

[To love God] is the first thing and it is everything.

all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ (Mark 12:28–31a, trans. mine). If the first command is not right, then the second—to love others—is a hollow social nicety. Without the first command life becomes selfish and phony. Thus, *the* command is the *first* command, creationally and in priority.

Third, the command defines the all-consuming focus of life itself. It is the first thing and it is everything. It can be paraphrased thus, “Love Yahweh your God with everything you are, and teach his word to the next generation everywhere, all the time.” The meaning of “love” here is something like loyalty and devotion. What it looks like includes teaching his word to the younger generation as a perpetual occupation.

Within a family structure the next generation is our own children. More broadly, however, the next generation refers to those coming after us. Many devout North American Christians miss this understanding because of the tendency to extreme individualism in the prevailing culture. Our responsibility before God does not end with each of us considered alone. If we measure our obedience to the command, it necessarily includes instructing the generation that follows us. How

the next generation is doing with God, however we understand it, says a lot about how we are doing with God. In other words, how they are doing is how we are doing. ?



What is the place of instructing the next generation in obeying the great command?

The reference to tying scripture on foreheads and arms also seems metaphorical—though literally wearing scripture has been practiced in some Judaic traditions. God’s instruction should be on our mind and in our heart (see 6:6b). The parallel passages in the Torah also sound metaphorical—“*This observance [the Passover] will be for you like a sign on your hand and a reminder on your forehead that the law of Yahweh is to be on your lips*” (Ex. 13:9), and “Fix these words of mine *in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads*” (Deut. 11:18, italics added). The metaphorical reading of this teaching by other portions of the Hebrew scriptures, especially wisdom parallels, will be taken up in “Another Look,” below (also see Propp, 423–25; Weinfeld, 341–43).

The command to love Yahweh is both an interpretation of the first word and a concise summary statement of the entire section (Deut. 6–11). These chapters unfold out of and situate the meaning of the command (see Table 26-C). Each section previews Israel’s future history in relation to how

The phallic image of Asherah, the Canaanite goddess of fertility (Deut. 7:5)



the nation will fail to obey the first command. The sections interweave interpretive review of the wilderness journeys, showing the continuity of Israel's sinfulness. Thus, the meaning of the command is explained within a storied context. These teachings are not limited to Israel's path but offer some of the most important teaching to anyone who desires to obey the command. It is no accident that each of the three passages Jesus quoted when he faced his temptations came from these chapters (see 8:3; 6:16, 13; Matt. 4:1–11).

The first instruction concerning the meaning of the command within Israel's story is the warning about the danger of God's gifts. The dangerous gifts, in this case, are not just any gifts but acts of Yahweh's grace to his people. The problem has nothing to do with the gifts from God but has everything to do with the recipients of his kindness. The hazard of the gifts is that people will enjoy them and forget the

Table 26-C: A Summary of Deuteronomy 6–11

6:4–9	The Command
6:10–25	The danger of enjoying the gifts of God
7	The danger of military might
8	The danger of prosperity
9–10	The danger of self-righteousness
11	Summary of the command

giver. Gifts and each of the other dangers presented in these chapters reveal the problem of human rebellion against God's word. The gifts are treated in chronologically reverse order (see Table 26-D). ?



What makes God's gifts dangerous?

The next generation must learn that God's will is always oriented toward remembering his mighty acts told in his word. The path of obedience means placing his teaching in the



"When Yahweh your God brings you into the land . . . filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant. . . ." (Deut. 6:10–11)

Table 26-D: Chronologically Reversed Order of the Instructions in Deuteronomy 6:10–25

6:10–15	Immediate future—the land
6:16–19	Immediate past—the wilderness provisions
6:20–25	The previous generation—deliverance from slavery

context of the story of his power and goodness. Notice the critical logic:

In the future, *when your son asks you, “What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws Yahweh our God has commanded you?” tell him: “We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but Yahweh brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes Yahweh sent miraculous signs and wonders—great and*

terrible—upon Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land that he promised on oath to our forefathers. Yahweh commanded us

to obey all these decrees and to fear Yahweh our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today.” (6:20–24, italics added)

The story of the instruction—the basic character of Deuteronomy—includes the instruction to tell the story of the instruction. The meaning of God’s word is understood within the narrative context that it establishes.

The next three dangers—military might, wealth, and self-righteousness (see Table 26-C)—form a set. The

relationship among them can be seen, first, by the phrases “say to yourself.”

You may say to yourselves, “These nations are stronger than we are. How can we drive them out?” (7:17)

You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” (8:17)

After Yahweh your God has driven them out before you, *do not say to yourself, “Yahweh has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness.” (9:4a, italics added)*

Second, this set of three teachings, including the self-conversations, seems to be followed in various contexts (see Isa. 47:5–7, 8–9, 10–11; cf. Ps. 10:3–4, 5–6, 10–13; Eccl. 2:1; 3:17, 18; also see Olson, 52–53). This set of perils provides a virtual outline of Israel’s downfall. Each should be considered briefly.

First, the danger of *military might* runs in two directions. The people could misjudge the reason for their being chosen by God or fail to trust him when faced with military challenge. In the case of the former problem, the theological explanation makes clear:

Yahweh 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 Yahweh loved you and kept the oath he*

The path of obedience means placing his teaching in the context of the story of his power and goodness.

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. (7:7–8, italics added)

Concerning the latter Moses said, “You may say to yourselves, ‘These nations are stronger than we are. How can we drive them out?’ But do not be afraid of them; *remember well what Yahweh your God did* to Pharaoh and to all Egypt” (7:17–18, italics added). In both cases the antidote centers on placing the moral challenge in the context of the acts of God as reported in the Torah story. The word of God itself is the answer.

Second, *financial security*, in terms of the good life, presents grave danger to those who would be loyal to Yahweh. Deuteronomy 8 says, repeats, and says again that the people must remember and must not forget the story of what he has done. He redeemed Israel from bondage and provided for them through the long sparse wilderness years. The Torah story, the word of God itself, again offers decisive substance for the people’s responsibility (see, e.g., 8:17–18). It describes the challenges and provides the solution within itself. The opening instruction captures the spirit of the larger context:

Remember how Yahweh your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger

and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone *but on every word that comes from the mouth of Yahweh*. (8:2–3, italics added)

The word of God is the foremost of life’s “essentials.”



Pomegranates
(Deut. 8:8)

The problem with financial prosperity is not the prosperity itself. The peril is in forgetting—failing to place present prosperity in its rightful perspective. The story of the successful life cannot begin with “the success” itself. The rightful and necessary worldview, especially under the threat of affluence, is placing life within God’s story. The opposite of beginning with the scriptural narrative is conceit. Notice the attitudinal reason for moral failure and its relationship to the Torah story.

Self-righteousness could cause Israel wrongly to connect the results of grace with their own merits.

Be careful that you do not forget Yahweh your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, *then your heart will become proud and you will forget* Yahweh your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. He led you through the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. He gave you manna to eat in the desert, something your fathers had never known. (8:11–16a, italics added)

Third, the danger of *self-righteousness* may be the gravest of all. The nature of the problem stems from misunderstanding the meaning of circumstances and/or the self. Self-righteousness could cause Israel wrongly to connect the results of grace with their own merits. This context emphatically denies a works-based religion. The fulfillment of God's word is not rooted in human achievement but is established on itself. It is accomplished because he said it.

After Yahweh your God has driven them out before you, do not say to yourself, "Yahweh has brought me here to take possession of this land *because of my righ-*

teousness." No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that Yahweh is going to drive them out before you. *It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity* that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, Yahweh your God will drive them out before you, *to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.* Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that Yahweh your God is giving you this good land to possess, *for you are a stiff-necked people!* (9:4–6, italics added)

True obedience of God's instruction has nothing to do with earning anything. Following God's word is an act of faith, that is, a function of his grace. More precisely, the rightful interpretation of circumstance, whether good or otherwise, begins by recognizing the sinfulness of humankind. This is the beginning of the great command and the beginning of the gospel. ?



What is the relationship between obedience and faith?

Deuteronomy 9 continues with a detailed retelling of Israel's sin with the golden calf. The rebellion at Sinai provided a template for explaining Israel's other sins, in the wilderness and at Kadesh. It was something that they needed to "remember" and "never forget" (9:7). Moreover, later