

We Are The Church Together: A Foundation

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

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6Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, ²so that you and your children and your children’s children may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. ³Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

How many Bibles do you own? According to the Institute for Bible Reading, the average household in North America owns four Bibles, and the average Christian household has 11 Bibles.¹ If you think about the Bibles you have in your house – on the coffee table, beside your bed, neatly arranged on the bookshelf - does this number sound about right to you?

When I read that statistic last week, I looked around my office and saw a number of Bibles on my bookshelves. So, I decided to count just how many Bibles I had in my office. Although I haven’t unpacked every box yet, I counted 21 Bibles. These 21 Bibles included a variety of different translations, paraphrases, and styles. Some of my Bibles were designed for use with children. Some were broken down into sections for daily Bible reading or a “Through the Bible in a Year” plan. Some were written in plain language and others in more complex language. But that’s not all. In addition to the 21 Bibles in my office are the Bible commentaries which include the full scripture text, and Bibles written in Greek or

Hebrew. Needless to say, I'm above average. The Bible makes up a good portion of the books in my office...as it should for any minister. But it's really not about quantity...

Reflecting on the statistic, J.R. Briggs, a pastor in Philadelphia, told a story about a neighbor who came to see him one afternoon. This neighbor, who had recently been widowed, was moving into a smaller house and had been going through his possessions. And so, that afternoon, Briggs' neighbor came by with a box full of old Bibles to give to the pastor.

Briggs was surprised. "You don't want them? How about your kids. Would they want to keep them in the family?"

The neighbor replied. "No. My kids aren't interested in them. They don't read the Bible and neither do I. But if I throw them away, God might strike me dead or something."

Briggs said he almost laughed, but then realized his neighbor wasn't kidding. He honestly thought God would punish him if he threw away the Bibles. And then Briggs went on to point out the reality of the situation. "It's an extreme example of many people's contradictory relationship with the Bible: they believe there's something special about the Good Book, but they seldom, if ever, actually read it."ⁱⁱ

By the way, that Institute for Bible Reading statistic that suggests that the average household owns four Bibles...in the same study, they also found that every day, 700 people stop reading their Bibles for good.ⁱⁱⁱ That's a problem. A problem for us as individuals...and a problem for us as the church.

Last week we began a sermon series called *We Are The Church Together*. I intentionally started this series by noting that Jesus called the church to love neighbor as self - to be a family. The notion of engaging with people as though they are family is an important characteristic of the church – a concept that we can easily grasp. But, we can't stop there because that's not all the church is. The church can't just be a family reunion. The church isn't just about being nice to one another, because the fact is, we are nice to each other...until we're not. The reality is the church is not built upon a foundation of relationships with each other. Instead, as we sang a few moments ago, the church's one

foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord. What that means for the church – and the fact that I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together – is that together we need to be come structural engineers of sorts; foundation experts. We have to be invested in knowing more about Jesus Christ...and knowing more about what it means to declare him as our Lord and Savior. And this isn't something we do alone as individuals. It's something done in community, corporately. You and me – we – have a responsibility to ensure that everyone seated around us is also making that same investment in foundation expertise.

So how do we do this? With our Bibles. How do we use our Bibles to know more about Jesus? Perhaps there is a clue in our scripture lesson. Now, to be clear, our scripture lesson this morning is not so much about knowing Jesus. After all, Deuteronomy is found in the Old Testament – long before the earthly Jesus arrives on the scene. Yet, in these nine verses of our scripture lesson, we find strategies for how you might get to know Jesus better.

Deuteronomy is the fifth book in our Bibles, in the Old Testament. It picks up with the Israelites encamped just east of the Promised Land. The Israelites are now about halfway through the forty years of wilderness wandering following their exodus from Egypt. The name of this book of the Bible gives us a clue to why it was written. *Deutero* means “second” and *nomy* is a part of the word *nomian*, a word meaning “law.” Deuteronomy literally means “second law,” or better translated a second telling of the law.

Where Deuteronomy picks up the story of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, there was a need for a second telling of the law. Now that more than 20 years had passed since their escape from Egypt, a whole generation had been born and had grown up. Many members of that generation were moving into adulthood without a personal experience of what God had done in liberating God's people from slavery under Pharaoh. So Moses, knowing that the Israelites were on the cusp of entering the promise land, felt that this generation needed a refresher course. Before they faced the dangers of what lay ahead, a carefully nurtured preparation was needed to ensure that this law would never be forgotten.^{iv}

Our scripture lesson from Deuteronomy 6 begins as the fulfillment of a cliffhanger from chapter 5. At the end of chapter 5, Moses tells the people:

You must therefore be careful to do as the Lord your God has commanded you; you shall not turn to the right or to the left. You must follow exactly the path that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land you are to possess. (Deuteronomy 5:32-33)

Chapter 6 then opens with another cliffhanger. In verse 1, Moses says this is the commandment...but then goes on to give more reasons why it should be kept. Finally, he gets to the commandment that will keep them on the right path in verses 4 and 5: *Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.* This commandment is known as the *Shema* – the Hebrew word for “hear.” Essentially, Moses told the Israelites, “Listen up! Hear and obey this! You are to love the one true God with every fiber of your being – heart, soul, and might. Everything hinges on your ability to do this – on having the right attitude towards God; on giving the right priority to God and God’s demands.”

I suspect the Israelites first heard this and thought: “We’ve got this.” Like the Israelites, we probably think we’ve got no problem with our priorities. Those Israelites were a bunch of complainers. They were a bunch of idol worshipers. But, we aren’t like them. We don’t ever complain. We don’t ever put other things ahead of God...or the church...

Fortunately for them and for us, Moses then makes some suggestions about how to ensure that this law – the *Shema* – is given proper attention, both now and in the generations to come. Moses first tells them to keep the words of this command “today in your heart.” This command wasn’t just a nice summary of everything that had come before. It was an action to be done that day. Moses goes on to describe how this command should be instilled in the generations to come. You should “recite it to your children”, and tell them about it all day long. You should bind these words “as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house.” In other words, this commandment should be ever before you – in your field of vision, in your mindset, and in the everyday conversations you have with your children.

There is no doubt that the *Shema* is important to our Jewish friends. Jewish writer Mitchell Scher called the *Shema* the national anthem of the Jewish people. It is the first verse of the Torah taught to a young child and the words that a Jew strives to have on his or her lips while departing this world.^v And because it is so important, many of our Jewish friends, particularly those who are conservative and orthodox, have taken a literal approach to keeping those words in their hearts.

After their bar mitzvah, Jewish boys perform the practice of wearing tefillin. Tefillin are small leather boxes holding handwritten scrolls of four texts: Exodus 13:1-10, Exodus 13:11-15, Deuteronomy 6:4-9 (our scripture text) and Deuteronomy 11:13-21. One box is strapped with leather to their head like a crown, and another to the non-dominant arm with the box facing the heart. This practice, done every day, is designed to create a bond between the God who commands and the one who performs. It's literally binding themselves to the one and only God.

Similarly, affixed outside most Jewish homes is a little box called a *mezuzah*. The word *mezuzah* is Hebrew for "doorpost." Inside this *mezuzah* is a small piece of paper on which the Deuteronomy 6:4-9 has been handwritten. Every time a faithful Jew enters or leaves their house, he or she touches the *mezuzah* as a visible sign of their commitment to be a person of the Covenant, someone who is trying to live his or her life with conscious reference to the Law, to the Word that God has spoken.

For these Jewish friends, wearing the tefillin and touching the *mezuzah* both serve as ways to affirm one's religious loyalty and identity. I have deep respect for the disposition and careful observation which accompanies these Jewish practices. There is no doubt that a regular affirmation of who God is, and a reminder that we aren't God, is a good thing. But, I also believe that a literal approach may miss the mark. As Christians, we can't just hold the Bible up to our head, or attach it to our arm, and assume we will then follow it. No, the words we find there have to find their way into our lives – into our attitudes and daily living. And that means we have to read what it says, regularly...routinely...passionately, and allow that Word, along with the Spirit of God, to be the instrument of transformation in our lives.

Here's what that looks like. When the Word does its work on us, its truths begin to "*permeate our thoughts, aspirations and actions.*" Its impact becomes more evident in us as our lives become better reflections of Christ's life and love. When the Word takes deep root in people, they are changed by the experience. The more you read the Bible, the more humble you'll become. The more you read the Bible, the more merciful you'll become. The more you read the Bible, the more concerned you'll become about the things that concern God. And the more you read the Bible, the more active you'll become in the things that God is doing. But none of this happens in us without serious and sustained Bible engagement.

Donald Whitney uses the simple analogy of a cup of tea as an illustration of what this means.

You are the cup of hot water and the intake of Scripture is represented by the tea bag. Hearing God's Word is like one dip of the tea bag into the cup. Some of the tea's flavor is absorbed by the water, but not as much as would occur with a more thorough soaking of the bag. In this analogy, reading, studying, and memorizing God's Word are represented by additional plunges of the tea bag into the cup. The more frequently the tea enters the water, the more effect it has. And when the tea bag has been immersed completely and allowed to steep, all the rich tea flavor will get extracted and the hot water will actually change colors, having been completely and thoroughly transformed by the encounter.^{vi}

Moses understood well that the Israelites needed to be immersed in the commands of God in order to be prepared for the challenges they would face in the days ahead. And he clearly knew that things would only go well if they anchored themselves to the one true God, remembering what God had done for them and the covenant God had made with them for the present and future. In the same way, to face the challenges of our day – things like parenting, grief, money management, employment, pluralism, racism, sexism, cronyism, nepotism, ageism, and all the other –isms – ...to face those challenges, we are better prepared if we are anchored to the God we know in Jesus Christ – a God powerfully revealed to us in scripture. That means the more frequently we engage with that scripture, the more that scripture is ever before us, the more we are prepared and transformed for what lies ahead, and prepared to help the next generation as well.

But let me offer this caution about engaging with scripture. Reading the Bible for information is not enough. It's a little like trying to get your Driver's License by committing the DPS manual to memory. You will know the signs and the rules, but you won't have a feel for how to keep your car between the lines on the road. If you have had the experience of teaching your teen how to drive, you definitely know there is a difference between knowledge and practice. Both are needed. The same is true for reading the Bible. As New Testament Professor Scot McKnight properly notes, "The goal of reading the Bible is not to know our Bible; it is to know the God of the Bible. We must have the proper end in sight – not more info, but a deeper relationship with God."

And that's what the church is *foundationally* here to help you do, especially when we recognize that we are the church together. Together, we've got to help each other navigate the Bible, understanding how the smaller stories of scripture connect to tell God's bigger story. Together, we've got to help each other personalize scripture, committing scripture to memory so that they are there when we need them. Together, we've got to help each other articulate what we believe, wrestling with what the Bible teaches so that we can make it our own. Together, we have to be formed, informed, and transformed by what we find in the Word.

About ten years ago, a one-of-a-kind survey was commissioned to measure individual spiritual growth. This Reveal survey helped individuals identify how much their faith impacted their daily life. But, this survey also identified ways that churches could help their members become more Christ-centered. After studying more than 8,000 individuals, this is what the Reveal survey indicated:

Nothing has a greater impact on spiritual growth than reflection on Scripture. If churches do only one thing to help people at all levels of spiritual maturity grow in their relationship with Christ, their choice is clear. They would inspire, encourage, and equip their people to read the Bible – specifically to reflect on Scripture for meaning in their lives. The Bible's power to advance spiritual growth is unrivaled by anything else we've discovered.^{vii}

That's why the church is a foundation – or better said, a vessel for constantly and consistently pointing to and learning about our foundation, Jesus Christ. That's why we

invest energy and time and dollars into Sunday School and small groups and Bible studies and men’s and women’s study groups and children and youth ministries. We don’t do this so that we can increase the number of Bibles floating around the homes of our members. We do this because we *foundationally* believe that our impact for Christ is greatest when we, as the church, allow the Word to do its work in us.

ⁱ Briggs, J. R. “Seven Ideas for Improving Bible Engagement in Your Church.” *Christianity Today*. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2018/spring-when-church-gets-sidelined/7-ideas-for-improving-bible-engagement-in-your-church.html>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Clements, Ronald E. “The Book of Deuteronomy” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Vol. II*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998. p. 342.

^v Scher, Mitchell. “National Anthem” *Torah from Dixie*. <http://www.tfdixie.com/parshat/vaetchanan/021.htm>

^{vi} Whitney, Donald S. *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. NavPress. 1991.

^{vii} Hawkins, Greg L. and Cally Parkinson. *Move: What 1,000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2011.