



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION SUNDAY (SUNDAY SCHOOL AND BIBLE TRAINING EMPHASIS)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, August 23, 2009

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Lection - Deuteronomy 6:1-9 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into

and occupy, (v. 2) so that you and your children and your children's children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. (v. 3) Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you. (v. 4) Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. (v. 5) You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (v. 6) Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. (v. 7) Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. (v. 8) Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, (v. 9) and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Christian education is indispensable in the life and work of the church. Ask any member of a church what Christian education is and you will get a variety of responses. The most likely response among laity will include Sunday school. Christian education, however, is much more than Sunday school and takes place other than on Sunday.

Christian education is that ministry which moves believers from membership to discipleship and is, therefore, that ministry which undergirds all other ministries of the church. "Christian education is a process that helps a community of believers understand theology, learn Christian history, reinforce personal decisions to live for Christ, and make commitments to the internal and outreach ministries of the local church."¹

This moment on The African American Lectionary calendar is designed to highlight for believers the importance of knowing and loving the God of the Bible, understanding better the tenets of their faith, and being able to fully live out their theology in community. With the study of the Bible, which reveals acts of God and information about the personality of God, it is possible to begin to know God so that one is motivated to live out God's agenda in the earth realm.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

The education of disciples of Christ is a 24 hours a day, seven days a week process that must begin at birth and continue throughout our lives. My mother knew that the easiest time in life to capture a person's heart for Christ is during the childhood years. To that end, she faithfully carried her six children to Sunday school. She knew that if we were going to "make it" in this world, we would need to have a solid foundation in the Lord. As children, we were expected to have an understanding of the Creation narratives (at least one of them), the birth and death of Jesus Christ, memorize the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the 23rd Psalm, the Beatitudes, know how to say a blessing before we ate our food and do bedtime prayers. We were also expected to recite

some of the great biblical narratives which told of God's goodness and God's power, such as the story of David and Goliath and the crossing of the Red Sea by the children of Israel.

The process of Christian education must be engaged in with highly concentrated effort. We get some idea of the concentrated effort that is to be put forth in learning God's commandments and statutes when we read Deuteronomy 6. Here, Moses declares that parents must teach their children "diligently." Christian education is a serious endeavor that must not be taken lightly. The sooner parents learn this the better.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Deuteronomy opens with the Israelites encamped just east of the Promised Land. For forty years, Israel wandered through the desert area south of the land of promise. Though at times to them it did not seem so, like a faithful mother, God was indeed with them; God never left them nor did God ever forsake them.

Deuteronomy documents and sets forth the formal covenant relationship between God and the Israelites after they conquered Canaan. In this exposition of the first commandment, Israel is expected to demonstrate utter loyalty and fidelity to the God of the Covenant, the Redeemer of Israel, the LORD.² Covenant agreements were not new among middle-Eastern people of that time. These agreements were typically made between governments or individuals who lived in close relationship.

This generation of Israelites who now stand at the edge of the Promised Land never experienced the exodus from Egypt. Deuteronomy amplifies the previous accounts of the Law for them, expounding upon the implications of the historic agreement at Mount Sinai between God and Israel. The teaching, the understanding, the living out of the Ten Commandments was not new to this generation of Israelites. However, it seems that whenever God has something important to say, the theme is repeated by several biblical writers. It is as if God is using a yellow highlighter demanding attention be given to certain precepts again and again.

The commandment in verses 1-3 of chapter 6 seems to refer to the first of the Ten Commandments. To hear and observe are the basic requirements for blessing of the land by God. This generation of Israelites had seen and heard of the disobedience of their ancestors, which resulted in their death and failure to cross into the Promised Land. People, however, have short memories so here, more so than in chapter 5, Moses makes clear that if God is going to bless them, there must be reverent obedience from the youngest to the oldest, to all that the Lord commands.³

The rejection of polytheism by God's people is seen throughout the Old Testament. God repeatedly demonstrates superiority to other claimants of deity. Because of these continuous demonstrations, God was clearly entitled to Israel's exclusive worship, devotion, and obedience. That God alone is to receive their worship and praise is clearly established in verse 4. This call for Israel's undivided loyalty to the Lord is called the

“*Shema*,” after its first word in Hebrew, “hear” (“hear” is translated *shema*): *Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone*. In early in Judaism, the *Shema* became a confession of faith, and in second century BCE, it was included with the Ten Commandments in the Nash papyrus, a liturgical text.⁴

Reciting the *Shema* expresses personal devotion to God and willingness on the part of the worshiper to accept responsibility for the ethical principles of the Law, both in the present as well as in the future, through religious instruction of one’s children.⁵ To this end, according to Jewish tradition, the *Shema* should be recited morning and evening as part of prayers, as well as on special occasions on the Jewish calendar.

The second great truth God wanted Israel to learn is found in verse 5, “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might.*” God expects love without limits, that is, love with our entire being, including our minds. Israel is commanded to absorb and inculcate into their children the great truths of God. Moses paints a picture of how closely they are to steward these truths. “Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (v. 7).

Stewarding God’s truths in this manner may seem extreme to some. Some may even be so bold as to say, “It doesn’t take all of that.” However, whether one takes literally or symbolically how continuously and intently we are to steward God’s truths, it is clear that God expects his truths to have a place of importance in the lives of those who claim him as sovereign. Perhaps if stewarding God’s truths in the manner commanded in Deuteronomy 6 were taught in more churches and homes, true devotion to God would be realized by so many more believers.

Challenge

God’s faithfulness to the Israelites and God’s faithfulness to us demands our loyalty and complete devotion, especially as it relates to knowing and living out the commandments of God. At all times, but especially in times of global turmoil, we need educated Christians who know the Word of God and can transmit it to others in words and deeds.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: The sound of victory as they cross into the land and occupy it; and

Tastes: The taste of fresh milk and sweet honey (verse 3).

Notes

1. McKinney, Lora-Ellen. Christian Education in the African American Church: A Guide for Teaching Truth. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2003. p. ix.
2. Mills, Watson E., Richard F. Wilson, et al., Eds. Mercer Commentary on the Bible. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995. p. 206.
3. Mills, Watson E., Roger A. Bullard, Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., Walter Harrelson, et al., Eds. Mercer Dictionary of the Bible. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1991. p. 206.
4. Ibid., p. 818.
5. Ibid., p. 819.