Sunday Sermon Notes

Hear, O Israel…and then Just Do It!

Deuteronomy 6 · English Standard Version

Deuteronomy 6 stands among the most familiar passages in Scripture, and for good reason. It is widely recognized as foundational to life with God. The principles it sets down are not ornamental. They are the means by which a life is built, and the means by which God makes a dwelling among his people.

> Deuteronomy 6:4–5
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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 and with all your soul and with all your might."

When Moses says, "Hear, O Israel," he is summoning a nation to attention. He is teaching a people how to become the household of God. In verse 7 the same instruction turns to the father and shows him how to build the house of a family. In verse 9, at the gates, it turns to the city and shows a community how to hold a common life. Few passages in Scripture speak so directly to the building of a life, a family, a congregation, and a nation.

Yet verses 1 through 3 are often passed over in the study of the chapter. They are the foundation beneath the life with God that Deuteronomy 6:4—25 describes. They disclose the divine ground of the instruction, the spiritual realities that sustain it, and the human psychology at work whenever people try to live before God.

The text is Deuteronomy 6:1—3. It is the instruction Moses gives so that life may go well for Israel, and it is the wisdom of God concerning the way his world works.

Deuteronomy 6:1–3

"Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the rules, that the LORD your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it, that you may fear the LORD your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them, that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey."

God's Mandate

The passage begins with a mandate. A mandate is not a suggestion offered for consideration. It is an instruction that binds the one who receives it. To hear it is to be obligated to obey it.

The mandate given to Israel is also the mandate given to the church. If it were not, the passage would be of historical interest only. It was written to Israel, yet what God required of them he requires of us. Set aside the promise of the land of Canaan, and the section would sit at home in the New Testament.

A serious problem remains, and it must be faced before the instruction can be received. What God told them to do, he tells us to do. They could not do it. Neither can we, if we attempt it in our own strength.

The will of God is authoritative. He gives commandment, statutes, and rules, not opinions, options, and suggestions. He does not invite Israel to weigh his words, negotiate terms, or put the matter to a vote. He gives commands, and the commands are obligatory. Israel was required to hear them and to obey them.

Obedience Creates the Fear of the Lord

The order of the passage is easy to miss, and it carries an important spiritual principle.

God commands Moses to teach the commandment so that Israel might do it. Verse 2 then names the result: “that you may fear the LORD your God.” The command is taught. The command is done. The doing produces the fear of the LORD.

This reverses the sequence we usually assume. We expect the inward life to produce the outward practice, and in one sense it does. It is equally true, maybe even more so, however, that outward practice, when it is the diligent doing of what God has said, works inwardly. It creates the fear of the LORD. Obedience practiced is transformed into reverence for God.

Deuteronomy teaches the same principle elsewhere. The tithe was never a suggestion about a pleasant percentage.

Deuteronomy 14:23

“And before the LORD your God, in the place that he will choose, to make his name dwell there, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, of your wine, and of your oil, and the firstborn of your herd and flock, that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always.”

The obedience required is very specific. Israel is to eat specified things, in the presence of God, at the place he chooses, and not according to private preference. The tythe tenth is to be brought: not a fifth, not a twentieth, not a token. The result of doing what he says is that they learn to fear the LORD. The act of obedience forms the inward attitude.

Deuteronomy 17:19

“And it shall be with him [the king], and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them.”

The king is to read the law all the days of his life so that he may learn to fear the LORD by keeping it. Observing the law, doing it, creates the inner reality. By reverence Moses means this

settled regard for God. What is done outwardly does something internally. The order is not the one we expect. It is the order Scripture describes.

Outer obedience creates inner reality for three reasons.

First, it guards against spiritual amnesia. We are a forgetful people. Scripture returns, again and again, to the warning not to forget, and it would not do so if forgetfulness were rare. The failure is not confined to the man who looks at his own son and cannot recall his name. It belongs to all of us. Memory is strengthened by action. A thing written down is more likely to be remembered, even if the note is never read again.

In my own family I am known as the one who loses keys. Anyone wishing to be rid of a set of keys need only place them in my hands. The household rule is simple: do not give them to me, and do not leave me in charge of them. When I intend to remember my own keys, I set them in front of the door. The action fixes the memory. Obedience works in the same way. The act done before God helps to form an inward reality.

Second, obedience creates and strengthens spiritual attitudes. When I coached football, the players were put through drills that were tedious, hard, and at times agonizing. There is, I confess, a certain grim amusement in watching young men suffer alongside their coach. The purpose, however, was not amusement, and not only the teaching of technique. The drills formed an inner reality. They made the players stronger and tougher, taught them regard for their coaches, and bound them together as a team. What was done outwardly did something inwardly.

Third, obedience forces an encounter with divine reality. Consider the Sabbath. In that economy, a day without work was a day without production, and the one who kept it was poorer by a seventh. God nevertheless commanded the Sabbath. When Israel kept it, they learned what they could not have learned by working through it. God is good, and he provides. God is powerful, and he can meet the lack. God is wise, and the rest they had not known they needed was given.

Generosity teaches the same lesson. God calls his people to be financially openhanded toward those in need, and the call is often met with reluctance, because giving what one is not sure one can spare feels unsafe. Yet the one who gives learns, in the giving, that God is good. There was still bread on the table. He is wise, and he is powerful. Obedience leads to inward reality because it brings a person into contact with the God who keeps his word.

The Upward Spiral

The end of verse 2 brings the process full circle. The command is given. It is done. The doing strengthens the inward life. The strengthened inward life produces further obedience.

What begins as a loop of reverence and obedience becomes an upward spiral. Obedience deepens reverence, and reverence increases obedience. Tomorrow's obedience is easier because today's obedience has already done its work. Over time the person is transformed. This is sanctification. This is the growth of fellowship with God. Above all, this is the glorifying of the Lord.

The pattern is the same one that governs physical fitness. The person who waits to feel like going to the gym, declining the cake, or taking the walk will wait indefinitely. The action must come first. The action creates the spiral. The spiritual life follows the same order. The action is taken even when the feeling has not yet arrived.

The outcome Moses names is the blessing God brings upon his people: that it may go well with them, and that they may multiply greatly, as the LORD, the God of their fathers, has promised.

The blueprint given in Deuteronomy 6:1—3 governs the life of faith still. The New Testament teaches the same principle. We are required to hear and obey the Lord. In the hearing and the doing we grow inwardly and become spiritually stronger. Strength produces further obedience, and the spiral issues in blessing, as it was meant to do for Israel.

Obedience Is Still Required

Salvation by grace through faith does not set obedience aside. It requires it.

The tendency is to lean one way or the other. One leaning treats grace as a reason to regard obedience lightly. The other makes the Christian life a matter of works and forgets grace and faith. The New Testament permits neither.

Jesus will not be Savior to the one for whom he is not also Lord.

Hebrews 5:9

> “And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.”

Obedience is necessary if a Christian is to please God. His commands are not optional. That necessity brings us to the problem.

The Problem

Israel could not fulfill the mandate and were disobedient. The people failed in obedience. They were unable to do what God required.

We are in the same condition. Human nature has not improved. We are not better than the Israelites, and nothing in us by nature supplies the ability they lacked. If they could not obey, neither can we.

A man once asked me for help with his fitness. He was not in condition, and he wanted to be. I drew up a plan that was sound and suited to him. He had support, and he wanted badly to follow it. He had one obstacle. A heart condition made exertion impossible. His heart would not permit him to do what the plan required. The plan was right. He could not fulfill it.

Scripture says the same of Israel. They had a heart problem, and so do we. The heart is incapable of fulfilling the law. God himself must do something in the heart.

What God Does in the Heart

The New Testament provides the remedy. The deficiency of the first covenant was not a defect in the law. It was a deficiency in the people who tried to obey it. They did not continue. God answers that failure directly.

> Hebrews 8:10–11
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> “For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach, each one his

neighbor and each one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.”

Under the new covenant God does in the heart what he did not do in the old law. They shall all know him. The believer has a much more intimate relationship with the Lord.

Romans 8:3–4

“For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

What the law could not do, weakened as it was by the flesh, God did. The failure belonged to the people, not to the law. The weakness was in the flesh, and that weakness remains in us. God sent his Son so that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in those who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

2 Corinthians 3:3

“And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.”

Paul describes the old covenant as a ministry of condemnation: a law written on stones, external to the people. Those who tried to keep it found their minds hardened. The Spirit, by contrast, gives life. The word of God is written by the Spirit on the heart. As we behold the glory of the Lord, the Holy Spirit transforms us into his image.

The contrast is complete. Under the old covenant the word stood outside the person. Obedience was attempted in human strength. The heart was hard, and the covenant was not continued. All of that remains true of anyone who tries to keep the mandate alone.

Deuteronomy 6:1—3 · The Foundation Under the House

The New Testament speaks differently. The Holy Spirit gives life. God places the truth within the heart. The Spirit enables a person to know and experience God, equips that person to live, and transforms him into the image of God.

The problem is the same problem Israel had. The church sometimes makes it worse without intending to. A person is told that salvation is by grace through faith, and is then handed an enormous book and instructed to do the best he can, to work it out, to be responsible for making it happen. That cannot succeed. Israel could not do it. We cannot do it. It must be something God does in the heart, and he does it for those who believe in Jesus.

God Enables Hearing and Doing

Hearing and obeying, then, depend on a prior truth: God enables and empowers the whole process.

God enables learning. The word of God is not truly learned apart from the assistance of God.

> Acts 16:14
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> "One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul."

Paul spoke the word. The Lord opened Lydia's heart to receive it. Those who open the Bible learn it only as God helps them learn. The preacher and the teacher are dependent on God for the learning that takes place. No individual human eloquence is sufficient to communicate the word of God effectively. God enables the teaching, and God enables the hearing. God also enables understanding.

> Luke 24:45
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> "Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures."

On the road and in the room, the disciples did not understand. Their minds were clouded, and the events they had witnessed remained closed to them until Jesus opened their minds. Understanding is God's gift.

God enables obedience. The person who says, "I have tried everything I can think of to stop this sin, and everything I can think of to begin the thing God requires," has already named the problem. The effort has been self-dependent. Scripture teaches that it is God who enables obedience.

This is not an invitation to passivity, as though God moved his people like a puppet master. The life of faith does not work that way.

Prayer comes first. We ask, continually, for help to understand the Bible, to listen when the word is taught, and to receive what is said. Without that help we will not.

Diligence comes with the prayer. We give ourselves to the effort, privately and in the company of the church. We study the Scriptures, and we place ourselves under instruction whenever it is offered.

Human dependence on God runs through both. The process from beginning to end rests on God. That is the teaching of Scripture, and it is the posture the teaching requires.

Invitation

The mandate given to Israel was to hear and obey. It is the mandate given to us. They could not fulfill it, and we cannot fulfill it by the means they used. Hearing and obeying become possible because God enables the learning, the understanding, and the obedience, and he does this in the heart.

The hope of this teaching is that God has been at work in the speaking, the hearing, and the thinking, and that he does this work in the heart. Where he works, the need for change becomes clear. Some of what must change can be tended in private, between a person and

God. Some of it calls for the help of the church: conversation, prayer, and study. The invitation is open to either.