

Introduction

Most of you are familiar with the term "**bucket list.**" It's a list of the things a person wants to experience or achieve before he or she kicks the bucket or dies. A survey was taken that asked one question, "**What's the number one thing on your bucket list?**" The top three answers were: "**travel around the world,**" "**offer my service to a humanitarian cause,**" and "**write a book.**" Other answers included "**hugging a sleeping crocodile,**" and "**floating in the Dead Sea.**"

Let me ask you two questions. First, do you have a bucket list? And second, what's at the top of it if you do? What's the number one thing on it? I have a bucket list, a short one of just two things. I'm going to preach about the first of those today.

The Foremost Commandment

Its source is verse 5 of our text. Moses declared, "**You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.**" What's at the top of my bucket list? It's that – to love Yahweh with my whole being.

That's number one because of what Jesus said about it in Matthew 22:37-38. It's "**the great and foremost commandment.**" "**Foremost**" means it's the most significant of the commandments, the one in which all the others are rooted. We should, therefore, be uncompromising in making it the first aim (only *primary* objective) of our lives.

Unfortunately, many Christians and churches don't seem to grasp that. I say that because they've set and are seeking other first aims including obeying God's commandments, believing correct doctrine, having special spiritual experiences, and being faithful to the church. One of those four is the first aim of many Christians and churches.

I met a Christian who told me he was leaving his church. When I asked him why, he replied, "**The pastor talks more about speaking in tongues than he does about obeying God's commands.**" The pastor

considered a spiritual experience primary. The complaining Christian considered keeping God's commandments primary.

Both were misguided and wrong. It may shock you, but I'm going to say it anyway. Obeying God's commandments, believing correct doctrine, having special spiritual experiences, being faithful to the church; none of those should be our first aim as individuals or as a church.

How do I know? It's because Jesus tells me so. He said loving God with our whole being is the great and foremost commandment. We should have only one *primary* objective in life and it's that.

So let's make it that – our only *primary* objective. Once we have, let's then devotedly seek to achieve it in the power of the Holy Spirit. Thankfully, Moses teaches us how to do that in 6:1-9. Loving God with our whole being requires three things of us.

Know the Right Answers

First, we must know the right answers.

We see that in verse 1. Moses conveyed to the Israelites what one of his divinely appointed roles was – to teach them. They were students of God, in other words, and as disciples and friends of Jesus, so are we!

Let's think about teachers and students and what their responsibilities are. The responsibility of teachers is to define reality for their students. It's to give them correct information about their subjects, what Dallas Willard called "**the right answers.**" The responsibility of students is then to know those right answers.

Just as students need to know the right answers about the subjects they take, so disciples and friends of Jesus need to know the right answers about God. They need to know the details of what He reveals about Himself to them.

Let me ask you something in that regard. Do you know the right answers about God? I always detested taking pop quizzes when I was in school. I don't mind giving them though. So, let me do that now. Give you a pop quiz of ten questions to determine if you know the right

answers about God. I've given the answer to each of these in sermons I've preached. #1 – Does God have a body and brain? #2 – How is God able to hear millions of prayers all at once? #3 – How does God's triune nature relate to human sexuality? #4 – What is God's relation to what we call the natural laws of our universe? #5 – Where is God at any given moment? #6 – Is an archangel or Satan more like God or the slug in your garden? #7 – Does God's character grow better with the passing of time? #8 – Why does God get angry? #9 – How does God relate to our capacity to enjoy things and to laugh? And #10 – Is there anything God can learn? Those are vital questions, each of which has dramatic implications to our everyday lives. How many of the ten can you correctly answer?

I hope it's all of them because knowing the right answers about God is essential to loving Him. Loving Him requires knowing about Him. And the more we know about Him, the more deeply we're able to love Him.

There's only one way of course that we can know the right answers about God. I've explained it before. We study the Bible, nature, human beings, and human life and learn all the details they teach us about Him. Using the logical relations of implication and contradiction, we then infer more details about Him from those details. I've written a study titled *The First Aim* that will help you do that. It's available on our church website, www.bethelfriendschurch.org.

Believe the Right Answers

But just knowing the right answers isn't enough. We have to believe them as well. As verses 2-3 imply, belief involves a readiness to act as if something is so. In this case, we're ready to act as if what we know about God is so. That is belief and it's essential to loving Him.

Many of us find that difficult to accept because of our culture's educational practices. Think about it. Those practices emphasize knowing not believing. I never once had a teacher or professor who told me I had to believe the right answers. I never once had a right answer on a test marked wrong because I didn't believe it. The fact is our

culture considers us educated even if we only know the right answers. It doesn't require that we believe them.

That isn't the way it is though when it comes to God. We see that in verse 4. For centuries, Jewish people incorporated verses 4-9 as part of the *Shema* and recited it daily as a prayer. Verse 4, as a result, was one of the central confessions of their faith. Every day, they confidently declared their belief that **"Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is one!"**

That Jewish experience of verse 4 impresses on us the absolute necessity of believing what we know about God. It isn't enough just to know the right answers about Him. We have to believe them as well in order to love Him. There can be no loving without believing.

I counseled a Christian, not from our church, who sinned, repented, but still felt guilty. He didn't feel forgiven. I asked him if he knew about God's goodness and grace. He answered that he did, to which I replied, **"Then you must not believe what you know because you wouldn't feel guilty if you did."** That's problematic and I mean seriously so. He can't love a God he doesn't believe will forgive him.

He illustrates the struggle many Christians have. They've learned some pretty inspiring things about God, but don't really believe them. Their confidence in the truth of those things is shaky at best. The right answers haven't become part of their real life. They continue to think, feel, and act as if they aren't so. That in turn impacts them in many ways, one of which is they aren't able to love God with their whole being.

To love Him, we must believe the right answers about Him. So, we commit ourselves to that by doing five things. First, identify our doubts. Pinpoint precisely what it is that we don't believe. Second, admit our doubts. There's no shame in having them. So, confess them to God, us, and to others who can help us. Third, identify the cause of our doubts. Put our finger on what it is that's hindering belief. Fourth, take head on the cause of our doubts. Unbelief in Christians is usually the result of either not understanding things or actually misunderstanding them. So, we make every effort to understand, which includes studying and

consulting others who can help us. And finally, fifth, ask the Holy Spirit to help us believe. Belief is a gift of His. So, we pray and ask Him to help us believe what we know.

I counseled a follower of Jesus who resolved a disturbing doubt she had. First, she identified her doubt. She disbelieved that God is good. Second, she admitted her doubt. She confessed it to Him, herself, and me. Third, she identified the cause of her doubt. It was how she perceived His anger. How can He be good and at the same time have **“burning anger,”** to quote Deuteronomy 13:17? It was a little more complicated than that, but that was the gist of it. Fourth, she took on the cause of that doubt? She came to me and asked me to explain divine anger. So, I did and she realized as a result that she misunderstood it. And fifth, we prayed and asked the Holy Spirit to help her believe, which He did. She eventually came to believe what she once didn't. God is good. That in turn contributed to her growing in her love for Him.

Keep the Right Answers Constantly on Our Minds

Loving God with our whole being requires a third thing of us. We must keep the right answers constantly on our minds.

Moses mentions **“these words”** in verse 6, which refers to the content of Deuteronomy. Notice what God commands the Israelites to do with that content. 7 – Teach it and talk about it when they sit, walk, lie down, and rise up. Verse 8 – Bind it on their hands and foreheads. And verse 9 – write it on their doorposts and gates. Those are figurative commands, the meaning of which is found in verse 6. It must be **“on your heart.”** The *Keil-Delitzsch Commentary* explains what all of those verses together mean. The content of Deuteronomy **“must be . . . the constant subject of thought and conversation.”**

That content includes right answers about God. They must be the constant subject of our thought and conversation. We routinely place our minds on them when our minds aren't necessarily occupied. They then become common topics of conversation because we do.

Verses 6-9 are rooted in a profound psychological truth. What occupies our minds largely sets the tenor of our persons and lives. What we routinely think about establishes an emotional and volitional tone within us. That tone in turn conditions our ability to love our world, others, us, and, most importantly, God Himself. The degree to which we love someone is directly proportional to two things: how positively we perceive him or her and how often and long we think about him or her. That someone includes God.

That fact impresses upon us just how vital it is to place our minds on God and the right answers about Him. When our minds aren't necessarily occupied, we purposefully think about Him and them as often and as long as we can. The *First Aim* study I mentioned earlier explains how to do that. Anyway, faithfully doing that eventually forms the insights and habits of our minds so that they stay directed toward Him. We naturally and routinely think about Him in other words. That in turn establishes the emotional and volitional tone that loving Him requires.

Conclusion

Those then are the three things that we, in the context of our discipleship to Jesus, need to do. First, know the right answers about God. Second, believe the right answers. And third, keep the right answers constantly on our minds.

Verses 2 and 3 reveal the natural consequences of doing that. We'll keep God's commandments, verse 2, and it will go well for us, verse 3. Those consequences imply a million dollar insight. Loving God is the deepest need of human beings. I'm not exaggerating or being stupid in saying that. It's literally true. The deepest need of human beings isn't being loved. It's loving. It's loving God.

That's why I've done what I've done and you should too. Have a bucket list and put loving God with our whole being at the top of it.