

Part 9: The Severity of Love

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“Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul and with all your might.” This verse is taken from Deuteronomy 6 and is the first part of what is called, “The Shema.”

The Shema is a prayer that Jews even today pray every day to remind them of the importance of loving God. This passage is so important to the whole Bible that it's also a passage which Jesus quotes in the New Testament when he is asked what the most important command is.

And if you were with us last week, we started a new section in the book of Deuteronomy which runs from chapter 12 to chapter 26. And a superficial reading of this section shows a list of rules, laws and case studies which sound far less compelling and far less engaging than the heartfelt worship contained in the Shema.

But what's interesting is that everything Moses is going to outline for his people in these seemingly legal chapters is actually a detailed explanation of what it looks like to love Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and might. When the gospel warms our hearts to respond in love to Jesus, the details of our lives change. They have to.

David Brainerd was a missionary who was one of the first men to bring the gospel to the Indian tribes in the New England area. At one point two 50 year old men professed faith in Jesus, and were baptized by Brainerd but he worried deeply for these men. Both of them were notorious drunkards and violent men, one of them was a known murderer in his community. But to Brainerd's surprise the gospel they believed really changed their life he said: "Through rich grace, none of them have been left to disgrace by any scandalous or unbecoming behavior."

When we begin, and grow to love something with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our might, our whole lives begin to change bit by bit.

This comprehensive and specific nature of our love for God is something we need to bear in mind as we get to our text today because at the heart of our text is the Shema: **Deuteronomy 13:3**. This text today is first and foremost about your love for God, and implicitly, love for others.

Yet, whether you are, or are not a Christian in here today, this text will include some stuff which is jarring to us. And we in here will be prone to either two responses to the tension in this text. We will want to either write off this God and his word as outdated and foolish, or we will want to belittle the weight of this text by simply writing this passage off as an Old Testament law which we no longer have to follow.

But there is a seriousness which we need to wrestle with inside this text if we want to be serious about our love for God and for others. And here is what we are going to see this morning: **There is nothing more serious to God's covenant people than their love for God**. To help us see this in Deuteronomy 13

we are going to look at three things: **The Danger of Love, The Discipline of Love** and **The Love which we have known**.

Before we look at our first point today, Moses provides for his people a bit of a prescript to his main point today. Let's look at this in **Deuteronomy 12:29-32**.

How many of you have failed at a New Year's resolution in an observable way? How many of you, after failing, have had someone come up to you and say, "How did you pursue your resolutions, so that I might do the same?"

That's how foolish Moses assumes our hearts will be when it comes to loving and worshipping things which are not God. He cautions his people from even inquiring about the false god's of Canaan because he points out the utter foolishness of the premise.

Moses says, these people practice terrible things in worship of their gods. They even burn their own children as sacrifices to their god. Yet you just conquered them. You just tore down their temples. And despite their violent and disgusting worship, their gods couldn't even defend them.

These people gave everything to their idols and got nothing in return. And you still want to worship what they worship?

We too live in a culture where almost a million children are sacrificed in the womb each year to the gods of comfort, pleasure and greed. And we have seen firsthand lives left in ruin when wealth and career come crashing down. Yet we too inside the church are all too quick to ask our world the same question: "How do you worship? How do you get what you want from your idols?"

Why is that? Because as the old hymn goes: "Prone to wander Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love." As much as we might speak of our love for God, this world seeks to draw our hearts to love other things.

And it's here we see our first point today: **The Danger of Love**.

Let's read together **Deuteronomy 13:1-5**. So there you see the tension inside this text. A tension which prioritizes at all costs a heartfelt love for God, but which ends in this case study with the destruction of a real person.

And actually what we see in Deuteronomy 13 are three case studies of how Israel is to respond to people who would try to steer their love away from Yahweh. This first one we saw involves some sort of religious figure: a dreamer or a prophet, the second case study (6-11) involves someone close to you: a brother, a son, a wife or a dear friend, and the third (12-18) involves an entire city, a whole culture.

And in each instance Moses calls for the destruction of those who attempt to lead people away from the worship of God. The level of detail shows that such events are very plausible.

Now if we want to best understand what Moses is talking about here we need to look at two things. The first is the nature of God's community at this time, and the second is the nature of the offense.

When it comes to the nature of the community during the time of Israel, it is different that the community we have today in the church.

God's people at this point in time was a physical, ethnic nation. It was Israel, whom God promised to bring about from Abrahams offspring. And Israel was called to be set apart from the nations around them by their worship of God. They were physically marked off by circumcision. They were physically brought out of Egypt by God's mercy. They were to physically live in God's special place, the Promised Land. They were to submit to God's physically represented leader, such as Moses, or David, or Solomon. Belonging to God meant converting to Jewish life and the Jewish God.

To be part of God's covenant community was to have witnessed first-hand this covenant keeping God. Which means you were maybe someone who walked across the Red Sea, you were someone who ate manna in the wilderness, who saw God's glory set ablaze Mount Sinai or who heard God audibly speak. Or as this whole group crosses over into the land of Canaan they will cross over as their God miraculously heaps up the waters of the Jordan River so that they might cross. Or they will be the ones who get to go to God's chosen place and see his glory dwelling in his temple. To be part of God's people meant that you were relationally near to this wonderful working God.

And because of all of that there was physical danger to the whole people during times of forgetfulness. Remember **Deuteronomy 8:18-20**?

Because Israel's corporate identity was the worship of God, the sin of even an individual had the ability to affect the whole community. A failure by one to love God meant extreme danger for all involved. This is where we begin to better see the nature of the offense.

We see the nature of it explicitly in **Deuteronomy 13:6-9**

Why is Moses commanding God's people to use capital punishment in cases like this? Because the danger is so high. Now pay attention here. Moses is not telling God's people to destroy people who are wrestling with doubt. He's not telling them to destroy people who are walking repentantly but still wrestling with holiness.

He is telling them to destroy those people who say this: "Let us go and serve other gods, gods which you have not known, gods of the people around you, gods of this world."

Both of these words, "go and serve," are not words of inquisition and exploration. They are words of devotion. The Hebrew word used for "go" carries with it the idea of imitation, walking as they walk. And the Hebrew word for "serve" is translated in other places as "worship."

So let's make something clear here: the people whom Moses are talking about are Israelites from among God's people who are out rightly calling, either in public or in secret, people away from the worship of Yahweh and towards the worship of other gods.

This sin is the sin of insurrection against a God who has covenanted himself to his people. All throughout Deuteronomy Moses is reminding the people of God's covenant love for them. The nation of Israel was formed when God covenanted himself to his people saying, "I will be your God, you will be my people."

So to really understand the scandal of this let me put it this way. Imagine if you were in a Bible study group of consisting of married couples. And one of the other guys in that group came up to you and said, "Tyler, I've found this group of ladies, and they are gorgeous. Their bodies are out of this world, they are so eager to satisfy whoever comes to them, come with me and I'll introduce you to them. I'm sure you'll find them more gratifying than Sarah."

Even as I say those words, my heart cringes. It feels like things a married pastor should never say even in hypothetical. Why? Because I'm married and to even speak of another woman in such a way is scandalous in regards to the covenant I've made with my wife. But that's not even at the level of scandal or relational intimacy that these worthless fellows are reaching in this text.

You will have people in your life who speak to you the same words of treason against God, but robed in the culture of our day.

And in speaking to Israel, Moses says such deceivers must be killed.

Why is Moses being so harsh here? He is telling his people that your love for God is so serious, and the danger of loving other gods is so real, that if you have even a brother who tries to tell you that it is possible to be part of God's people while loving something other than God, you must put him away. You must not worship God in that way.

Such a person is a threat not only to you Moses says, but a threat to the whole community of faith. After each action of punishment the community is strengthened. Verse 5 says that such actions removes the evil from the community, it cleanses. Verse 11 says that it helps others stand in fear of sin. And verses 17-18 says it helps maintain the compassion and blessing of God.

Because the sin preyed on God's community a right response strengthened God's community.

But we as the New Testament church are not Israel. Because Jesus' perfect life, he fulfilled this law. So does this mean that we completely disregard this passage? Does grace mean that we don't need to be concerned of those who walk away from faith? To each his own? Quite the opposite.

In fact the Apostle Paul, in writing to the church in Corinth, quotes Deuteronomy 13 as a point of application to God's new covenant community: the church.

For us today, the application of this text is actually in church discipline. This is our second point today: **The Discipline of Love**. If I asked you to write a sermon on loving God and loving others, most of us certainly wouldn't include ideas of capital punishment. But I'm sure even less would include ideas of church discipline.

Just about every mainstream idea in our culture would cringe at such ideas of love. But let us heed Moses' words once more: "do not even inquire about their gods saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods?' --that I also may do the same' You shall not serve the Lord your God in this way."

We don't listen to culture's idea of love. We listen to God's. Jonathan Edwards says this: **"Whatever ways of constituting the church may seem to us fit, proper, and reasonable, the question is, not what constitution of Christ's church seems convenient to human wisdom, but what constitution is actually**

established by Christ's infinite wisdom." We care about God's love because God is the substance of love, everything else is a shadow.

So with this in mind let us turn to Paul's application of Deuteronomy 13 in 1 Corinthians 5. Let's read: **1 Corinthians 5:1-2,6-13.**

So here we have in the church in Corinth, a man who is sleeping with his mother. And Paul shows the danger of this to the community with the illustration of leaven. Just as a little leaven causes a whole loaf of bread to raise. So a little leaven in the community of believers can cause the whole church to fall.

His solution, "Let him who has done this be removed from among you." And in summary he quotes Deuteronomy 13:5, "Purge the evil person from among you."

Does this mean that anyone who wrestles with sins is excluded from coming to church? No! Jesus himself says he came not to heal the well, but the sick.

So, just as we did in Deuteronomy 13 we must look at the nature of the community of the church and the nature of the offense.

The nature of belonging to the church is different than belonging to Israel. It's no longer physical. It's not that if you come to the physical church service, or do the physical acts of worship you belong.

God's community is now spiritual. You belong to God through faith in Jesus Christ. Conversion, not cultural immersion is the mark of God's church.

Our churches today include people from all different places in their walk with God. But to truly belong to the community of faith is to be converted by believing and repenting.

Church membership makes visible the spiritual reality of our covenant with Jesus. Church membership is for those who say, "I have experienced firsthand the saving wonder of God through Jesus Christ. He has brought me by his mighty hand out of slavery to sin and brought me into the Promised Land of salvation. This is what my baptism responds to and binds me to."

This is why applying church members are affirmed by the rest of the membership. It is the body of believers saying with you, "Yes we see that you have been saved by Jesus and we welcome you into the covenant community by faith."

So the covenant community in the New Covenant does not consist of those who are marked by the blood of circumcision, but by the blood of Jesus Christ.

So when Paul is talking here, he is talking of a man who claims to belong to this converted community. It starts out just like Deuteronomy 13: **1 Corinthians 5:1.** The problem is from the one among you, from one who has claimed to experience that life changing covenant of Jesus.

And the danger is that if this church does nothing with this man caught in such sins, that it will leaven the whole church. There is a corporate problem here. The problem is this that people inside the church and those outside the church will see how this man is living and they will think: "Well it turns out you can be a Christian and still live like that."

And little by little, the affection of people's hearts will follow the sin. This has the potential to not only destroy the community, but to destroy the very person who is caught in the sin.

Paul's response is taken straight from Deuteronomy 13: Purge the evil person. Now there isn't a call to kill him, because Jesus fulfilled those laws for us. But Paul says there is a point in church discipline where the church as a whole needs to say to the sinner and to the church: this man is not a follower of Jesus. Why? Because we do not worship God in this way.

Now Paul here is talking about the final step in church discipline which is often called excommunication. At this point the body of believers would remove the individual's name from the membership roll so as if to say, "Brother, you are no longer counted as one of Jesus' sheep." This is the power Jesus gives to the church in Matthew 18:18.

But this is not the only step in church discipline. This is the very end. Matthew 18 lays out other steps which include someone going to you in private regarding your sin, then if the sin persists two or three brothers or sisters go to you. If the sin still persists, then the issue is made known to the church so that the church might pray and plead for you. And only when all those options have been exhausted and there is no repentance, then with great tears we draw the line where God has called us to draw the line.

In my time here at Sovereign Hope we have never reached such a public point of discipline. Right now we don't have one in the queue. But I promise you, as a church who is committed to sharing the gospel, we will run into times where such discipline is needed as an extension not only of our love for God, but of our love for the sinner.

This might sound utterly foreign to our culture and the epitome of unloving. But the truth is, our culture understands such discipline. In fact they are kings of it. In our cancel culture, the priests of media are quick to cast out, shame, isolate, and banish anyone who fails to keep their party line. Our culture thrives on purging dissenters.

I made the mistake of watching some New Year's Eve special this year. And during the program one artist sang a song called, "Love Yourself" which included the lyrics: "Self-love is the solution. Be a part of this revolution. You're the only one you need, you won't need anyone else, all you've got to do is love yourself. Always remember who you are. Don't let anyone get in your way." That gets pretty dark, pretty quick.

So if both secular and religious culture exercise some sort of discipline, what's the difference? Grace and love.

Years later Paul wrote back to the church and what we see is that this man repented because of his discipline: **2 Corinthians 2:5-7**.

I've talked to so many pastors and believers who have gone through the hard work of pleading and praying with those who are in sin only to eventually discipline them out of the church. But I've also talked to many who years sometimes decades down the road have welcomed those sinners back into their midst with joyful reconciliation.

Brothers and sisters when eternity is on the line, we take the love of God seriously. As a community of faith we want you to know that we are after your love for God. We want you above all things to realize that this is not a personal preference, this is not a social function, the gospel is salvation to those who are perishing.

Which is why in closing I want to point us to **The Love which we have known.**

If you recall in Deuteronomy 13, each person tried to allure people away to worship "gods which you have not known." In the face of what is unknown Moses leads us into what is known.

Did you hear verse 4? In the face of temptation, don't listen to the one preaching apostasy. Instead walk after God, fear him, keep his commandments, obey his voice, serve him and hold fast to him. Cling to God.

So in closing, here are three things you can know which will help you in your love for God and for others.

First, *Know the voice of the gospel.* In our media world we are given access to countless hours of teaching from the Bible but much of it is fool's gold and a false gospel. Just because someone uses gospel language, or Jesus talk, don't assume they preach Christ.

Consider how even Paul spoke of this in **Galatians 1:8**. Some friends and I watched a great documentary this week called, *The American Gospel*, which helps us hear the truth and the lie in our current culture of American Christianity. It would be a great resource for you as well.

Second, *Know the love of a true brother or sister in Christ.* Here Moses highlights someone as near as your own soul who attempts to lead you away from Christ. May we be a church where we surround ourselves with dear brothers and sisters who attempt to lead us to Christ.

If you do not have people in your life who can speak to you when you are on the verge of sin, you are cutting yourself off from both the love of God and the love of your community. And consider how you might lovingly speak truth into the lives of those whom you do know.

And lastly, *Know the truth of Jesus' love.* You see it's easy to look at passages like this and see Jesus and his church as some controlling and harsh power. But these passages don't remind us as much of God's wrath as much as it reminds us of God's grace.

The truth is each and every one of us were a Deuteronomy 13 defector. **Romans 3:9-18.**

We are all held in bondage under our sin. Our greatest problem is that we are under God's just wrath. But in the gospel Jesus makes a way for grace. Grace which was promised in Deuteronomy and finalized on the cross.

Grace where Jesus became the one who was as close to his father as his own soul, who was put to death for our sin. Right after Paul joins all of humanity to sin, he joins believers to Jesus Christ: **Romans 3:23.**

Don't lose the weight of death in Deuteronomy 13. Don't lose the weight of church discipline in 1 Corinthians 5. Because to lose the weight of that is to lose an understanding of God's love for you in Jesus Christ.

This is the God whom all of you who believe have known. Why would you need another God? What God has shown love like this God has? What God has taken action for his beloved like this God has? What God can promise true life more than the God who raised up his son for our life?