

The Shema



Recently, I was able to share at a local church. I chose to speak on the “Shema.” The “Shema” is one of the most, if not **the**, most known prayers in all of Judaism. It is the most fundamental prayer of the Jewish faith. In the prayer itself it tells of when and how often it needs to be remembered and

prayed by the Jewish people. Most believers in Christ are familiar with it as well, although it is not as fundamental to their faith as it is to the Jewish people. Why is that?

The term, “*shema*,” is literally the translation of the first word of the prayer which is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9. In our Bibles it is translated to the word “hear.” However, the term “shema” actually means in the original language, “listen” which is a more emphatic term than “hear.” What I mean by this is that when we are told to “hear” something we tend to hear it possibly (and more than likely) with less than 100% of our attention.

The word “listen” is used in this scripture in such a way that it is imploring the listener to listen intently, 100%, with all their understanding as to what they are listening to and ultimately what God is saying to them. This is telling the “listener” that what is being spoken to them is not someone simply saying just “something” but more importantly that they need to get it and receive what is actually means – they are to **listen**, not merely hear. The word “listen” literally means “to give one’s **full attention** to what they are hearing.” In other words, as God was speaking this to Moses, He was imploring Moses, as well as all the people, to give their fullest attention, 100%, to what He was about to say to them.

Let us read Deuteronomy 6:4-9 (KJV). Let us “listen” to what the Lord our God, is truly saying to us.

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: ⁵ And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. ⁶ And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: ⁷ And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. ⁸ And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. ⁹ And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.

What most believers in Jesus do not always realize is that what we just read is simply the first part of the total Jewish “Shema.” They also include Deuteronomy 11:13-21 and Numbers 15:37-41.

Deuteronomy 11:13-21 (KJV)

¹³ And it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently unto my commandments which I command you this day, to love the LORD your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹⁴ That I will give you the rain of your land in his due season, the first rain and the latter rain, that thou mayest gather in thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil. ¹⁵ And I will send grass in thy fields for thy cattle, that thou mayest eat and be full. ¹⁶ Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and ye turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them; ¹⁷ And then the LORD'S wrath be kindled against you, and he shut up the heaven, that there be no rain, and that the land yield not her fruit; and lest ye perish quickly from off the good land which the LORD giveth you. ¹⁸ Therefore shall ye lay up these my words in your heart and in your soul, and bind them for a sign upon your hand, that they may be as frontlets between your eyes. ¹⁹ And ye shall teach them your children, speaking of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. ²⁰ And thou shalt write them upon the door posts of thine house, and upon thy gates: ²¹ That your days may be multiplied, and the days of your children, in the land which the LORD sware unto your fathers to give them, as the days of heaven upon the earth.

Numbers 15:37-41 (KJV)

³⁷ *And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, ³⁸ Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them fringes in the borders of their garments throughout their generations, and that they put upon the fringe of the borders a ribband of blue: ³⁹ And it shall be unto you for a fringe, that ye may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the LORD, and do them; and that ye seek not after your own heart and your own eyes, after which ye use to go a whoring: ⁴⁰ That ye may remember, and do all my commandments, and be holy unto your God. ⁴¹ I am the LORD your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the LORD your God.*

In these sections it is imploring the Jewish people to not simply know these truths but to grasp and truly understand what they are saying to them. It is expressing that God is their source and that they were never, never, ever to forget that. The second part we read as found in Deuteronomy 11:13-21, begins with imploring the people, “...to love the LORD your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul...” Sounds very much the same as the first part found in Deuteronomy 6. God goes on to tell them all that He will give them.

However, in the midst of this section we see God give a warning to the people. He states, “Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and ye turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them; ¹⁷ And then the LORD'S wrath be kindled against you, and he shut up the heaven, that there be no rain, and that the land yield not her fruit; and lest ye perish quickly from off the good land which the LORD giveth you.” He emphatically tells His people to, “...take heed.” This means to truly hear what He is telling them because if they do not then it will not go well for them – at all.

After the warning, He again implores His people by telling them, “Therefore shall ye lay up these my words in your heart and in your soul...” He again implores them to teach them to their children and to remember them in the same way as in Deuteronomy 6. Why should they do this? He tells them very plainly in verse 21, “That your days may be multiplied, and the days of your children, in the land which the LORD sware unto your fathers to give them, as the days of heaven upon the earth.”

The next section of the “Shema” as recited by the Jewish people is found in Numbers 15:37-41. This is a little different. It tells the Jewish people to make a “tallit” (a prayer shawl) and on the ends of the tallit they were to make blue threads hanging from each corner. These threads are called the “tzitzit.” These are the fringes or tassels that are found on traditional or ceremonial garments worn by Jewish males as reminders of the commandments. Each tassel has eight threads (when doubled over) and five sets of knots, totaling 13. The sum of all numbers is 613, which is traditionally the number of commandments found in the Torah.

The purpose of these “tzitzits” was to remind the Jewish people of their God and to keep all of His commandments. On each corner, four threads are threaded through a hole and looped over, so that there are eight strings hanging down. A series of double knots and coils then join the first few inches of each corner's tassel into a single cord. The eight threads are to then hang down. The eight strings and five knots are a physical representation of the Torah's 613 mitzvahs (commandments). They were to wear them so that they would be a physical reminder to keep the commandments of God.

As we look at the scriptures we see that God desired the Jewish people, His people, to not just simply remember His commandments but more importantly to keep them. Not just in a ceremonial and religious way but as a lifestyle. Why? So that He could bless them.

Unfortunately, it became, like many other things, a ritual. They would keep the ritual but they lost the real reason why they were keeping what God told them. They were getting lost in doing the rituals and keeping these “things.” God’s Word to them was not actually becoming a part of who they actually were. It was not really are part of the lives. The rituals were. The rituals were being done in its place. What the “tzitzit” were to remind the people of within their lives was getting lost.

Jesus discusses this within three of the Gospel accounts. We see Him address this in Matthew 22:36-40, Mark 12:28-34 and Luke 10:25-28. For our discussion, I would like us to look at Mark 12:28-34.

²⁸ *And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that he had answered them well, asked him, Which is the first commandment of all? ²⁹ And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: ³⁰ And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. ³¹ And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these. ³² And the scribe said unto him, Well, Master, thou hast said the truth: for there is one God; and there is none other but he: ³³ And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbor as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. ³⁴ And when Jesus saw that he answered discreetly, he said unto him, Thou art not far from the kingdom of God...”*

We see in the above scriptures that when asked which is the greatest commandment of all, Jesus responded first by saying the Shema – “Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: ³⁰ And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength...” He immediately followed by stating the “second” commandment, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Jesus took His answer, when asked directly, which is the greatest commandment of all, straight from the “Shema” as found in Deuteronomy 6. He also then immediately stated that the second commandment is to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

We see that the scribe responded to Jesus’ answer stating that he was in total agreement with what Jesus had responded. Jesus then concludes their discussion by stating that the scribe was “not far from the kingdom of God...” The man spoke the correct thing. However, Jesus stated that the scribe was “not far from the kingdom of God.” If Jesus spoke this and the scribe was in total agreement with Jesus, why would the man still not be a part of the kingdom but was still, “not far?”

The answer was, is and always will be - Jesus. Jesus was, is and always will be the only way into the Kingdom of God and access to the Father. Why? It is simply because we can never truly love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength in our own ability and strength. We may know this but we can never do this because of our sinful nature. Only through Jesus can we be truly “born again.” Only through Jesus could we ever begin to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength.

No one... **NO ONE** can truly love God the way He is to be loved. We can know it – just as the scribe did. We can try to do it the best we can – just as the scribe did. However we will still fall short – just as the scribe did. It can only be fully accomplished through Jesus. It is because Jesus loves God with all His heart, soul, mind and strength. Through believing in Jesus and all that He has done, can God now look at us as if we have performed and accomplished this first commandment. It is nothing we could ever do in our own strength or ability.

However, unfortunately, this is where many fail to truly grasp what the Word is truly telling us. They fail by only saying that they accept Jesus and all that He has done. However, the problem is that it doesn’t end there. It really is only the beginning. Once we have accepted and received Jesus we are now to continue in the same fashion of lifestyle that Jesus role-modeled to us as He walked this earth. How can we do this? We do this through the power of the Holy Spirit.

If we take a look, briefly, at the parable Jesus gave us as found in Matthew 13:3-9 we see this “in action.” It is the parable of “The Sower and the Four Different Soils” that the seed, the Word of God concerning salvation, would be planted in. Briefly, we see that the Word, which is the Word of God, is “thrown” everywhere and to everyone for all to hear and, most importantly, to receive.

The first example is of seed, God’s Word, which falls by the wayside and does not grow at all – it is totally rejected by the individual. The second seed we see falls on “stony ground.” We see that at first it is accepted but then trials came and they ended up rejecting it and doing their own thing. The third seed falls on ground where there are thorns and thistles that ultimately will come and if allowed, choke the true Word of God. This individual again will also stumble and fall away. Finally, we see the fourth example of the seed, the Word, which fell on good fertile ground. It grew up strong and continued on.

Through this parable, we see that one out of four people will truly hear and receive the Word of salvation and it will truly grow and become real - forever. That individual is truly a child of the most High God. We see that two of the other seeds seemed to have grown a little. Then because of different reasons they fell away. This is very disturbing.

What I see it telling us is that these “two” types of individuals will truly receive the Word of God and salvation. However, the trials of life will come. They will come in diverse and many ways. The deceptions of this world will find us. The enemy will come and if allowed will cause many to succumb to his treachery and fall away from the One and only true God.

That is why, I believe, that when an individual truly accepts and receives Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior, Jesus promises to send and give them the Holy Spirit so that they can continue to now live their lives as children of the most High God. The scriptures are clear. There will be and there are the Gentiles and the Jewish people. Then there will be and are the “true Jewish people,” the believers, the one new man in Christ (Jew and Gentile) who have truly placed their total trust in Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior.

Throughout the New Testament we see that the *Shema* was not made obsolete by the Good News of Jesus. Rather, believers are called to observe it now in the light of the revelation of Jesus Christ, receiving Him as their personal Lord and Savior, and by the infilling of the Holy Spirit. Both, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are one with the Father in heaven. They are the fullness of God - the “Three are One in God” and each are God.

“Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself.”