

MESSAGES from LIBERTY

“WORDS TO LIVE BY”

1. All In

(Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

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Here’s a profession I feel sorry for: I feel sorry for TV programmers who work for cable sports channels. And here’s why: there are so many cable TV channels devoted to sports – how do you come up with all of that programming? There’s an insatiable demand for content, the need to put something on the air, on all of these channels, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, all the time.

At first, it seemed like the best of all possible worlds – dozens of TV channels dedicated to nothing but sports. We would be able to watch Major League Baseball games, and NFL games, and NBA games, and NHL games. We could watch college football and basketball, baseball and softball, soccer and hockey. We could watch MLS soccer, and English Premier League soccer, and German Bundesliga soccer. We could even watch high school sports – football, basketball, hockey, lacrosse.

But all of that doesn’t come close to filling up the schedule for the dozens of cable TV sports channels. And that’s why I feel for the programmers – they have to come up with still more sports to televise, and something that will draw an audience.

So, next, there was golf – PGA, LPGA, Champions Tour, European Tour, Nationwide Tour, NCAA championships. Then there was car racing for the NASCAR dads. But then they started to scrape bottom of the barrel. Cliff diving. Collegiate cornhole tournaments. Mixed martial arts. Beach volleyball. And finally, at the very bottom – poker.

I mean, it’s not clear if poker is even a sport. And could anything be more boring than watching 9 guys sitting at a table, looking at cards? Well, they figured out the technology to show the hole cards of the players without anyone being able to cheat. But they also decided to focus poker coverage on No Limit Texas Holdem. Because Texas Holdem brings two advantages for the viewing experience.

First, it’s a version of poker that has a story. *Chapter 1*: every player gets two cards face down, which means they start with a terrible hand or a powerful hand or something in-between. *Chapter 2* is the flop: three cards are dealt face up – and every player gets to use any of these three cards combined with his hole cards to make the best poker hand. Sometimes people flop nothing, sometimes they flop the nuts, most times they connect with something that has possibilities. *Chapter 3* is the turn – a fourth card is dealt face up, and the possibilities of a winning hand increase or decrease. And the *final chapter* is the

river – a fifth card is dealt face up. Now the viewers know who the winner is – but because the players can't see their opponents' hole cards, bluffing is still very much in play.

The second advantage of No Limit Texas Holdem is that there is no limit on what you can bet. In most forms of poker, there is a limit on any single bet – say \$1 for first two bets, then \$2 dollars for the final three bets. But in No Limit Texas Holdem, you can bet every chip in your stack at any point in a hand. Which does add a degree of viewing drama. Because it always gets your pulse going a bit when you see someone say, "I'm all in" and push his entire stack of chips into the pot. He's betting everything he's got that he holds the winning hand. He's holding nothing back in reserve. He's putting it all on the line. He's "all in".

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This morning we start a seven-week sermon series we're calling, "Words to Live By." A better title would be "Greatest Hits of the Bible." Basically, Becky, Kyle and I are preaching on our favorite Bible verses, passages that are absolutely fundamental to the Christian faith.

Today I start us off with a golden oldie from the Book of *Deuteronomy*. The Book of *Deuteronomy* is a long sermon (some 33 chapters worth) that Moses delivers to the Israelites as they camp on the east bank of the Jordan River, right before they launch across to take possession of the Promised Land. Before they cross, Moses takes 33 chapters to remind them of who God is, of who they are, and what God's intention for them is. And in what is intended to be a summary of his entire 33-chapter sermon, Moses says this (listen to God's Word from the sixth chapter of *Deuteronomy*):

"Listen, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength."

This passage is called the "Shema", because that's the first word: "Shema", which is Hebrew for "Listen". Or better: "Listen up; pay attention; mark this; hear and understand". And then, in two short sentences, Moses conveys the fundamental truth about God and the fundamental truth about living our lives with God.

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First: "The LORD is our God, the LORD alone." The fundamental truth about God is that God is a specific God: specifically, "the Lord" is God. We don't get this because we think the word "Lord" is simply another word for "God". But that's not the case. Remember when God called Moses from the burning bush? In that encounter, when God tells Moses to return to Egypt to free God's people from Pharaoh's slavery, Moses balks. And one of his objections is, "If I tell the people that the God of their ancestors' sent me, they will ask me what your name is. What should I tell them?" To which God answers (in English), "I am'. Tell them 'I am' has sent you." Now, the Hebrew for "I am" is "Yahweh." And

every English Bible since the King James version has translated “Yahweh” as “Lord”. Because “Lord” is not another word for “God” – “Lord” is God’s name, the personal name of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who called Moses to free His people, the God of the prophets, and the Father of Jesus. In other words, “the Lord is our God, the Lord alone” talks about the exclusive loyalty that God’s people owe to this, specific, particular, self-revealed God. *This God – Yahweh, the Lord – is our God. This God – Yahweh, the Lord – is the only God, so all other gods are false gods. This fundamental truth simply re-states the first commandment: “I am the LORD your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt, the place of your slavery. You must not have any other god but me.”*

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Then the Shema goes on to state the fundamental truth about living our lives with the Lord: “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength.”

It’s a really powerful statement. First because it uses the word “love”. You see, from *Genesis* through *Numbers*, “love” has not been a dominant word used to describe the relationship between Israel and God; rather, it’s been words like “devotion” and “obedience”, “reverence” and “faithfulness” – all of which are good words. But now, for the first time in the Bible, “love” takes center stage in describing our relationship with God. You see, since the creation of the universe in *Genesis* 1, God has demonstrated again and again and again that he is sold-out in love for His creation, His creatures – for you and me. But now, in *Deuteronomy* 6, it’s made explicit for the first time that that’s what we’re called to do in response – to love God, to love Him back. God calls us into a love relationship with Himself, His faithful love for us evokes from us a faithful love in response.

And “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength” is also a powerful statement because of how it describes this kind of love – “all”. Love God – not some, not a little, not from time to time, but “all”. Love God with all of your heart and with all of your soul and with all of your strength. Love God with everything, all the time, with all of yourself. As Bruce Larsen puts it, being a Christian means giving all that you know of yourself to all that you know of God. It’s a leap of faith, not a test flight. It’s diving into the water, not inching in bit by bit. It’s going “all in” for God.

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“Listen, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength.”

In some ways, the book of *Deuteronomy* reads like an autopsy report of what went wrong in Israel’s story – what went wrong between the high point of moving into the Promised

Land and the low point of being hauled off into exile by their Babylonian conquerors 600 years later. And one of the fundamental things that *Deuteronomy* says went wrong in Israel's story was that, although they were given God's Law in a miraculous revelation on Mt. Sinai, the Israelites were never able to give their full commitment to the Law – they were never “all in” when it came to God.

And the truth is, we also struggle with being “all in” for God – to love God with all our heart, soul and strength. It's not that we don't love God. It's just that we trust other things more in certain situations:

- There are situations where we trust money more than God
- There are situations where we trust our own capacities more than God
- There are situations where we trust what others expect of us more than what God expects of us.
- And there are situations where our loyalties are mixed: on the job, with our family, in our desire for success.

I mentioned earlier that one of the attractions of watching Texas Holdem is that at any point a player can go “all in.” Because it's intense when someone wagers everything, holds nothing back, puts it all on the table.

Of course – except in really corny movies or really desperate real-life scenarios – no poker player is ever “all in”. They're only “all in” for what they've brought to the table, the total amount of chips they purchased and brought to the game – it might be \$10, or \$100, or \$1,000. But even at the super high-stakes tables, even when a player goes all in for millions of dollars, they're not really “all in” – it's not their car, it's not their house, it's not their bank account. They're only “all in” for what's right there on the table at that moment.

I think that's a good image for our struggle. Sometimes we think that we are “all in” for God, but it's really only for what we brought to the table. We might have brought a lot, we might have brought a little, but usually there's always something that we haven't brought to the table, that's not “in play”. Things we've marked off as “not applicable”, “not yet”. It's different things for each of us, the things we make untouchable in our relationship with God. But it doesn't take much reflection for each of us to know exactly what they are.

But we can't be “all-in” for God – we're not loving him “with all our heart, soul and strength” – if we're not bringing everything to the table.

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“Listen, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength.”

Surely, these are words to live by. Because they get right to the heart of the fundamental truth about God and the fundamental truth about living with God. In a nutshell, it's a command – an invitation – to go “all-in” for God. Which only makes sense, because He is the God who, in Jesus Christ, has gone all-in for us. And that's why it's the good news.
AMEN

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