

# biblestudy: february 2022

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Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

## February 6, 2022 Text: Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Matthew 22:34-40 “The Shema”

How do you react when someone says, “Hey, listen up!”? How do you respond when someone shouts, “Hey! I’ve got something to tell you!”? What do you do when someone says, “Pay attention now!”? That’s what the word *Shema* means: “Hear ye, hear ye!”

Many faithful Jewish persons (tradition says males) will recite this text from Deuteronomy twice a day. It is a prayer conversation with God in which the Almighty is speaking. The Lord is saying, “Accept this!” And by New Testament times, Jesus is pointing to this divine expectation and clarifies that loving God also means loving neighbor (Matthew 22:34-40).

There is not any “wiggle room” in this commandment. In Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (New Revised Standard Version), note the words “alone” and “all” (three times). That does not allow for any exceptions. And, if there be any doubt about it, Jesus makes it clear that loving God (fully) and loving neighbor (fully) are part and parcel of the same relationship.

But, don’t let one other point slip by: Jesus also calls for us to love ourselves (Matthew 22:39). When we look at another and say, “Child of God,” we look in the mirror and say the same. When we respect another as someone created in the image of God, we look in the mirror and say the same. When we acknowledge others as targets of God’s preve-

nient—seeking, preceding—grace, we look in the mirror and see the same.

Loving God. Loving neighbor. Loving self. Which is the hardest for you to do? Loving God can be tough because God can seem abstract. Loving neighbor can be tough because neighbor can be uncaring. Loving self can be tough because so often we fall short of our best.

Yet, here it is: “Shema!” “Listen!” “Hear this!” These love expressions flow from each other, don’t they? The “go” switch on all of this is God’s grace-giving love for God’s creation and for us God’s creatures. God has “flipped the switch” of love and now it is our turn: God, neighbor, self.

### What Someone Else Has Said:

Kenneth J. Collins (*The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace*, Abingdon Press) has written: “Though Wesley often simply employed the term ‘holiness’ to describe the end or goal of the Christian life, nevertheless, at key points in his writings, he broke out this language into the elements of holy love.”

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Your love, O God, has set me free to love as You love...”

## February 13, 2022 Text: Matthew 5:14-16 “Making God’s Light Visible”

Hooray! I preached a sermon and folks told me I did a great job.

Hooray! I gave ten dollars to the needy family fund and the treasurer told me how generous I was.

Hooray! I took time to drive thirty miles to visit a friend in the hospital and he told me how thoughtful I was.

Oops.

Jesus said that the light we shine is so that others can give glory to God, not so they will see how wonderful we are. As one writer has said about this text: “While God’s glory may be made evident through creation, God’s lovingkindness and concern for justice is often most visible when those who profess faith in God make God’s love and justice evident.”

Has anyone ever asked you why you did some particular thing and your answer was “because of God”? I have grown in grace when I recognize that a strong sermon, a financial gift, and a helpful visit are expressions of how God lives in the world.

I’m not encouraging us to exhibit a fake humility. Such humility is a

sham and such fakery does not please God. Instead, I am inviting us to consider the source of what Jesus calls “your good works.” Indeed, they are my good works! And Jesus calls on us to let those good works shine before the world. But those good works are acts of God for which we are simply instruments. We are imperfect examples of how God works: “The Word became flesh” (John 1:14).

You and I are gifted differently. Whatever your gift, it is as John Wesley wrote in his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, “The very design of God in giving you this light was that it might shine.” In seeing such light, others may be moved to love and serve God also.

So, I ask myself: “Has God given me a light that I have kept under a basket?”

### What Someone Else Has Said:

Leonard Sweet (*Me and We*, Abingdon Press) has written: “The darker the night, the brighter the stars...The light is found only in the darkness, just as peace is found only through suffering.”

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Use me, O Lord, to be Your light in the darkness of the world...”

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February 20, 2022 Text: James 1:19-27 “Authentic Speech”

When I was in the fourth grade, I was promoted to the Junior Department of the Sunday School of First Methodist Church in Siler City. We had an opening assembly and then we fourth graders went off to our small classroom. There, on the front wall, was a large poster. It read: “Be ye doers of the word and not hearers only.” Now, that presented a new word: “doers.” Mrs. Dellinger said it meant “Don’t just sit there; do something.”

Charles B. Williams (*Translation in the Language of the People*) says it means “obeying this message.” James Moffatt (*A New Translation*) interprets “doers” as “act on the word.” *The Twentieth Century New Testament* translates it: “Put that Message into practice.” Eugene Peterson (*The Message*) renders it “Act on what you hear.” (James 1:22)

James is pretty clear on what it is we hear from God. In James 1:27, he spells it out as caring for the needy and not becoming worldly. (“Not becoming worldly” does not mean we do not get involved in the world; it means we do not make our decisions by worldly values; we make our decisions by God’s values.)

I suppose it is not very good Bible study, but sometimes I read between the lines to take a guess at what was going on when the writer took pen in hand. James is writing to a scattered group (James 1:1), but he has

evidently heard that there are those within the community who were running off at the mouth, insulting others, using foul language, blabbering without thinking. Note how in this week’s text he writes about the speech of the believer: verse 19 (“be slow to speak”), verse 26 (“bridle your tongue”). James makes a point that faithfulness is measured both in what we do and in what we say (and don’t say).

I know a fellow who says that the Letter of James is so practical and down-to-earth that the writer seems to be just “one of the boys.” Therefore, he has decided to give the author a nickname; he calls him “Saint Jimmy.” Jimmy or James—this is indeed instruction and conversation that applies to daily life. That is both the comfort and challenge of these verses.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Bishop Kenneth Carder (*Living Our Beliefs*, Discipleship Resources) has written: “The church’s purpose is not its own. The church belongs to God and not to us. The church is to be present in the world on behalf of God by whose grace it has been called into existence. What is the nature of God’s presence in the world? God’s presence is creative and redemptive.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord Jesus, help me to speak with love; help me to act with love; help me to be love...”

February 27, 2022 Text: Matthew 28:16-20 “The Great Commission”

This week’s study text is a familiar one. It is reflected in the official mission statement of The United Methodist Church: “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”

But there would have been good reason for discouragement and uncertainty as those early disciples were commissioned by Jesus. The first thing that jumps out is the fact that there were only eleven disciples present (Matthew 28:16). Judas is gone. The post-resurrection work is just beginning and already the numbers are dwindling. A second reality is that even as the risen Lord stood among them, “some doubted” (Matthew 28:17). Those who had been closest to Jesus were not in full assurance that what was happening was real. There is a third concern: Jesus said to go to “all nations” (Matthew 28:19). That task is just overwhelming!

How about today? Are we discouraged by the shrinking number of faithful believers (verse 16)? Are we really sure that Jesus can make good on His promises (verse 17)? How can we go to “all nations” when we can’t even get a full house of disciples here where we live (verse 19)?

What, then, are we to do? It looks as if we are to play the game without having been dealt a full deck.

For starters, let us note that what Jesus has said is not a suggestion; it is an instruction. Then, let’s pay attention to the context: Jesus points out that all authority has been given to Him (verse 18). The word translated as “authority” is *ἐξουσία*. It means not only the position of authority, but also the ability of authority. In other words, the Lord has the ability to get things done. That ought to be encouraging!

The final “yes” as we undertake this mission is that Jesus says He will be with us (verse 20). We do not go alone as we undertake what Jesus has told us to do. Shall we get started?

What Someone Else Has Said:

“The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world by proclaiming the good news of God’s grace and by exemplifying Jesus’ command to love God and neighbor, thus seeking the fulfillment of God’s reign and realm in the world....This mission is our grace-filled response to the Reign of God in the world announced by Jesus. God’s grace is active everywhere, at all times, carrying out this purpose revealed in the Bible.” (para. 121, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*)

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Yes, Lord, we go...”

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