the “Shema,” most English translations convey “meod” as strength or might. They are emphasizing the idea of loving the Lord with all of our power. But that concept limits this passage a bit.

God isn’t asking us to drum up some super strength with which to serve Him. He is just asking us to love Him with everything we have. There is to be an intensity associated with the Christian life. We are to love Him “very much.”

Christianity isn’t a religion. It isn’t a series of theological statements. It is a relationship, a relationship ignited by the love of the father. “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have every lasting life.” (John 3:16)

In response to that amazing love (I John3:1), we are commanded to love Him intensely, with fervor and passion. Our worship and service cannot be passive or timid. We must love Him with our “muchness.”

Reflective Thoughts/Comments:

Discussion Questions:

1. At a sporting event, the crowd goes wild. Why do you suppose we don't worship the Lord like that?
2. Everyone has different possessions and opportunities. What would be included in your "muchness?" Are those "things" committed to Christ in worship and service?
3. Serving the Lord with passion is important. Think about the idea of "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). How do those two concepts (speaking the truth but doing it in love) "balance" or hold each other in tension?

Action Items:

1. Do a personal inventory. What activities do you do with the most passion and enthusiasm? (Consider family activities, work, athletics, musical expressions and so on.) Why do you give so much effort to those activities? How could you add that kind of energy to your worship of God?
2. Volunteer for a spiritual act of service that you are unfamiliar with. Give it some serious consideration. Do it with enthusiasm (your "muchness").
3. Find a mentor that will help you identify your spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12, Romans 12 and Eph 4:1). Once you have them identified, make sure you are actively pursuing a life of service using those gifts.

Conclusion:

In the “Shema,” we are commanded to listen and obey. It is not enough to just personally reflect on truth or collectively discuss Biblical principles. Worshipping at church is wonderful but not the end of our service. God expects us to hear what He has to say and then put it into practice, each and every day.

Listen and obey: “BLESSED RATHER ARE THOSE WHO HEAR THE WORD OF GOD AND OBEY IT” (LUKE 11:28)