

## **“Praying Like Jesus: The Shema”**

*The Piedmont Lectures at Dallas Christian College*

Dr. Les Hardin

Professor of New Testament

Johnson University Florida

### **Introduction:**

Thank you for inviting me to deliver the 2014 Piedmont Lectures. It’s an honor to be invited, and since this is my first time on the campus of Dallas Christian College, I’d like to thank you for your hospitality. I’d also like to thank Mark Hahlen who extended the initial invitation to me. Mark helped me figure out what would be a good topic for this year’s lectures and helped me balance the demands of an academic lecture series for a crowd that isn’t all that interested in the technical arguments and pointless discussions of the many academic conferences that we faculty members attend. We wanted this to be informative, solidly biblical, but also practical. We wanted to provide an opportunity to take everyone deeper, but deeper in a way that enhances a living faith in a living God. I also want to thank Twila Sias, professor at Johnson University Florida, for her kind and shrewd work in editing these lectures.

My name is Les Hardin, and I am professor of New Testament at the artist formerly known as Florida Christian College, now called Johnson University Florida. My life’s work has been in the integration of biblical studies and spirituality (two disciplines that usually don’t go together), or more specifically, what a serious study of the New Testament can teach us about what it means to be authentically spiritual. I’ve been confused about what it means to be “spiritual” for a long time. I was born and raised in a church founded by Barton W. Stone, only 15 miles from Cane Ridge. I am descended from Elders and Deacons, seminary-trained by serious men, a teacher of Israel, and a ministry veteran. But in spite of my upbringing and training, I had no idea what it meant to be “spiritual.” I began to notice that a lot of what passes for “spirituality” in the church is nothing more than personality theory sprinkled with holy water. So my doctoral work became about the integration of biblical studies and spiritual formation, specifically to see if the hard-core work of serious textual inquiry could lead to a practical, authentic way of walking with the Spirit.

Last year I was granted a sabbatical by Florida Christian College for the express purpose of researching and writing on the topic of prayer. I spent a whole semester doing what I have described for you—putting the hard work of biblical studies to the task of deciphering what it means to genuinely communicate with God. So here in the 2014 Piedmont Lectures I want to make some of that research available to the people of God, to a faith community that is broader than the three people who will read my entry on “Prayer” in the *Lexham Bible Dictionary*, and suggest ways that we can benefit from this research.

I’m not all that interested in laying out for you a lot of technical jargon and impressive theories. I hope to lay out for you a better way to *pray*. Of course, if that were patently obvious everyone would be doing it, so it will require some serious thought and some hard-core biblical, historical, and theological investigation. But you deserve the very best. You paid good money to come to school here, and you deserve someone who knows what they’re talking about. And since he couldn’t come, they sent me instead. Tonight I’ll do a brief history of prayer—from Sumeria and Egypt, to Judaism, to Qumran, to Jesus, and then to the early

church. But in the other two lectures we'll focus on the two primary New Covenant teachers we have: Paul and Jesus. And not in that order. So I want to lay out some things related to prayer, and I want to do so in a fashion that brings all that we have to the table—not just piety, but theology, history, language, hermeneutics, spirituality, Gospel, and tradition—and see whether or not, in a very serious study of prayer, it will lead to transformation of the way we pray, make us more responsible servants of Christ Jesus, and help us escape the trap of spiritualistic narcissism.

### I. How Important is The Shema?

If I were to ask any of my church friends—and if you were to ask any of yours—“What is the most important verse in the Bible?” then I suppose the answers would vary. Like most things related to theology, ask twelve people and you're likely to get thirteen answers.

My *Pentecostal* friends would say that it's Mark 16:17: “And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues.”

My *Catholic* students would say that it's Matthew 16:18-19, where Jesus, speaking to Peter alone, says, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not stand up against it. I will give to you, Peter, the keys of the kingdom of heaven.”

Most *Protestants* would say the most important verse is Romans 3:28: “We maintain a man is justified by faith, not by works of the Law.”

My *Methodist* students would say it's “Continue to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12).

My *Reformed* students (and living in the back yard of Reformed Theological Seminary, we have lots of them) say that it's Romans 8:29-30: “For those God foreknew he also predestined ... and those he predestined he also called, and justified, and glorified.”

My *Church of Christ* friends all say that it's Acts 2:38: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Christ Jesus, for the forgiveness of sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

My *Baptist* friends would counter that it's Luke 23:43, where Jesus says to the *unbaptized* thief, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”

My *Premillennialist* friends will point to Matt. 24:40: “One will be taken, the other left.”

My *Mormon* friends (and I have them) say it's John 10:16: “I have sheep that are not of this sheep pen.”

*Emergents* point to Paul: “Stop being a prude and take a little wine for your stomach” (1 Tim. 5:23).

Billy Graham would say it's John 3:16.

But what about Jesus? If you asked Jesus that question, “Jesus, what is the most important verse in the Bible?” do you think he would quote Micah 6:8: “What does God want from you? To love justice, to do mercy, and to walk humbly with God”? Would he quote from Isaiah 53: “It was YHWH's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and to make his life a guilt offering”? Would he quote Psalm 2: “You are my son, today I have become your father. Ask me, and I will give you the Gentiles for your inheritance”? I don't have to wonder because, in fact, Jesus was asked that very question on more than one occasion. When asked what the most important verse in the Bible was, Jesus said this: “*Shema Israel, YHWH elohenu, YHWH echad. ...*” “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with

*all your soul and with all your strength.*” (Deut. 6:4-9). The summary of the Law into a single sentence became something of a cottage industry to ancient rabbis, and everyone had their own favorite verse.<sup>1</sup> But Jesus identified The Shema—Israel’s most formative and foundational creed—as the most important of them all.

So why is it that The Shema has such little importance, presence, or repetition in our Christian piety throughout the centuries? I grew up in a traditional Christian home and have attended church faithfully since I was two weeks old. But I don’t recall ever hearing a sermon on the importance of The Shema (as it was known to Jews) or The Great Commandment (as Jesus called it). I wasn’t taught to say it as an expression of my faith, and it certainly wasn’t a prayer that we prayed in our home. Maybe it was because we have come to distrust the “memorized and repeated over and over” kinds of prayers. Maybe because my generation was obsessed with “authenticity” we viewed this kind of liturgical prayer as less-than-genuine, fake, and lacking intimate communion with God. Maybe it was because we were all afraid of dead ritual, afraid of meaningless ceremony, and afraid of being ... well, *Catholic!* Maybe because Jesus said, “When you pray, do not babble on like the pagans who think they will be heard because of their many words” (Matt. 6:7)? For whatever reason, I came to distrust the repetitive kind of prayer, even if it was Scripture, because it didn’t seem genuine and didn’t come from my heart.

But lately I’ve begun to rethink this. Some of it has to do with me re-evaluating the role of tradition and ritual in my life. Most of it, though, has to do with something that I uncovered about the prayer life of the Messiah when I was writing *The Spirituality of Jesus*, and it was this: Jesus prayed The Shema twice a day, every day of his life.<sup>2</sup> When questioned about the summary of the Law, Jesus answered with what Scot McKnight has come to call *The Jesus Creed*:<sup>3</sup> The Shema coupled with the amendment to “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). Jesus believed that all the Law and the Prophets cycled on these two wheels. The Shema was important to Jesus, and not just as a creed. It was a vital part of his prayer life.

Traditionally Christian scholars haven’t placed much emphasis on The Shema as a faith-forming prayer. In my research on prayer and on The Shema in particular I began to notice that a discussion of The Shema is largely absent from our collective Christian discussion of prayer. The thirteen-page entry on “Prayer” in the *Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible* doesn’t have a single word to say about it.<sup>4</sup> Neither does James Charlesworth’s article on “Prayer in Early Judaism” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*.<sup>5</sup> One of the best works on prayer in the Old

---

<sup>1</sup> Hillel was once asked by a Gentile to teach him the entire Torah while standing on one foot, to which Hillel replied, “That which is detestable to you, do not do to others” (*b.Shabbat* 31a). *b.Makkoth* 24a demonstrates the tendency among later rabbis (3<sup>rd</sup> cent. A.D.) toward summarization of the Torah. They noticed an ever-increasing brevity in summarization from Moses (613 commandments), to David (11), to Isaiah (6), to Micah (3), to Isaiah again (2), and finally Amos (1).

<sup>2</sup> Leslie T. Hardin, *The Spirituality of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009), 26-38.

<sup>3</sup> Scot McKnight, *The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2009), esp. 5-13.

<sup>4</sup> G. R. Lewis, “Prayer,” in *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible*, eds. Merrill C. Tenney and Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 4:943-955.

<sup>5</sup> J. H. Charlesworth, “Prayer in Early Judaism,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992): 5:499-450.

Testament is Samuel Ballantine's *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible*.<sup>6</sup> Here is a Christian, a man whose personal life of prayer drips on every page of his work. But in all of his discussion of prayer in the Old Testament, he has nothing to say about The Shema. I expected to find something about this in Patrick Miller's magisterial work, *They Cried to the Lord*,<sup>7</sup> or in Walter Brueggemann's *Great Prayers of the Old Testament*<sup>8</sup>, or in Möshe Greenberg's *Biblical Prose Prayer*<sup>9</sup> ... but nothing. Maybe it's because the Lord's Prayer seems to have supplanted The Shema as the formulaic creed of the Christian Church. Whatever the reason, it seems that Christians don't find The Shema—at least as a form of prayer—important.

But The Shema was vital to the faith that Jesus inherited, and not just as a creed. The Shema was quoted in the Temple alongside the Ten Commandments daily at morning sacrifice,<sup>10</sup> and on the Sabbath when the Torah scroll was removed from the Ark of the Covenant. It was recited during the great Jewish festivals and at the conclusion of the services on the Day of Atonement. So important was the recitation of The Shema that ancient rabbis prescribed laws to safeguard against saying it frivolously or carelessly. One was not allowed to say The Shema while walking, to wink or gesticulate during its recitation, or to say it in front of a desecrated place, or in front of a naked body. Rather, adherents were to pray it while standing still, with fullest concentration, to say it loud, particularly in Hebrew,<sup>11</sup> with fear and trembling so as to give it (and by extension YHWH) the greatest measure of respect.<sup>12</sup> Josephus tells us that in his day Jews prayed The Shema twice daily.<sup>13</sup> There is some evidence to suggest three times a day to coincide with The Shema's command to "talk about these things when you get up, when you walk along the road, and when you lie down" (Deut. 6:7), and in accordance with Daniel's example of praying three times daily (Dan. 6:10). The lasting tradition of Rabbi Akiva is that he quoted The Shema on his death bed (b.Ber. 61:b), prompting subsequent generations of Jewish martyrs to follow suit. The Shema was important to ancient Judaism and occupied a central place, not just in its worship, but in its prayers.

If this creed, and this prayer, was important to God's people in the time of the Messiah, and important to the Messiah himself, then it's imperative that we, as the people of God, give consideration to The Shema, not just as a creed, but as a prayer. In this first lecture I want to spend some time poking around in The Shema, or The Greatest Commandment, to see if we can figure out WHY this was so important. What's here that helps me to pray? To worship?

---

<sup>6</sup> Samuel E. Ballantine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine-Human Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Great Prayers of the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer: As a Window to the Popular Religion of Ancient Israel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> *m.Tamid* 4:3-5:1.

<sup>11</sup> *b.Megilloth* 17b. While the rabbis preferred the people recite The Shema in Hebrew, the Septuagint version was used in areas outside Palestine.

<sup>12</sup> Louis Jacobs, "Shema, Reading of," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1978), 14:1371-1372.

<sup>13</sup> *Antiquities of the Jews* 4:8.13: "Let everyone commemorate before God the benefits which he bestowed upon them at their deliverance out of the land of Egypt, and this twice every day, both when the day begins and when the hour of sleep comes on." C.f. also *m.Berakoth* 2:2.

And to love God with all my being? And what would it mean to us if we started praying this prayer on a regular basis?

## II. The Shema in Context:

In modern Judaism The Shema is a conflation of three separate texts: Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21, and Numbers 15:37-41.<sup>14</sup> But not originally. Originally it consisted only of Deut. 6:4-9:

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.*

Contextually, The Shema is set in the middle of a highly-organized speech given by Moses. After giving a brief recounting of Israel's history (Deut. 5:2-5) and a recitation of the Ten Commandments (5:6-21), Moses urges the people to be faithful to YHWH by obeying those commands (5:28-6:3). The Shema comes next, with its focus upon making the commands an integral part of every aspect of life (Deut. 6:4-9). Moses then brackets The Shema with another brief summary of Israel's history (6:10-9) and an exhortation to obey and pass on the commands (6:20-25). With the double-recounting of Israel's history and exhortation to be faithful, The Shema stands at the center of this speech, the centerpiece around which history and obedience to the commands are set. YHWH has brought us out of Egypt and loved us as His people. Our response is to love YHWH with all we have.<sup>15</sup>

## III. The Exegesis of The Shema:

That's where The Shema is and what it's doing in the larger context of Deuteronomy and Israel's history. But now it's time to turn to the exegesis of the text and see what's really there, what's really being said, and what it's really calling us to. Several things stand out in this section of Deuteronomy that deserve mention as we try to understand The Shema and its import.

### A. "Hear, O Israel"

The first is the command: "*Shema Israel*" ("Hear, O Israel"). Etymologically the term "*shema*" invokes not only hearing, but also learning, following, even obeying.<sup>16</sup> Where it

---

<sup>14</sup> An extensive set of rules for recitation of The Shema is found in *m. Berakhot* 1:1-3:6. The Nash Papyrus (c. 150 B.C.) contains the Decalogue and The Shema and represents the morning liturgy of the Second Temple period. Unfortunately, the Nash Papyrus breaks off after the second letter of Deut. 6:5, so determination of the longer or shorter reading of The Shema is hard to determine. For a brief description of the history of its development, see McBride, "Yoke of the Kingdom," 274-287.

<sup>15</sup> Wyse, "Loving God," 17-36.

<sup>16</sup> U. Rütterswörden, "שמע, שמע, שמע," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 15:254.

involves listening to the spoken word, this term implies an engagement with the mind, an attentive listening, even a sense of “heed by acting” or “putting to practice.”<sup>17</sup> When God calls Israel to hear, he expects more than just a listening. He expects *action*. The term “*Shema*” appears ten times in the larger text here, and beckons us to not only hear the words of God, but to take them into the very center of our being and doing.<sup>18</sup> In other words, God expects a listening with a view toward *doing*.

### B. “YHWH Alone”

Of course, I wouldn’t be a very good scholar if I didn’t dive into some kind of academic and theological controversy, and on this topic it’s the meaning of the term “one” — *אֶחָד* (*echad*). The English text here, in almost every version reads, “The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deut. 6:4). Those of us in the Christian faith have traditionally read this as a Trinitarian statement: we believe that God is three-fold—Father, Son and Spirit—and this verse keeps us from believing that there are three gods. We’ve used this verse throughout Christian history to prevent us from abandoning the unity of the Godhead in favor of three separate gods. And when our atheist friends accuse us of it, we like to quote Deuteronomy 6:4: “God is one.”

In context, though, that doesn’t make very much sense, and this is the theological controversy over which barrels of printer ink have been spilt. On the one side of this battlefield is a whole host of scholars who believe that the word “one” has to do with God’s unity—both to himself, and within Israel. On the one hand, it communicates that God’s desires and actions are in perfect sync, that he has *integrity* of purpose and plans,<sup>19</sup> or even that he is “all-comprehensive.”<sup>20</sup> It also, according to this view, has the force of uniting the various tribes of Israel around worship of a single God. There is no YHWH of Shechem who is differentiated between YHWH of Bethel, YHWH of Samaria, and YHWH of Jerusalem. There is only ONE YHWH.<sup>21</sup>

On the other side of the battlefield is a whole host of scholars who recognize—as apparently did Calvin and Luther<sup>22</sup>—that this part of The Shema is an affirmation of the first two commands of the Decalogue, that YHWH is God and Israel is to have no other (Exod. 20:1-4). The opening line of The Shema has the force of calling Israel to cast off all other gods—like

---

<sup>17</sup> K. T. Aitken, “אֶחָד,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 4:175-178.

<sup>18</sup> See Wyse, “Loving God,” 24-29.

<sup>19</sup> J. Gerald Janzen, “On the Most Important Word in The Shema,” *Vetus Testamentum* 37 (1987): 280-300. Janzen believes that the word *אֶחָד* is a description of YHWH’s unity, cohesion even, of “desire and action, between intention and execution” (p. 287). “Oneness” connotes something of YHWH’s integrity and divine faithfulness. Janzen admits that this interpretation is based on indirect evidence (p. 297) and acknowledges that in at least one text (Zech. 14:9) the meaning of *אֶחָד* has the force of “alone.”

<sup>20</sup> So George A. F. Knight, “The Lord is One,” *Expository Times* 79 (1967-1968): 8-10. Knight sees *אֶחָד* as a unifying term drawing together the various anthropomorphic designations of YHWH (his Face, his Name, his Presence, etc.) together as “one,” just as a bundle of sticks is bound together as “one” (e.g., Ezek. 37:17).

<sup>21</sup> So Patrick D. Miller, Jr. “The Most Important Word: The Yoke of the Kingdom,” *Illiff Review* (1984), 21-23. Miller points to inscriptions that refer to “Yahweh of Samaria” and “Yahweh of Teman,” and ultimately concludes that God’s “oneness” is both a claim to exclusivity (“YHWH alone”) and integrity of purpose (“YHWH is not divided”).

<sup>22</sup> See McBride, “Yoke of the Kingdom,” 297, n. 50 and the literature cited there.

those they encountered in Egypt, Canaan, and Philistia—to worship and serve only YHWH. In this sense, I think a better translation reads: “Listen, Israel: YHWH is our God, YHWH *alone*.” The golden calf incident die-cast Israel into a foreign-god-worshipping kind of mold, and The Shema was a twice-daily discipline to keep this temptation at bay. At the heart of The Shema is a call for the people of God to worship “YHWH alone.”<sup>23</sup>

C. “Love YHWH Your God ...”

Another thing The Shema teaches us is that our *doing* is inextricably tied to our *loving*. The Shema calls us to “love YHWH our God” with all of our being. In Deuteronomy the command to “love YHWH” is always set alongside obedience to his commands, or rather, obedience to the commands that YHWH give is the *way* to love him. Consider the following examples:

Deut. 11:1: “Therefore you shall love the LORD your God, and keep His charge, His statutes, His judgments, and His commandments always.”

Deut. 11:13-14a: “And it shall be that if you earnestly obey My commandments which I command you today, to love the LORD your God and serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul.”

Deut. 11:22-23: “carefully keep all these commandments which I command you to do—to love the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways, and to hold fast to Him.”

Deut. 19:8b-9: “if you keep all these commandments and do them, which I command you today, to love the LORD your God and to walk always in His ways.”

John said it this way: “This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3). Do you remember Jesus saying, “If you love me, then keep my commandments” (John 14:15)? (Perhaps there is a subtle claim to deity in Jesus’ statement there.) The way to love God—and the way to love Jesus—is to obey his commandments. Love for YHWH has nothing to do with feeling and everything to do with action. The commands that The Shema has in mind are specifically the Ten Commandments repeated by Moses right before the recitation of The Shema. “Deuteronomy 5-6 functions as a literary unit, a unit that purposefully connects the Decalogue to The Shema, and vice versa. The implication is that obedience to God’s commands (embodied in the Decalogue) and loving God (embodied in The Shema) are actions intricately bound up with one another.”<sup>24</sup> The Shema and the Ten

---

<sup>23</sup> For a compelling case for translating *echad* as “alone” rather than “one,” see Jackie A. Wyse, “Loving God as an Act of Obedience: The Shema in Context,” in *Take This Word to Heart: The Shema in Torah and Gospel*, ed. Perry Yoder (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2005), 48-51, esp. n. 79; Dean McBride, “Yoke of the Kingdom,” 291-297.

<sup>24</sup> Wyse, “Loving God,” 36.

Commandments go hand in hand<sup>25</sup> so that to live by the Ten Words is to demonstrate love for God.

Contextually, the result of all of this commandment-obeying and God-loving is *life!* Over and over again the Old Testament (in part, owing to what we're about to discover next) lays out two ways that we can all choose: the path of life, or the path of destruction. "There is a way that seems right to a man, but it only leads to death" (Prov. 14:12). It's embodied in Psalm 1: "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked ... but who delights in the law of the LORD" (Ps. 1:1-2). Jesus said it this way: "Wide is the road that leads to destruction, and narrow the way that leads to life" (Matt. 7:13-14). And so it is in Deuteronomy. There are two ways set before the people, one of obedience and life, the other of rebellion and destruction

Deut. 30:16: "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the LORD your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess."

Deut. 30:19b-20: I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days."

That's what The Shema is doing in the larger context of Deuteronomy: calling Israel to remember her history and to obey his commands as a sign of love for him and his deliverance from their captivity in Egypt.

#### D. "With All Your Heart, Soul, and Strength"

Finally, The Shema calls for the people of God to love YHWH with "all the heart, soul, and strength," and the tripartite nature of this sentence deserves some comment. But not much, so I'll be brief.

In accordance with the greatest of the rabbinic traditions,<sup>26</sup> we tend to approach this as if God were speaking about three separate divisions of our being. What does it mean to love God with all my heart? Is that emotion? Is my soul about my worship and religion? And what does it mean to love God with all my strength? But instead of thinking about the various divisions of the human psyche, God seems to be (in traditional climactic parallelism) calling us to love him with *every aspect of our being*. This comprehensive interpretation is evidenced by three contextual and historical factors. First, this is in line with the way ancient kings expected those

---

<sup>25</sup> The interconnectedness of The Shema and the Decalogue is further evidenced by the Nash Papyrus (c. 150 B.C.), which contains the Ten Commandments and The Shema as a guide for daily prayers.

<sup>26</sup> Midrash Sifre Deuteronomy interprets this as "impulses" and lays them out according to the various vocabulary ("heart," "soul," and "strength/means").

under their rule to serve them and fight for their policies “with all your heart.”<sup>27</sup> Second, the subsequent verses in The Shema call for us to mark our homes, our children, our work, our rising, our sleeping, our walking, our minds, and our bodies with the commands of God. Third, Jesus had no trouble amending The Shema to include the phrase “with all your mind” (Mark 12:30), and he wouldn’t have done so if he hadn’t assumed the whole person was in view.

One of the greatest scenes in the *Rocky* series is that scene in the fourth film where Rocky is walking out into the ring for the final round, having to lay it all out on the line to win. (You remember that ONE Rocky film that does this, right ... that ONE film where Rocky gets beat down for 14 rounds and then has to pull it out at the last minute?) The Stallion has taken a beating from the Russian champ, Ivan Drago. Right before he goes out to the center of the ring for the final round, the camera zooms in on Duke, one of his trainers who is furiously trying to energize him with this motivational speech: “There’s no stopping’ now! You start, and you don’t stop. All your strength, all your power, all your love, everything you got. This is your WHOLE LIFE HERE.” Duke gets it! What he calls Rocky to do is to put it ALL on the line—not various components of his being, but EVERYTHING, ALL THAT HE IS centered on this one task at this one moment.

That’s what The Shema is calling us to do: love God with ALL OF OUR BEING. With all my heart, with all my mind, with all my strength, with all my work, with all my computers, with all my Facebook, with all my wallet, with all my home, with all my time. This is what it means to “love YHWH your God.”

#### **IV. So What Benefit is There to Praying The Shema?**

For the last little bit of our time together I want to suggest some ways that praying The Shema regularly might help us love God in a deeper and more effective way. Over the last few years I have given The Shema a greater presence in my discipline of prayer. I pray The Shema at least twice a week, in Hebrew, in Greek, and then in English (to ensure that it’s not just an exercise in scholarly vanity). I recite it, *aloud*, every time I walk through the Garden of Allah at Disney World. I’m not yet in line with my fathers, for I do not pray it three times a day. But I do recite this often enough to warrant surprise from two Jews—one a lady I was seated next to on a plane, the other a conservative rabbi—both of whom were shocked that a Gentile and a Christian would make a habit of reciting The Shema at any time, let alone as a regular part of his discipline of prayer. Both of them, in separate conversations, asked me why I did this, and the best and quickest answer I could give was this: “Because Jesus did. And I want to live like he did.”

I want to challenge you to recite The Greatest Commandments (The Shema and its amendment) on a more frequent, regular basis. If you do, I think there are a few very practical benefits.

---

<sup>27</sup> Some suzerain-vassal treaties call for the adherents to “be faithful with all your heart” and to “fight with all your heart” in support of the king’s treaties. See George E. Mendenhall, “Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition,” *The Biblical Archaeologist* 17 (1954): 50-76; H. L. Horowitz, “The Sh’ma Reconsidered,” *Judaism* 24 (1975): 476-481, believes that The Shema is a treaty of this nature.

### A. *The Shema Focuses My Attention on God*

At the core of the Greatest Commandment is the assertion that there is but ONE God—YHWH. The creed begins, “Listen, Israel—The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” We’ve become accustomed to calling him “The Lord,” but the Great Commandment actually names him—YHWH. “Listen, Israel—YHWH our God, YHWH is one.” The Shema keeps us from doing what is so common in our culture—ascribing a generic term like “god” to a very specific person, the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The term “God” is a favorite in our culture to refer to many things, and Muslims, Buddhists, New Age gurus, and a plethora of cults refer to their object of worship with the generic name “God.” Naming him—YHWH—prevents us from descending into this kind of ambiguity, which, if left unchecked, will only lead to madness.

So how does this help me in prayer? There is a strong tendency for us to focus only on our selves when we pray. We tend to be selfish, asking for things that make our lives better, things that bring us success, and things that help ensure our own happiness. Even when we pray for others, our prayers (if left unchecked) tend to be only for those we care about, revealing a selfish desire even in our intercession. We so often pray for what we want and attach God’s name to it. But this prayer, The Great Commandment, from its very first words, focuses our attention on God Alone. It removes US from the center of the prayer altogether and makes YHWH the first priority.

The Greatest Commandment helps to keep us from all of this. For at its core, its very foundation, it’s about loving GOD. And Him ALONE.

### B. *The Shema Connects Me to a Larger Community*

I think it’s also worth noting that the Greatest Commandment is *communal*: “Hear, O Israel.” The first words of The Shema are not individual. They’re not, “Listen up, Hardin,” or “Les, note this.” The first words are national, communal, corporate, group-oriented in nature: “Hear me, all ye people of God!” It’s not for me alone, but for me as a member of the corporate people of God.

There’s plenty in our culture that pushes us toward a privatized, individualistic worldview. Our North American capitalist culture tries to convince us that the world is all about me, that I can have what I want, I can achieve my dreams, and that I can have true love. Seldom, if ever, does this worldview point out to me that my individual dreams and hopes have ramifications on other people. If I get what I want, it probably prevents other people from getting what they want. Achieving my dreams may mean shattering someone else’s. If I get that dream job, it shatters the hopes of someone else who also thinks that is their dream job. And our fairy tales never tell us that, if the hero gets the girl, then someone else who may also be in love with her is gonna be sadly disappointed (something I learned the hard way ALL THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL!).

The spirituality gurus of our world are riddled with this personalized, individualistic, selfish kind of theology. They preach a gospel of “getting in touch with the divine” but for the express purpose of helping you to live a better life, to find success, and to help alleviate any inconvenience you might happen to have in this world. I remember listening to the spiritual teaching of one of these gurus, someone who happens to teach religion as a PBS fundraiser, who called the power of God “Intention,” and said that if I align myself with this power, then the universe would align itself to fulfill my desires. But on the most basic level this doesn’t

work: I was sitting in traffic and thought, “I would love for the universe to align itself so that all the north-south traffic lights were green on my way to work.” But the moment that I do so, that means that all the folks heading east-west get red lights. And what happens if two of those people are expecting “Intention” to align for them at the same time? There will either be massive disappointment with the god called “Intention” ... or there will be death and carnage and mayhem at the town square. Neither of these is the picture of YHWH given us in the New Testament. At its core, the spiritualities of this world are focused on nothing more than my own, personal selfishness.

The Greatest Commandment helps reshape my worldview. It brings me back around to the fact that I’m not the center of the universe. It connects me with something larger, something that God is doing in the world. To be fair, it gives me the great honor of being a *part* of it! But it subtly has the effect of training me that I’m not the *center* of it.

This narcissistic self-worship also tends to make its way into the American church. Somehow, over the last hundred years or so, we’ve convinced ourselves that the Gospel is about me and my relationship with God. Our evangelism is individualistic: “I am a sinner. I need Jesus. Jesus died for MY sins.” Our Bible study is individualistic: “What does this mean for MY life.” And our worship tends to be individualistic: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like ME” and more contemporarily, “My Savior loves, My Savior lives, my Savior is always there for ME.” But the pronouns in the Greatest Commandment are not singular; they’re plural. The text literally reads something like this (and I hope you can understand this language): “YHWH is OUR God. And y’all will love YHWH y’all’s God with all y’all’s heart, and all y’all’s soul and and all y’all’s strength.” The Great Commandment is corporate, focused in on God’s people and calling them to redemption and obedience together, as one people. Some of our more recent songwriters and hymn composers are starting to understand what is written in The Shema and incorporate this into our worship: “We fix our eyes upon the cross and run to him who showed great love and bled for US” and one of my personal favorites, “ALL hail the power of Jesus’ name... let every kindred, every tribe on this terrestrial ball to Him all majesty ascribe and crown him Lord of ALL.”

I’m starting to notice that the Gospel that is told all throughout the Scriptures is inherently a *corporate* Gospel—that God has been since the beginning of time trying to create a people for Himself, a people who will be devoted to him, who will do his will, a people who are holy, and who can be for him a KINGDOM of priests. God started with Israel, and when Messiah came into the world, He opened up the flood gates of the Kingdom to allow, by his good graces, a Sabbath-breakin, pork-chop-eatin’ Gentile like myself to come and be a part of His people Israel. What a gracious God He is! That’s the great paradox here: the Gospel relates to me individually by allowing me to be a part of the great community that God is building for himself. It allows me—a Gentile—to be a part of His people Israel.

### C. *The Shema Reminds Me to Worship God with My Whole Being*

I’ve explained all of this already, and I have nothing more to add. But the recitation of The Shema is a repetitive reminder that this is my call—to love God with everything I have, with every day that I live.

## **Conclusion:**

So there it is. The Greatest Commandment. It's a prayer that helps identify us as God's people Israel. It reminds us that we are a part of that people, by God's grace, that He is the center of that people's worship, and that those people are to love Him with every last fiber and ounce of their being.

I think the best thing to do to conclude this sermon is to tell you the story of Rabbi Akiva.<sup>28</sup> Akiva was an influential Jewish teacher who lived at the end of the first and beginning of the second century A.D. Akiva was born and raised in Judea, studied and became one of the most respected rabbis in all of Judaism. Akiva lived through the destruction of the Jewish temple by the Roman empire in 70 A.D., and later when the Romans wanted to erect a pagan temple on the site where the Jewish temple once stood, Akiva was instrumental in gaining support for a military rebellion against the Romans. They ordered him to stop teaching the Torah on pain of death. Akiva would not be deterred, and continued to teach. So they rounded him up and sent him to the executioner. The stories in the Talmud vary a bit, but the basic gist is that when they executed him, it was the time for the recitation of The Shema. They raked his flesh with hot combs, and when he was asked about why he continued to pray The Shema at that moment, he replied, "All my life I've known how to love God with all my heart, and with all my strength. Now I get to show God that I love him with all my soul." Akiva prolonged the final word—*echad*—and died with the words of The Shema still on his lips. And partly because of his influence, it is custom among the Jews of this day to recite The Shema at the time of death.

I rather think that the Greatest Commandment is a prayer for LIFE. It doesn't form how we die, but rather forms how we LIVE—to live every day by loving God with all our hearts, souls, minds, strength, to love Him with every last fiber and ounce of our being, with every moment of every day, and with every thought and action. Praying this commandment, treating it as a prayer—"God, please help me to love you with all of my heart, soul, mind, strength"—will help to fix our eyes on the Father, and on Jesus, the author, perfecter, example, and teacher of our faith.

I hope that you'll join me. I hope that you'll memorize this prayer, that you'll say it, repeat it, write it down, post it on the bathroom mirror, on the windshield of your car, on your computer monitor, in your workspace, and "paint it on the doorframes of your houses," and repeat this prayer often. It had the function of forming an entire culture and shaping them as the people of God ... and the Word of God is powerful to do so once again.

Let's begin today, as one people, standing together to recite the Greatest Commandment. And in deference to our Lord and Brother and Teacher, we will include his amendment of The Shema.

Hear, O Israel: YHWH is our God, YHWH alone.  
We will love YHWH our God with all of our hearts  
And with all of our souls  
And with all of our minds  
And with all of our strength.  
And we will love our neighbors as ourselves.  
And we will do this in the name of Christ Jesus. Amen.

---

<sup>28</sup> The story of R. Akiva's death can be found in *b.Berakoth* 61b.