

Deuteronomy 17 **Civil Order (VI, VII, IX)**

Deuteronomy 19-24

In the past two studies, the warning against compromising with the local worship is clear. There must be no deal made with them. God is holy and we cannot worship Him in ways borrowed from other religions, and not even when we think it is right. It has to be true to the nature of God. We must not import secular principles into the church. What worked in the business world need not be the best thing for the church. An example.

The issues enunciated by Moses in these next few chapters do not display the clear order as with the earlier commandments. It seems that Moses had got it all over the place. To say that would be disrespectful to Moses. We would like an organised discourse in the order of the commandments given. However, I think Moses had a different grid as he talked to the people. He was basing his discourse on the covenant relationship. The sixth to tenth commandments revolve around the divine covenant relationship expressed in the human realm. There would be myriads of issues to mention. We can summarise these issues in these words, 'if we love God, we would love those whom He has created'. And Moses just wanted to talk to that as the last five commandments are inter-related. They sum up the love that should be expressed to one another in our community.

Rather than to go through chapter by chapter, in this and the next study, I would like to discuss them in the order of the commandments given. This will involve moving from sections to sections in the various chapters. There will be a few miscellaneous issues that Moses raised in these chapters and I will leave them out.

We would have noticed from last study that our western judicial system is modelled after the Deuteronomic discourses. This is also obvious from today's study. What is different is that we have separated the secular from the religious, and the legal from the covenantal. In other words, instead of a theocracy we have a democracy, and instead of a covenant we have a contract. What is wrong in this separation is that we now have law without love. Yes, Moses did enunciate the law, but that was in the context of the covenant. We live in a country that does not allow us to do that, but at least we can do that in the communities we live and worship in.

VI, VII, IX Commandments

- VI You shall not murder.
- VII And you shall not commit adultery.
- IX And you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Homicide 19:1-13, 20:1-21:14

(You shall not murder).

Cities of refuge 19:1-13

The commandment against homicide is clear and needs no further elaboration. However, accidents can happen, someone was killed unintentionally. The example given was that of an axe head flying off its handle and killing someone. Naturally, there would be anger and vengeance contemplated. Israel needed to set up cities of refuge where the person involved in the accident could flee to for safety, 'lest innocent blood be shed' (19:10). This does not apply for premeditated

murder (19:11-13). They needed to be turned in and judgement made. This is for the protection of innocent parties.

Warfare 20:1-20

In warfare, Israel was instructed to put her trust in the Lord as she was fighting against a much superior force. However, this must not be taken to apply to any battle, but only the battles that the Lord put them through in order to possess the land that was promised. It is the Lord doing what He said He would do for Israel, not just Israel deciding whom she wanted to take over. We are not simply talking about killing in war, but the removal of evil and all that pervert the justice of God.

However, there were exemptions for enlistment. These included those moving into a new dwelling (20:5), those who had planted a new vineyard (20:6), and the newly married (20:7). The home, the produce from the land and posterity are the essence of the life in the community¹, without which the possession of the land would be pointless. The fainthearted were also excluded (20:8) as they would prove to be a cold blanket on the army.

The next section on warfare presents a few problems for the modern mind. I think it is best to read this section (20:10-18) so that we put things in context.

¹⁰“When you draw near to a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it. ¹¹And if it responds to you peaceably and it opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall do forced labor for you and shall serve you. ¹²But if it makes no peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it. ¹³And when the LORD your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword, ¹⁴but the women and the little ones, the livestock, and everything else in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as plunder for yourselves. And you shall enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the LORD your God has given you. ¹⁵Thus you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not cities of the nations here. ¹⁶But in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, ¹⁷but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the LORD your God has commanded, ¹⁸that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the LORD your God.

Their first task when confronting a city was to ‘offer terms of peace’ (20:10). No lives were to be taken. The local inhabitants were to serve Israel. In other words, Israel dictated the terms of the occupation and not follow the practices of the land.

It was only upon their refusal that warfare ensued. Yet the peace was not on equal terms. Israel was to take down all local forms of worship in the conquered land. Males were put to the sword as they would be the ones who could mount a resurgence. The worship of Yahweh in Israel was to be the dominant culture (20:18). There were other cities where there would be total destruction.

Regarding vegetation, only those plants that did not bear fruit for food could be cut down (20:19-20). The others would be retained for food.

The humanitarian emphasis is clear in this section and indeed in all sections of the discourse by Moses. It is not rampant destruction of the conquered lands, but the preservation of what is good for the life of the communities that would inhabit the land.

However, the total destruction advocated in 20:16-18 is unusual and needs to be seen in the context of the times. The reason for the hard line is that ‘they may not teach you to do according

¹ P Craigie, *Deuteronomy* (Eerdmans, 1976), 274.

to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the LORD your God' (20:18). The purity of worship needs to be preserved against all forms of evil. There might be the need to do that in those days, but we are told by Jesus to 'love our enemies' (Matt. 5:44). However, we need to do that without compromising our practices and the way we live and worship God. This principle is clear. We can see that in our times the interpretation of 'loving our enemies' and not conforming to worldly practices may not be as clear cut as it was in the days of Moses. Where do we draw the line? It is not easy and we need to respect our brothers and sisters in the Lord as we seek to live out these injunctions. Indeed, we have the guidance of the Holy Spirit in post-Pentecost to live this out. I have cited a few applications of the principles Moses had given and I acknowledge that I do intend them to be absolute. We all need to 'work out our salvation with fear and trembling'.

Unsolved murders 21:1-9.

⁷and they shall testify, 'Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it shed. ⁸Accept atonement, O LORD, for your people Israel, whom you have redeemed, and do not set the guilt of innocent blood in the midst of your people Israel, so that their blood guilt be atoned for.' (21:7-8)

The issue of cleanliness was important to Israel in those days, but not in ours. A murder had taken place and the community needed to act justly.

Female POW 21:10-14

When one wanted to take a female captive to be a wife, it had to be done with respect to the woman. She must be allowed a month to mourn for the loss of her family. Only then could the marriage take place.

What governs these practices is the respect for life and the individual circumstances, but whatever that does not conform to the worship of Yahweh has no place in the newly established nation. It may seem harsh, but the purity of worship must not be compromised. We need to take heed in our world today.

Marriage and sexual purity 22:13-30

(And you shall not commit adultery).

The husband wife relationship is a creational relationship for the continuation of the human race. It is also an image of the divine-human relationship, that of the lamb and the church (Rev. 21:2). Thus, this relationship needs to be observed with the utmost purity. Sexual relationship outside of marriage is a defilement of the creational order and the divine-human relationship. The scriptures describe Israel flirtation with other gods as prostitution. Paul reinforce this commandment this way.

¹Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, ²older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity. (1 Tim. 5:1-2)

This statement by Paul should be clear enough and there is no need to go through the various perversions of this commandment. We may regard some of the punishment as harsh, but we need to see that in the context of the creational order and the divine-human relationship restored at the cost of Jesus' blood. God does not mete out punishment that He is not prepared to bear Himself.

Divorce (24:1-4)

Moses granted them a certificate of divorce where there was evidence of indecency. Jesus answer was this, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment (Mark 10:5). The creational male female union is sacrosanct. There may be difficulties in the relationship, as will be the case in all human relationships, yet it is because of our faith in God, which is our worship, that He will continue to bless this relationship. Furthermore, if we claim that it is God who brought together this union, then a divorce is taking the name of the Lord in vain. The granting of a divorce on the grounds of indecency is not an absolute determination. The redemption of an indecent wife as in the case of Hosea speaks against that. However, in cases of violence I have no hesitation in advising a separation, and later a divorce if no reconciliation is possible. Violence can lead to the loss of life. In all ethical consideration, there is a hierarchy of ethical principles. The sanctity of human life overrides all ethical principles.

Levirate marriage (25:5-10)

A Levirate marriage is one where a man dies without a child, then his brother marries the sister-in-law and their first child from that union is the child of the brother who had passed away. The reason for this is the preservation of posterity for the family.

False witness 19:15-21

And you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

The commandment against false witness is straightforward. Justice needs to be established on the facts of the situation. Witnesses establish the facts. Our justice system is based on this. False witness gives a false impression of the situation and incriminates the wrong the person. Often that is done to get oneself out of the penalty.

¹⁵ "A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established. ¹⁶ If a malicious witness arises to accuse a person of wrongdoing, ¹⁷ then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who are in office in those days. ¹⁸ The judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, ¹⁹ then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. ²⁰ And the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you. ²¹ Your eye shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

Miscellaneous laws

First born 21:15-17. The first-born child is the first born even though he is from a less favourable wife.

Rebellious man 21:18-21. There is a sense of the community here. Difficult though the son may be, the wider community has a role in making a judgement.

Hanging 21:22-23. The body of one hanged needs to be buried the same day less his body rot and invites disease. There are other in this category and we can easily understand them from our knowledge of hygiene. We have a responsibility to others in preventing the transmission of diseases. We have now a principle called 'the duty of care' when delivering services to the community. It is a good principle but is often abused and used in incriminating others when one takes no personal responsibility for the result. That is the result of the separation of the law from the covenant.