

Adam Clarke Commentary Deuteronomy 6

Adam Clarke:

Introduction

The great design of God in giving his laws is, that the people may fear and obey him, that they may continue in peace and prosperity, and be mightily increased, Deuteronomy 6:1-3. The great commandment of the law, Deuteronomy 6:4, Deuteronomy 6:5, which shall be laid up in their hearts, Deuteronomy 6:6; taught to their children, Deuteronomy 6:7; and affixed as a sign to their hands, heads, doors, and gates, Deuteronomy 6:8, Deuteronomy 6:9. How they are to act when they shall come into the promised land, Deuteronomy 6:10-19. How they shall instruct their children, and relate the history to them of God's wonderful acts, Deuteronomy 6:20-25.

Verse 1

Now these are the commandments, etc. - See the difference between commandments, statutes, judgments, etc., pointed out, Leviticus 26:15 (note).

Do them - That is, live in the continual practice of them; for by this they were to be distinguished from all the nations of the world, and all these were to be in force till the Son of God should come. Whither ye go, *עבר* (oberim), whither ye pass over, referring to the river Jordan, across which they must pass to get into Canaan.

Verse 2

That thou mightest fear the Lord - Respect his sovereign authority as a lawgiver, and ever feel thyself bound to obey him. No man can walk either conscientiously or safely who has not the fear of God continually before his eyes. When this is gone, more than a guardian angel is fled.

Thou, and thy son, and thy son's son - Through all thy successive generations. Whoever fears God will endeavor to bring up his children in the way of righteousness, that they also may fear God, and that pure and undefiled religion may be preserved in his family through all its generations, not only in word, but in practice also.

Verse 3

Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe to do it - Literally, Ye shall hear, O Israel, and thou shalt keep to do them.

1. God is to be heard; no obligation without law to found it on, and no law in religion but from God.
2. The commandment must be understood in order to be obeyed.
3. It must be observed - attentively considered, in order to be understood. And,
4. It must be performed, that the end for which it was given may be accomplished, viz., that God may be glorified, and that it may be well with the people.

What is here spoken applies powerfully to every part of the moral law; God has given it as a rule of life, therefore obedience to it is indispensably necessary, not to the purchase of salvation, for no human merit can ever extend to that, but it is the way by which both the justice and mercy of God choose to conduct men to heaven. But let it be fully understood that no man can walk in the way of obedience but by and under the influence of the grace of God.

Verse 4

Hear, O Israel - *שמע ישראל יהוה אחד* (*shema Yisraelclass="translit"> Yehovah Eloheinuclass="translit"> Yehovah achad*). These words may be variously rendered into English; but almost all possible verbal varieties in the translation (and there can be none other) amount to the same sense: *Israel, hear! Jehovah, our God, is one Jehovah;* or, *Jehovah is our God, Jehovah is one;* or, *Jehovah is our God, Jehovah alone;* or, *Jehovah is our God, Jehovah who is one;* or, *Jehovah, who is our God, is the one Being.* On this verse the Jews lay great stress; it is one of the four passages which they write on their phylacteries, and they write the last letter in the first and last words very large, for the purpose of exciting attention to the weighty truth it contains. It is perhaps in reference to this custom of the Jews that our blessed Lord alludes, Matthew 22:38; Mark 12:29, Mark 12:30, where he says, This is the first and great commandment; and this is nearly the comment that Maimonides gives on this place: *Hear, O Israel; because in these words the property, the love, and the doctrine of God are contained.*

Many think that Moses teaches in these words the doctrine of the Trinity in Unity. It may be so; but if so, it is not more clearly done than in the first verse of Genesis, to which the reader is referred. When this passage occurs in the Sabbath readings in the synagogue, the whole congregation repeat the last word אֶחָד (achad) for several minutes together with the loudest vociferations: this I suppose they do to vent a little of their spleen against the Christians, for they suppose the latter hold three Gods, because of their doctrine of the Trinity; but all their skill and cunning can never prove that there is not a plurality expressed in the word אֱלֹהֵינוּ (Eloheinu), which is translated our God; and were the Christians, when reading this verse, to vociferate (Eloheinu) for several minutes as the Jews do (achad), it would apply more forcibly in the way of conviction to the Jews of the plurality of persons in the Godhead, than the word (achad), of one, against any pretended false tenet of Christianity, as every Christian receives the doctrine of the unity of God in the most conscientious manner. It is because of their rejection of this doctrine that the wrath of God continues to rest on them; for the doctrine of the atonement cannot be received, unless the doctrine of the Godhead of Christ is received too. Some Christians have joined the Jews against this doctrine, and some have even outdone them, and have put themselves to extraordinary pains to prove that אֱלֹהִים (Elohim) is a noun of the singular number! This has not yet been proved. It would be as easy to prove that there is no plural in language.

Verse 5

Thou shalt love the Lord, etc. - Here we see the truth of that word of the apostle, 1 Timothy 1:5: Now the End of the Commandment is Love out of a pure heart, etc. See the whole of the doctrine contained in this verse explained on Matthew 22:36-40 (note).

Verse 6

Shall be in thine heart - For where else can love be? If it be not in the heart, it exists not. And if these words be not in the heart - if they are not esteemed, prized, and received as a high and most glorious privilege, what hope is there that this love shall ever reign there?

Verse 7

Thou shalt teach them diligently - אֶלֶם (shinnantam), from אָמַן (shanan), to repeat, iterate, or do a thing again and again; hence to whet or sharpen any instrument, which is done by reiterated friction or grinding. We see here the spirit of this Divine injunction. God's testimonies must be taught to our children, and the utmost diligence must be used to make them understand them. This is a most difficult task; and it requires much patience, much prudence, much judgment, and much piety in the parents, to enable them to do this good, this most important work, in the best and most effectual manner. See at the end of this chapter, Deuteronomy 6:25 (note).

And shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house - Thou shalt have religion at home, as well as in the temple and tabernacle.

And when thou walkest by the way - Thou shalt be religious abroad as well as at home, and not be ashamed to own God wheresoever thou art.

When thou liest down, and when thou risest up - Thou shalt begin and end the day with God, and thus religion will be the great business of thy life. O how good are these sayings, but how little regarded!

Verse 8

Thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand - Is not this an allusion to an ancient and general custom observed in almost every part of the world? When a person wishes to remember a thing of importance, and is afraid to trust to the common operations of memory, he ties a knot on some part of his clothes, or a cord on his hand or finger, or places something out of its usual order, and in view, that his memory may be whetted to recollection, and his eye affect his heart. God, who knows how slow of heart we are to understand, graciously orders us to make use of every help, and through the means of things sensible, to rise to things spiritual.

And they shall be as frontlets - אֶפְדָּיִם (totaphoth) seems to have the same meaning as phylacteries has in the New Testament; and for the meaning and description of these appendages to a Jew's dress and to his religion, see the notes on Exodus 13:9, and Matthew 23:5 (note), where a phylactery is particularly described.

Verse 9

Write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates - The Jews, forgetting the spirit and design of this precept, used these things as superstitious people do amulets and charms, and supposed, if they had these passages of Scripture written upon slips of pure parchment, wrapped round their foreheads, tied to their arm, or nailed to their door-posts, that they should then be delivered from every evil! And how much better are many

Christians, who keep a Bible in their house merely that it may keep the devil out; and will have it in their rooms, or under their pillows, to ward off spirits and ghosts in the night? How ingenious is the heart of man to find out every wrong way, and to miss the right!

Verse 12

Beware lest thou forget the Lord - In earthly prosperity men are apt to forget heavenly things. While the animal senses have every thing they can wish, it is difficult for the soul to urge its way to heaven; the animal man is happy, and the desires of the soul are absorbed in those of the flesh. God knows this well; and therefore, in his love to man, makes comparative poverty and frequent affliction his general lot. Should not every soul therefore magnify God for this lot in life? "Before I was afflicted," says David, "I went astray;" and had it not been for poverty and affliction, as instruments in the hands of God's grace, multitudes of souls now happy in heaven would have been wretched in hell. It is not too much to speak thus far; because we ever see that the rich and the affluent are generally negligent of God and the interests of their souls. It must however be granted that extreme poverty is as injurious to religion as excessive affluence. Hence the wisdom as well as piety of Agur's prayer, Proverbs 30:7-9: "Give me neither poverty nor riches, lest I be full and deny thee, or lest I be poor and steal," etc.

Verse 13

Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God - Thou shalt respect and reverence him as thy Lawgiver and Judge; as thy Creator, Preserver, and the sole object of thy religious adoration.

And serve him - Our blessed Lord, in Matthew 4:10; Luke 4:8, quotes these words thus: And him Only ($\text{לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ$) shalt thou serve. It appears, therefore, that לַיהוָה (lebaddo) was anciently in the Hebrew text, as it was and is in the Septuagint, (τῷ κυρίῳ ἡμῶν), from which our Lord quoted it. The Coptic preserves the same reading; so do also the Vulgate, (illi soli), and the Anglo-Saxon. Dr. Kennicott argues, that without the word only the text would not have been conclusive for the purpose for which our Lord advanced it; for as we learn from Scripture that some men worshipped false gods in conjunction with the true, the quotation here would not have been full to the point without this exclusive word. It may be proper to observe that the omitted word לַיהוָה (lebaddo), retained in the above versions, does not exist in the Hebrew printed text, nor in any MS. hitherto discovered.

Shalt swear by his name - בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה (tishshabea), from שָׁבַע (shaba), he was full, satisfied, or gave that which was full or satisfactory. Hence an oath and swearing, because appealing to God, and taking him for witness in any case of promise, etc., gave full and sufficient security for the performance; and if done in evidence, or to the truth of any particular fact, it gave full security for the truth of that evidence. An oath, therefore, is an appeal to God, who knows all things, of the truth of the matter in question: and when a religious man takes such an oath, he gives full and reasonable satisfaction that the thing is so, as stated; for it is ever to be presumed that no man, unless in a state of the deepest degradation, would make such an appeal falsely, for this would imply an attempt to make God a party in the deception.

Verse 14

Ye shall not go after other gods - The object of religious worship among every people, whether that object be true or false, is ever considered as the pattern or exemplar to his worshippers. Christians are termed the followers of God; they take God for their pattern, and walk - act, as he does. Hence we see the meaning of the terms in this verse: Ye shall not go after - ye shall not take false gods for your patterns. The Canaanites, Greeks, Romans, etc., were a most impure people, because the objects of their worship were impure, and they went after them, i. e., were like their gods. This serves to show us that such as our Redeemer is, such should we be; and indeed this is the uniform language of God to man: Be ye holy, for I am holy, Leviticus 21:8; Be ye perfect, as your Father who is in heaven is perfect, Matthew 5:48.

Verse 15

A jealous God - Jehovah has betrothed you to himself as a bride is to her husband. Do not be unfaithful, else that love wherewith he has now distinguished you shall assume the form of jealousy, and so divorce and consume you.

Verse 16

Ye shall not tempt the Lord - Ye shall not provoke him by entertaining doubts of his mercy, goodness, providence, and truth.

As ye tempted him in Massah - How did they tempt him in Massah? They said, Is the Lord among us or not? Exodus 17:1-7. After such proofs as they had of his presence and his kindness, this was exceedingly

provoking. Doubting God's kindness where there are so many evidences of it, is highly insulting to God Almighty.

Verse 17

Ye shall diligently keep, etc. - On this and the following verse see the note on Deuteronomy 6:3.

Verse 20

And when thy son asketh thee, etc. - "Here," as Mr. Ainsworth justly remarks, "followeth a brief catechism, containing the grounds of religion."

What mean the testimonies, etc. - The Hebrew language has no word to express to mean or signify, and therefore uses simply the substantive verb what is, i. e., what mean or signify, etc. The seven thin ears Are, i. e., signify, seven years of famine. This form of speech frequently occurs.

Verse 25

It shall be our righteousness - The evidence that we are under the influence of the fear and love of God. Moses does not say that this righteousness could be wrought without the influence of God's mercy, nor does he say that they should purchase heaven by it: but, God required them to be conformed to his will in all things, that they might be holy in heart, and righteous in every part of their moral conduct.

1. On a very important subject in this chapter, it may be necessary to make some farther observations.

A most injurious and destructive maxim has lately been advanced by a few individuals, which it is to be hoped is disowned by the class of Christians to which they belong, though the authors affect to be thought Christians, and rational ones, too; the sum of the maxim is this: "Children ought not to be taught religion for fear of having their minds biased to some particular creed, but they should be left to themselves till they are capable of making a choice, and choose to make one." This maxim is in flat opposition to the command of God, and those who teach it show how little they are affected by the religion they profess. If they felt it to be good for any thing, they would certainly wish their children to possess it; but they do not teach religion to their children, because they feel it to be of no use to themselves. Now the Christian religion properly applied saves the soul, and fills the heart with love to God and man; for the love of God is shed abroad in the heart of a genuine believer, by the Holy Ghost given to him. These persons have no such love, because they have not the religion that inspires it; and the spurious religion which admits of the maxim above mentioned, is not the religion of God, and consequently better untaught than taught. But what can be said to those parents who, possessing a better faith, equally neglect the instruction of their children in the things of God! They are highly criminal; and if their children perish through neglect, which is very probable, what a dreadful account must they give in the great day! Parents! hear what the Lord saith unto you: Ye shall diligently teach your children that there is one Lord, Jehovah, Elohim; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost: and that they must love him with all their heart, with all their soul, and with all their might. And as children are heedless, apt to forget, liable to be carried away by sensible things, repeat and re-repeat the instruction, and add line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little, carefully studying time, place, and circumstances, that your labor be not in vain: show it in its amiableness, excite attention by exciting interest; show how good, how useful, how blessed, how ennobling, how glorious it is. Whet these things on their hearts till the keenest edge is raised on the strongest desire, till they can say, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth I desire besides thee!"

See the notes on Deuteronomy 4:9, and Genesis 18 (note), and Genesis 29 (note) at the end.

2. Without offense to any, I hope, a few words more may be said on the nature of an oath, in addition to the note, see Deuteronomy 6:13 (note). The matter is important, and perhaps not well understood by many.

The making an appeal to the Supreme Being, and calling him to witness and record, constitutes the spirit and essence of an oath. It is no matter in what form this appeal is made, whether by putting the hand under the thigh, as among the patriarchs; by the water of the Ganges, as among the Hindoos; on a surat or chapter of the Koran, as among the Mohammedans; on a Hebrew Pentateuch, as among the Jews; on the form of the cross, as among the Roman Catholics; kissing the New Testament, as among Protestants in general; or holding up the hand, and making affirmation, as among the people called Quakers; still the oath is the same, for the appeal is made to God. On this ground (and this is the true ground), the holding up of the hand in a court of justice, is as perfect, as substantial, and as formal an oath, as kissing the New Testament. Why then so many objections against taking an oath in a court of justice by any one particular form, when the same thing is done in spirit, essence, and substance, when God is called to witness and record, though the form be different? When God says, Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God, and shalt swear by his name, he says, in effect, Thou shalt have no god besides me; thou shalt consider me the fountain of truth, the rewarder of righteousness, and the punisher of perfidy and wickedness. Swear by my name - bind thyself to me; take me for witness to all thy actions; and act in all things as having me continually before thine eyes, and knowing that for every act and word thou shalt give account to me in the day of judgment. Our Lord's command, Swear not at all, can never relate to an oath

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in a civil cause, taken according to the definition above given: profane and common swearing, with all light, irreverent oaths and imprecations, and all such oaths as are not required by the civil magistrate, in cases where the Lord is supposed to be witness, are certainly intended in our blessed Lord's prohibition. See on Deuteronomy 4:26 (note).