

Christian Phylacteries?

Reformation Sunday, October 31, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

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, 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. 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.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. 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.

In our time we have seen the increase of the numbers of the orthodox Jews, and these folks are easy to identify as their dress, especially among the men, is unique. These people can be easily recognized by their black hats, their forelocks (the long, curled locks of hair growing from their temples), the yarmulkes on their heads and the tassels which hang from their coats or shawls. Another item which an orthodox Jew can be found wearing, particularly at a time of prayer, is a phylactery. This is a small leather box which holds a portion of the Torah, the Hebrew Scripture, and is tied onto the forehead or left arm of the wearer with a leather strap. Today's Old Testament lesson gives the Biblical reason for this tradition. Moses instructed the Jews to take God's Word, the scriptures, and "*bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead.*" Peculiar as it may appear there is a lesson in this. God was challenging the Hebrews to keep His Word near, and this is a command which all of us should take to heart. Might there be some Christian answer to the phylactery? This deserves some thought. Let us go back to Deuteronomy 6, the source of this tradition.

As you may recall, Deuteronomy is Moses' final sermon to Israel as they were about to enter the Promised Land. In preparation for that great venture, he gave the people not only the Ten Commandments, but the Great Commandment, which the Jews call the Shema. "*Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*" This was a command meant to keep Israel on the right path, that they might live long and prosper in their new homeland. The Shema was also to become a central test of orthodoxy for the Jews, which is why Jesus often recited and affirmed this crucial teaching of Moses. This central teaching of the Hebrews is beautiful and inspiring, and it is also one tall order for God's people! How shall we obey such a calling to complete obedience? Even those who desire to follow this command find that they are unable to do so. We simply are not strong enough for such a task.

Moses understood the problem, so the words which follow the Shema offer practical advice for God's people as to how we can more fully live up to the high requirements of our faith. "*Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.*" God's Word is more than just commands and requirements. It is the plan of God's saving love for us, and is an encouraging, empowering Word. If we only receive the words of God as commands to be stored in our heads and obeyed, we will fail. If we can let God's Word, the plan of love and salvation which God has for us, sink into our hearts and souls, we will find more power to obey and to do so joyously. Moses exhorts the Israelites to receive God's Word into their hearts and not merely into their minds. It has been said that it may only be twelve inches from the head to the heart, but that can be a very long distance! How shall we take God's Word and let it settle into our hearts and souls and hands? A strategy is needed, and Moses offers such a plan.

We are all familiar with the necessary habits of faith which keep us in fellowship with God and moving in the right direction. We have many habits and rituals of worship, prayer, service, Bible reading, fellowship, and more, which empower us. When one mentions rituals and traditions the response is often a negative one as we commonly think of old and lifeless traditions. Rituals too easily become mere traditions, done with little thought or excitement. The great challenge is to keep these traditions and rituals alive and exciting. The practice of the phylacteries on the head and hands may have been a rich illustration of keeping God's Word near to our minds and actions, but such traditions easily devolve into empty actions. Jesus criticized the Pharisees in Israel of wearing phylacteries only to be seen and admired by others, and not out of a sincere desire to obey God's Word. (Matthew 23:5) Empty traditions are not a problem for only the Jews, but for all people of faith, and there are many religious practices in which we perform with little joy, enthusiasm or actual engagement.

The good news is that Moses offers some great insights in this passage which deserve a closer look. His great desire is that the words and wisdom of God be spread all throughout our daily lives. *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 gate. God's Word is to be applied to all aspects of our lives, and God wants nothing to do with any practice of Sunday morning segregation! Note how the instruction Moses gives has nothing to do with their Sabbath practices. He is telling how to honor and receive God's Word every day of the week, wherever they might be. He is also telling them to let God's Word influence them every moment of the day. It is a good practice to ponder God's Word at the end of the day as we lie down to rest, as that is always a rich time for reflection. It is also wise to start the day with God's Word. I have shared in the past about instruction which I received from an elderly and wise woman of God. She urged me to say, each morning before getting out of bed, "Jesus is Lord." This is the best way to start each day, affirming that God is in control, and whatever may come our way, we can rest in the knowledge that God is watching over us and is working all things, at least eventually, to His good plan.

We do well to also honor God's Word in all places. Think about Jesus while at home, at work and on the road. The Gideons place Bibles in hotel rooms for good reason, for when people are far from home, they are much more vulnerable to loneliness, depression, and temptation. We must be ready to fight the fight of faith on every battlefield. Don't keep God's Word locked up in your Church or in your study at home, but let it follow you wherever you go. Our engaging of God's Word should not be done only in the Church on the Lord's Day morning. Not that this time and place is unimportant! It is crucial that we take a special time and designate a special place where God's people can rally, worship, and be about the work of the Church. The problem comes when we segregate our lives such that our faith is only studied within those confines. Our faith, and God's Word on which our faith is built, needs to be spilling out over the boundaries of the worship place and hour, to touch all aspects of life. It becomes tempting and too easy to deal with our faith on Sunday morning, and then head out into "the real world" to deal with that whole realm on its own terms.

But how shall we take God's Word with us? Moses offers a very simple solution. *Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away... and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.* One trend in home decoration of late is to hang signs with words and phrases around the house, like "Welcome" or "Eat, Pray & Love." Many Christians have done some decorating of their own adorning their homes, inside and out, with brief Bible verses. This is one way to apply the Bible to our lives and to follow Moses' instruction in a very real way. In this day of modern printing methods, we can now carry pocket New Testaments with us, and I regret that this practice is not more widely honored. The Gideons hand these out regularly, and if you have received one, do carry it with you and take time

to open it and read. Try a few verses from a Gospel, or pray through a psalm. You will soon be surprised by the inspiration and guidance that you will receive. Throughout my pastoral career I have been blessed with the responsibility of needing to produce a weekly sermon, and to help in this work I have made a habit of carrying the text of the coming week's message with me. In these days of the computer and printer it is a simple thing to print out the Bible passage for the week and then take it with me. By regularly referring to that paper I not only gain insights and thoughts for that week's message, but I find that each day is enriched by God's Word. We Christians can have phylacteries of our own!

Daily Bible reading and study is a tremendous blessing. Whether you are trying to read through the Bible in a year, study a particular book of the Bible, or simply follow a daily devotional, there is life and power in delving into God's Word! The mention of daily Bible reading can cause us to feel guilty as many of us attempt this practice but frequently miss our readings. Don't punish yourself for the readings that you miss. Make the most of the reading which you do accomplish. All of us should also avail ourselves to what I call our "inner libraries." While most Christians are insistent that "they don't really know their Bibles," the truth is that we know more than we realize, and we must spend less time scolding ourselves for what we do not know and put much more time into meditating on what we do know. If you know the Lord's Prayer, the 23rd Psalm and the Apostles' Creed (not Scripture, but very rich just the same) you have enough truth to ponder for years. What is a recent Bible verse which caught your attention? Let me expand that to include the hymns and songs of faith which so move us. Think about it, and you will be blessed.

The final and great challenge for the believer is not to simply post God's Word all around themselves, but to then truly engage that Word. Bible verses on the walls, in our pockets or in phylacteries can easily become mere words or empty sounding phrases. The Bible is meant as God's love letter to His people, and like any love letter it must be read in an engaged and personal way. One barrier to engaging God's Word is our habit of receiving God's instruction only as a command. I see people posting the Ten Commandments, which are good, but I fear that some look to God and only see a source of commands over which we will all eventually feel very guilty. One might hear Paul's exhortation to *Rejoice in the Lord always*, and only register the message that "Golly, I really don't praise enough." We hear the call to *Trust in the Lord*, and our only response is to scold ourselves for our lack of faith. When we think only in terms of God's commands our faith becomes one big "should," and the sad truth is that we are weak and unable to fully do as we should. God's Word is much more than one big commandment. It is the story of God's saving work and power by which weak and helpless sinners can find power for living. Are you being crushed under a "should" religion? Start looking for some other Bible verses!

We must also be willing to genuinely engage God's Word with honest feelings and responses. I well remember a Sunday morning while I was in divinity school hearing Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount being read. As I heard Jesus' loving exhortation not to worry, for the God who takes care of the birds and the lilies will much more take care of you, (Matthew 6:25-34) I could distinctly hear my own heart crying out, "O baloney!" At first, we recoil at such a remark. One shouldn't talk to God in such a way, is our natural thought. But one can argue with God in a faithful way, and this is what I was doing. As a broke divinity student, I often tired of my financial condition, and when I heard those words on that Lord's Day morning my heart cried out in frustration, and this was wonderful! This is one way that we engage God's Word. Too easily we can force ourselves to smile and tell ourselves that we really ought to be more trusting of God's provision, but this is not really meeting God in a close-up kind of way. Like the psalmist, we need to pour out our frustrations and disbelief, deal with those emotions, and then move on to greater faith! At that moment when I realized the frustration which I was carrying, I was able to pour it out to God and allow God to restore my faith. And do note that I am not endorsing our dumping on God in the name of a more sincere faith without really wrestling with God as the psalmist did.

Another way that we can take God's Word to heart is by meditating upon certain phrases. In a recent Sunday school class we spent several weeks considering that marvelous phrase from the 23rd Psalm—*Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies*. Such a rich picture of faith! God provides for us and even meets us during this earthly life, but all this happens in a hostile environment as our enemies and the enemies of faith are always nearby. Take this familiar verse with you and be blessed! As brief as any verse in the Bible is John 11:35—*Jesus wept*—but these two words speak volumes to the soul of one who will meditate upon them. God came and genuinely suffered with us. Jesus was unashamed to cry. God understands my tears. The briefest of verses can bring boundless comfort.

Our bulletin cover reminds us of another great way to honor God's Word by sharing it with our children. Have you read the Bible to your children or grandchildren? This clear exhortation from Moses is an opportunity which must not be missed by either party. This is a Word which will stay with the little ones all their lives, and stories of the Bible come alive as we introduce them to the precious ones.

Finally let me stress that God's Word is meant to be a group activity. We make faith such an individual matter that we forget this crucial dimension of our walk with God. Moses tells to *talk* and to *recite*, and this involves other people. This is why a Sunday school discussion, or a neighborhood Bible study on someone's back porch, or our *Alpha* group can be so powerful an experience. I know many people who came to faith because of such groups and discussions. Faith may be a personal matter, but it is also for sharing. We must remember that the psalms, which present so clearly a dialogue

of faith between struggling believers and our faithful God, were written to be presented and celebrated by the gathered people of God!

On this Reformation Sunday we rightly stress the importance of the Bible, for there was a time when the Bible did not receive its rightful attention. There was a time when the Church did not encourage or even allow ordinary people to read the Bible for themselves, but as people of the Reformation we hold it high as the ultimate source of truth, with authority over the Church. All are urged to read for themselves, for God's Word has power to change lives, especially as we open ourselves to it. While we Protestants proudly proclaim these truths, we must also remember the humorous yet wise observation that "for every ten people who would fight and even die for our right to read the Bible, only about one of those people would actually open their Bible and read it." Let us be that one out of ten people, for only as we truly engage God's Word, do we find the power to truly live like God's people.