

Whole-Hearted

*A sermon on **Deut 6:4–5** | Mar 13, 2022 | by Alex Kirk*

Deut 6:4–5

4 “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

INTRODUCTION

The Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks once told a story that has stuck with me ever since I first heard it.¹

[ILL] As the Soviet Union began to collapse toward the end of the ‘80s, Jews were free for the first time to openly practice their Jewish faith in Russia. But as a result of open Judaism, open anti-semitism was on the rise as well. During this time an ultra-orthodox Rabbi from Manchester goes to help rebuild Jewish life in Moscow. One day, a young woman comes to him—very distraught—and she says, “Never before in my life have I thought about being Jewish, I never talked to anyone about being Jewish, and now I walk down the street and strangers see me and they shout at me, ‘Jew! Jew!’ What do I do?” And the Rabbi looks at her, wearing his long black coat, his big flat-brimmed black hat, with earlocks and a huge beard and he says, “Looking at me, no one will mistake me for an Anglican... but no one is shouting ‘Jew! Jew!’ at me—why do you think that is?” And the woman sat, looking at him and finally she said, “They can see that if they shout ‘Jew!’ at me I will take it as an insult, but if they shout ‘Jew! Jew!’ at you, you’ll take that as a compliment.”

Why does that story connect with us? I think it connects because we struggle to be whole-hearted with God. The rabbi in the story is clearly “all in.” He’s living in an alternate reality and that reality gives him a confidence and poise that defies understanding. But our hearts are divided by fashions of the

1. “Finding a Moral Compass in Challenging Times: David Brooks with Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfpIRTXO5HA>), starting at 42:29.

moment, whether those things are expressed in clothing or in ideas—pulled by our peers or grad scheme placement, by our parents expectations and our desire to perform. If we want to be whole-hearted, we need something outside of ourselves to ground us, to anchor us against the storms of life. In Deut 6:4–9, God gives us an anchor. This text—known as “the Shema” because the first word in Hebrew is *shema*, meaning “Hear!” or “Listen!”—is the single most significant confession of faith in the Old Testament. If it seems a little strange that such a text could be the loadstar for our lives as Christians, I want to remind you that when they asked Jesus what was the greatest commandment, he responded by quoting Deut 6:5, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength*” (Mark 12:30; Matt 22:37; Luke 10:27). Along with “Love your neighbor as yourself,” Jesus said that the entire Old Testament depends on this command, this idea.

So how should we think about the significance of this text for us? **We give the LORD our whole-hearted devotion because he is our God.** If you commit to a whole-hearted relationship with God, you’ll unlock an alternate universe where the sun breaking through the clouds is his love, where the wind howling outside your room is his power, where Ukrainian Christians singing “He Will Hold Me Fast” amid the siege of Kiev are the noble witnesses to a far greater truth than Putin can conceive, and where insults are transformed into compliments.

DOCTRINE

1. **The LORD is calling you to a whole-hearted relationship with him.**

1.1. The LORD is calling you. The Shema stands at a major transition point in the book of Deuteronomy. It’s a transition from the past to the future. The title “Deuteronomy” means second law and the Israelites that Moses is speaking to here on the plains of Moab are the second generation after the Exodus. If you start in Deuteronomy 1 and read through to the end of chapter 5, Moses basically revises the whole of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. He described the way the Israelites were enslaved

in Egypt, how God heard their cries and came down to deliver them, how God defeated Pharaoh and all the Gods of Egypt, how he fought for his people at the Red Sea, how he guided and provisioned them in the desert and how he brought them to Mt. Sinai where he came down to meet with them, speak to them, and enter into a covenant relationship with them. And how the Israelites had rebelled against God, plunging headfirst into adulterous idolatry even as God was speaking with Moses on the mountain. But it had been forty years since those events.

For their rebellion, God sentenced the Israelites to wander in the wilderness till that entire divided, faithless generation died. Moses recapitulates this entire narrative, but then something happens right at the beginning of chapter 6—he moves seamlessly from talking about the past to talking about the future. It's so subtle that you could easily miss it. **Deut 6:1**, *“Now this is the commandment... that you may do them in the land to which you are going over to possess...”* And **6:6**: *“these words that I command you today shall be on your hearts.”* This is no longer a review—we're being called in the present to step into the future tense. If you glance back in your bibles to **Deut 5:2–3** you'll find something incredible: when Moses repeats the Ten commandments to this new generation he does it in the present tense. *“The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. Not with our fathers did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. The Lord spoke with you face to face at the mountain.”*

[APP] Will you press into the LORD? Will you live your life in relationship with him or will you live in rebellion? **God is speaking to you in the eternal present.** As students we face a unique season of identity formation. A season of revisiting who we are and where we've come from, of being exposed to new ideas and working out where we belong. For some of us this will be our childhood faith struggling to become our adult faith. For others it's a more radical break from walking without the LORD to walking with him. But this is a reality we always face in the Christian life. God puts us at the base of the mountain and says, “Listen!” Will you enter the promised land to live with him, or will you continue

to wander in the deserted wilderness? **The LORD is calling *you* to a relationship with him.**

1.2. The central confession, the main theological idea that we are meant to hear, comes in **v. 4**: “*The LORD our God, the LORD is one.*” But as a creed, this seems terse to the expense of clarity. The text quite literally says that God *is* one, but what does it *mean*? The ESV actually has a translational footnote here that moves us in the right direction: “The LORD is our God, the LORD *alone*” (NRSV). This is surely part of the answer—to say that God is one suggests he is *unique* he is *singular*. To say God is one might be a way of saying he alone is God, there is no other.

But there’s a more personal and relational dynamic here.² Consider the context here. Look at **v. 5**: “*You shall love the LORD your God...*” These two verses hang together as a reason and its result or consequence: because God is one, you will love him. In the Hebrew verses 4 and 5 are linked by the word “and” (which is preserved in the KJV). So whatever it means that God is one, this fact compels us to love him. Now, let’s think about where else in Scripture we might find this language. Believe it or not, it is not all that common—the closest parallel is in Song of Songs, which as some of you will know is the bible’s collection of intimate love lyrics. In **Song of Songs 6:8–9a** the lover says of his beloved, “*There are sixty queens and eighty concubines, / and virgins without number. / My dove, my perfect one, is the only one.*” That expression, “the only one” translates the phrase “she is one.” The syntax here is exactly like Deut 6:4. Notice also that the text presents the beloved as one amongst other options, queens, concubines, virgins without number, but for him *this* girl is like no other—she’s his **one and only**. The fact that the only other time we get this same expression as in Deut 6:4 is in the romantic love lyrics of Song of Songs should tell us something about the intensity of devotion and relationship that God envisions. **The LORD is your one and only.**

2. On this point in particular, as in the rest of the sermon in general, I am indebted to the magisterial essay by my PhD supervisor, Walter Moberly, “A Love Supreme,” in his *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 7–40.

[ILL] When she was 34, with two little girls in primary school, Nicole Teague was diagnosed with ovarian cancer that had metastasized to her stomach—“It’s everywhere,” the doctor told her husband, Matt, “Like somebody dipped a paintbrush in cancer and flicked it around her abdomen.”³ With repeated surgeries and chemo, Nicole was dying a slow, graphic, and incredibly painful death. Through this season that lasted for two years Matt cared for her day in and day out. Since it was stomach cancer her digestive system disintegrated so Matt tended to colostomy bags, IV feeding tubes, and morphine drips at all hours. She had massive oozing wounds on her abdomen that he had to daily pack and unpack with gauze while she begged him to stop because of her horrendous pain. “In those months,” Matt writes, “I may never have slept an unbroken hour.” But on top of the incredible emotional pain of watching his wife fade away and the physical exhaustion of caring for her there was the psychological trauma of watching Nicole turn against him as her body and mind unraveled. When her health would occasionally rally, she would lash out at him for the state of the house. She would open up the gas on the stove and then walk away not realizing it hadn’t lit, then turn around and tell the girls that he needed to fix the stove, that he was failing them all. When he made her lunch, but failed to put enough mayo on the sandwich, her words cut—“So you’re trying to starve me,” she said. “I guess I’m not dying fast enough.” But Matt writes this about his wife, “If I [had] to put her in a backpack and carry her to the chemo ward, I[d] do it if it means getting an extra day with her.” ... “Since we had met, when she was still a teenager, I had loved her with my whole self. Only now can I look back on the fullness of our affection.”

[APP] **In Deut 6:4 when we confess that God is one—our one and only—we are confessing that he is all in.** He is in it for the late nights and the early mornings, for the times when you don’t feel like getting out of bed and the times when you’ve never been so happy in your life. That’s what makes him *one*—he is your one and only because he loves you. God makes this explicit in **Deut 7:7–8**, *“It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you,*

3. From the article, “The Friend: Love is Not a Big Enough Word,” by Matthew Teague. Esquire, May 2015 (<https://www.esquire.com/lifestyle/a34905/matthew-teague-wife-cancer-essay/>).

for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers.” You’re the cancer patient with the colostomy bag, but as the *Jesus Storybook Bible* says, God loves his children with “a Never Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love.”⁴ **The LORD is your one and only and he is calling you to a whole-hearted relationship with him.**

2. The LORD compels our whole-hearted devotion.

2.1. So as we’ve seen the command to love God is closely connected to the fact that our God is *unique* and this relationship transforms us. This is what v. 5 is after: “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*” Heart, soul, and might are not three different ways to love God, as if you could say to your friend, “You love God with your heart, but I love him with my might.” **No, all three faculties work together like concentric circles describing the totality of who we are.** In ancient Israelite culture the **heart** was not the seat of emotions, like we think of it today, but rather the heart was the seat of the entire inner life—your thinking and decision making as well as your emotions and your desires. Likewise the **soul**, doesn’t so much suggest the disembodied spiritual-eternal part of a person, but refers to the breath of life within someone: it’s your life-breath, your existence itself. Finally **might** refers to your resources, abilities, and all that you have at your disposal. In Hebrew the expression is very strange, it’s the modifier “very” or “much.” So literally, love God with all your “muchness.” There’s no parallel for this expression in Biblical Hebrew, but when Jesus quotes the verse in the New Testament he uses the word “power” or “strength” in Greek and that surely captures the sense. All your resources and abilities, whatever is at your disposal should be employed in loving God.

So to sum up, we are to love God with our thoughts, emotions, and motives, with the breath of life itself, and with everything at your disposal. **Whole-hearted devotion leverages everything to love the**

4. Llyod-Jones, Sally. 2007. *The Jesus Storybook Bible: Every Story Whispers His Name*. Illustrated by Jago. Grand Rapids: Zonderkidz. Page 36 (and many other places!).

LORD. While this feels like a tall order, it might actually be a relief. Because after all, we're being commanded to *love*. It's an emotion, and for many of us drumming up emotions can feel challenging but we can relate to the idea of being all in. And we can take action to love in this way even when we might be wavering in other ways.

[ILL] Matt and Nicole Teague had a mutual best friend from uni name Dane Faucheux. As Matt tells it, "Dane had come to visit after Thanksgiving and never ended up returning home." He would stand guard at the hospital for hours preventing well-meaning visitors from disturbing Nicole's rest. He took over all domestic duties and made the house run. He was there for Matt and Nicole's girls when they couldn't be. Matt writes that sometimes Nicole would wake up screaming in the night as the cancer took some new turn for the worse and Dane would hold the door open as Matt carried her to the car and drove her to the hospital. Then Dane would stay and care for their girls until they came home, sometimes days, sometimes weeks later. But more than just seeing to the practicalities of life, Dane's presence held Matt together. Dane voluntarily chose to enter into his friends' pain completely, so that he understood what Matt was going through like no one else. When Matt broke down sobbing on the bathroom floor wrapped around the base of the toilet, Dane called in the nurses and took over caring for Nicole. When Matt approached the level of total mental and physical breakdown, Dane arranged alternate carers for a few days and took him hiking in the Appalachian Mountains. All told, Dane lived with Matt and his girls for eighteen months during the most difficult season of their lives. At thirty-six, he gave up a management position and a girlfriend back in New Orleans. As Matt writes, "she could not grasp his devotion to Nicole and me—it is ungraspable." When Nicole finally died, it was ordinary, unremarkable. She took a slow labored breath, and then she didn't breathe again. The only remarkable element was Dane's presence. Matt reflects, "I had married into this situation, but how had he gotten here? Love is not a big-enough word. He stood and faced the reality of death for my sake."

[APP] There are no half-measures here and everything is on the line. Now, you don't have to be Mother Theresa, you don't necessarily have to look for a way of sacrificing everything. To be whole-

hearted means **living into that alternate universe** that is shaped by who God is and his love for you. The kind of universe where insults are compliments and giving up everything to love a friend seems sensible. It's like nothing else matters. It doesn't take you *out* of the world, but it transforms the world so that entirely different things become important, or the same things become important for different reasons—reasons that free you. You still work out, but you do it to be whole and healthy in body and mind not to impress potential hook ups. You still study, but you do it to steward what God has given you or for the love of the subject rather than to prove your worth or attempt to please un-pleasable parents. **And you listen to God.** Those little nudges and prompts from the Holy Spirit throughout the day, you heed them—whether its to reach out to a certain friend, or to refuse an invite to a party that you know will present temptations you don't need. If there's something that makes you feel connected to God you do it, if there's something that makes you feel disconnected from God you refuse. **Whole-hearted devotion leverages everything—your thoughts, your life, your resources—to love the LORD.**

IMPROVEMENT

2.2. This kind of whole-hearted devotion flows from who our LORD is. Again, look at verse 4, the confession at the heart of this passage and the whole Old Testament: *The LORD our God, the LORD is one.* In several key places where the apostles echo this formulation they bring Christ into it. So, for example, Paul in **1 Cor 8:6**, “... *for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.*” To confess the *Shema* as Christians pushes us toward Christ, because if Jesus is God then he must somehow be incorporated into this oneness of God. This pushes us in a trinitarian direction as we confess the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are one: **Eph 4:4–6**, “*There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*”

As Christians, then, we confess that God’s oneness—his unique love for us—is most full grasped in the Trinity, with the Father, Son, and Spirit conspiring together before the foundation of the world to redeem you in Christ. He set his love on you and chose you from before all time. **This is who he is, this is what he does, that’s why he is your one and only.**

[ILL] By the time he was 31 years old, Blaise Pascal had cemented his place in the annals of scientific history: He invented what some people consider the precursor to the computer, he developed the theory of probability and important papers on vacuums, the weight and density of air, and, of course, Pascal’s triangle. He even mapped out the first public transit system in Paris.⁵ To this point Pascal had dabbled with religion, but his commitment to mathematics and physical science was paramount. But one night when he was 31 he had a mystical experience that changed him forever. Immediately after it was over, he jotted down a raw account of his experience:

“The year of grace 1654, Monday, 23 November [...] From about half past ten at night until about half past midnight.

FIRE.

GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob
not of the philosophers and of the learned.

Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace.

GOD of Jesus Christ.

My God and your God.

Your GOD will be my God.

Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except GOD.

He is only found by the ways taught in the Gospel.

Grandeur of the human soul.

Righteous Father, the world has not known you, but I have known you.

Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.”

5. “Blaise Pascal: Scientific and Spiritual Prodigy,” ChristianityToday.com (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/evangelistsandapologists/blaise-pascal.html>).

He titled this note “Memorial” and sewed it into the lining of his jacket over his heart where it remained until he died just eight years later at 39—his own private covenant document. That night, that experience of God’s presence and his love changed Pascal forever. He gave up scientific experimentation. His legacy from the last eight years of life was a profound, but unfinished, work of theological philosophy and apologetics known simply as the *Pensées*. It has become a classic text in philosophical theology.

[APP] God calls people, he sets his love on them and transforms them. **This is who he is.** Just as God saw the suffering of Israel in slavery, came down to deliver them from Pharaoh in power, and brought them to Mt. Sinai to forge an unbreakable covenant relationship with them, in the same way, God in Christ has set his love on you, he has called you, he came down to deliver you at the cross, and rose from the dead to give you new life in him. **Your relationship with God flows from who he is, from his love for you—he is your one and only.** When this truth sinks in it unlocks an alternate universe shaped by God’s love. **He is making us whole-hearted, because *the LORD our God the LORD is one.***