

THE BANNER ABOVE: THE INEFFABLE NAME OF GOD

DEEPER LIFE NOTES

MATTHEW HENRY'S COMMENTARY – VERSES 4–16

Resources Matthew Henry's Commentary Deuteronomy Chapter 6 Verses 4–16

Verses 4–16

Here is, I. A brief summary of religion, containing the first principles of faith and obedience, Deut. 6:4, 5. These two verses the Jews reckon one of the choicest portions of scripture: they write it in their phylacteries, and think themselves not only obliged to say it at least twice every day, but very happy in being so obliged, having this saying among them, Blessed are we, who every morning and evening say, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord. But more blessed are we if we duly consider and improve,

1. What we are here taught to believe concerning God: that Jehovah our God is one Jehovah. (1.) That the God whom we serve is Jehovah, a Being infinitely and eternally perfect, self-existent, and self-sufficient. (2.) That he is the one only living and true God; he only is God, and he is but one. The firm belief of this self-evident truth would effectually arm them against all idolatry, which was introduced by that fundamental error, that there are gods many. It is past dispute that there is one God, and there is no other but he, Mark 12:32. Let us therefore have no other, nor desire to have any other. Some have thought there is here a plain intimation of the trinity of persons in the unity of the Godhead; for here is the name of God three times, and yet all declared to be one. Happy they that have this one Lord for their God; for they have but one master to please, but one benefactor to seek to. It is better to have one fountain than a thousand cisterns, one all-sufficient God than a thousand insufficient ones.

2. What we are here taught concerning the duty which God requires of man. It is all summed up in this as its principle, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart. He had undertaken (Deut. 6:2) to teach them to fear God; and, in pursuance of his undertaking, he here teaches them to love him, for the warmer our affection to him the greater will be our veneration for him; the child that honours his parents no doubt loves them. Did ever any prince make a law that his subjects should love him? Yet such is the condescension of the divine grace that this is made the first and great commandment of God's law, that we love him, and that we perform all other parts of our duty to him from a principle of love. My son, give me thy heart. We must highly esteem him, be well pleased that there is such a Being, well pleased in all his attributes, and relations to us: our desire must be towards him, our delight

in him, our dependence upon him, and to him we must be entirely devoted. It must be a constant pleasure to us to think of him, hear from him, speak to him, and serve him. We must love him, (1.) As the Lord, the best of beings, most excellent and amiable in himself. (2.) As our God, a God in covenant with us, our Father, and the most kind and bountiful of friends and benefactors. We are also commanded to love God with all our heart, and soul, and might; that is, we must love him, [1.] With a sincere love; not in word and tongue only, saying we love him when our hearts are not with him, but inwardly, and in truth, solacing ourselves in him. [2.] With a strong love; the heart must be carried out towards him with great ardour and fervency of affection. Some have hence thought that we should avoid saying (as we commonly express ourselves) that we will do this or that with all our heart, for we must not do any thing with all our heart but love God; and that this phrase, being here used concerning that sacred fire, should not be unhallowed. He that is our all must have our all, and none but he. [3.] With a superlative love; we must love God above any creature whatsoever, and love nothing besides him but what we love for him and in subordination to him. [4.] With an intelligent love; for so it is explained, Mark 12:33. To love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, we must know him, and therefore love him as those that see good cause to love him. [5.] With an entire love; he is one, and therefore our hearts must be united in this love, and the whole stream of our affections must run towards him. O that this love of God may be shed abroad in our hearts!

II. Means are here prescribed for the maintaining and keeping up of religion in our hearts and houses, that it might not wither and go to decay. And they are these:—1. Meditation: These words which I command thee shall be in thy heart, Deut. 6:6. Though the words alone without the things will do us no good, yet we are in danger of losing the things if we neglect the words, by which ordinarily divine light and power are conveyed to the heart. God's words must be laid up on our heart, that our thoughts may be daily conversant with them and employed about them, and thereby the whole soul may be brought to abide and act under the influence and impression of them. This immediately follows upon the law of loving God with all your heart; for those that do so will lay up his word in their hearts both as an evidence and effect of that love and as a means to preserve and increase it. He that loves God loves his Bible. 2. The religious education of children (Deut. 6:7): "Thou shalt teach them diligently to thy children; and by communicating thy knowledge thou wilt increase it." Those that love the Lord God themselves should do what they can to engage the affections of their children to him, and so to preserve the entail of religion in their families from being cut off. Thou shalt whet them diligently upon thy children, so some read it; frequently repeat these things to them, try all ways of instilling them into their minds, and making them pierce into their hearts; as, in whetting a knife, it is turned first on this side, then on that. "Be careful and exact in teaching thy children; and aim, as by whetting, to sharpen them, and put an edge upon them. Teach them to thy children, not only those of thy own body" (say the Jews) "but all those that

are anyway under thy care and tuition." Bishop Patrick well observes here that Moses thought his law so very plain and easy that every father might be able to instruct his sons in it and every mother her daughters. Thus that good thing which is committed to us we must carefully transmit to those that come after us, that it may be perpetuated. 3. Pious discourse. "Thou shalt talk of these things, with due reverence and seriousness, for the benefit not only of thy children, but of thy other domestics, thy friends and companions, as thou sittest in thy house at work, or at meat, or at rest, or to receive visits, and when thou walkest by the way for diversion, or for conversation, of in journeys, when at night thou art retiring from thy family to lie down for sleep, and when in the morning thou hast risen up and returnest to thy family again. Take all occasions to discourse with those about thee of divine things; not of unrevealed mysteries, or matters of doubtful disputation, but of the plain truths and laws of God, and the things that belong to our peace." So far is it from being reckoned a diminution to the honour of sacred things to make them subject of our familiar discourse that they are recommended to us to be talked of; for the more conversant we are with them the more we shall admire them and be affected with them, and may thereby be instrumental to communicate divine light and heat. 4. Frequent reading of the word: They shall be as frontlets between thy eyes, and thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, Deut. 6:8, 9. It is probable that at that time there were few written copies of the whole law, only at the feasts of tabernacles the people had it read to them; and therefore God appointed them, at least for the present, to write some select sentences of the law, that were most weighty and comprehensive, upon their walls, or in scrolls of parchment to be worn about their wrists; and some think that hence the phylacteries so much used among the Jews took rise. Christ blames the Pharisees, not for wearing them, but for affecting to have them broader than other people's, Matt. 23:5. But when Bibles came to be common among them there was less occasion for this expedient. It was prudently and piously provided by the first reformers of the English church that then, when Bibles were scarce, some select portions of scripture should be written on the walls and pillars of the churches, which the people might make familiar to them, in conformity to this direction, which seems to have been binding in the letter of it to the Jews as it is to us in the intent of it, which is that we should endeavour by all means possible to make the word of God familiar to us, that we may have it ready to us upon all occasions, for our restraint from sin and our direction and excitement to our duty. It must be as that which is graven on the palms of our hands, always before our eyes. See Prov. 7:1-3. It is also intimated that we must never be ashamed to own our religion, nor to own ourselves under the check and government of it. Let it be written on our gates, and let every one that goes by our door read it, that we believe Jehovah to be God alone, and believe ourselves bound to love him with all our hearts.

III. A caution is here given not to forget God in a day of prosperity and plenty, Deut. 6:10-12. Here, 1. He raises their expectations of the goodness of their God, taking it for granted that he would bring them into the good land that he had

promised (Deut. 6:10), that they should no longer dwell in tents as shepherds and poor travellers, but should settle in great and goodly cities, should no longer wander in a barren wilderness, but should enjoy houses well furnished and gardens well planted (Deut. 6:11), and all this without any care and expense of their own, which he here lays a great stress upon—Cities which thou buildest not, houses which thou filledst not, etc., both because it made the mercy really much more valuable than what they had come to them so cheaply, and yet, if they did not actually consider it, the mercy would be the less esteemed, for we are most sensible of the value of that which has cost us dear. When they came so easily by the gift they would be apt to grow secure, and unmindful of the giver. 2. He engages their watchfulness against the badness of their own hearts: Then beware, when thou liest safe and soft, lest thou forget the Lord, Deut. 6:12. Note, (1.) In a day of prosperity we are in great danger of forgetting God, our dependence upon him, our need of him, and our obligations to him. When the world smiles we are apt to make our court to it, and expect our happiness in it, and so we forget him that his our only portion and rest. Agur prays against this temptation (Prov. 30:9): Lest I be full and deny thee. (2.) There is therefore need of great care and caution at such a time, and a strict watch over our own hearts. "Then beware; being warned of your danger, stand upon your guard against it. Bind the words of God for a sign upon thy hand, for this end to prevent thy forgetting God. When thou art settled in Canaan forget not thy deliverance out of Egypt; but look to the rock out of which thou wast hewn. When thy latter end has greatly increased, remember the smallness of thy beginnings."

IV. Some special precepts and prohibitions are here given, which are of great consequence. 1. They must upon all occasions give honour to God Deut. 6:13): Fear him and serve him (for, if he be a Master, we must both reverence him and do his work); and swear by his name, that is, they must not upon any occasion appeal to any other, as the discerners of truth and avenger of wrong. Swear by him only, and not by an idol, or any other creature. Swear by his name in all treaties and covenants with the neighbouring nations, and do not compliment them so far as to swear by their gods. Swearing by his name is sometimes put for an open profession of his name. Isa. 45:23; Every tongue shall swear, is expounded (Rom. 14:11), Every tongue shall confess to God. 2. They must not upon any occasion give that honour to other gods (Deut. 6:14): You shall not go after other gods, that is, "You shall not serve nor worship them;" for therein they went astray, they went a whoring from the true God, who in this, more than in any thing, is jealous god (Deut. 6:15): and the learned bishop Patrick observes here, out of Maimonides, that we never find, either in the law or the prophets, anger, or fury, or jealousy, or indignation, attributed to God but upon occasion of idolatry. 3. They must take heed of dishonouring God by tempting him (Deut. 6:16): You shall not tempt the Lord your God, that is, "You shall not in any exigence distrust the power, presence, and providence of God, nor quarrel with him," which, if they indulged an evil heart of unbelief, they would take occasion to do in Canaan as well as in the wilderness. No change of condition will cure a disposition of murmur and fret. Our Saviour



uses this caution as an answer to one of Satan's temptations, with application to himself, Matt. 4:7; Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God, either by despairing of his power and goodness while we keep in the way of our duty, or by presuming upon it when we turn aside out of that way.