

Deuteronomy 18

Respect for life and property (VIII, X)

Deuteronomy 23-26

In these few studies, we see how Moses spelt out in some detail the ways in which the 'Ten Words' were to be observed. I think it is better to see that as 'The Ten Words of the Covenant Relationship' instead of 'Ten Commandments'. Of course, they are commandments. However, they are not commandments merely in the legal sense, but commandments to lead us in the ways of God. I have tried to draw out the principles on which Moses based his discourses and then re-apply them in our day. The applications of course differ in different cultures and periods. We can see that the ways Moses applied these principles three and a half thousand years ago do not apply to us today and we need to re-think them in the communities we find ourselves. The way we apply them may differ and we need to avoid setting them in dogma as the Pharisees did.

VIII, X Commandments

¹⁹ "And you shall not steal.

²¹ "And you shall not covet your neighbor's wife. And you shall not desire your neighbour's house, his field, or his male servant, or his female servant, his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.'

I will take the eighth and tenth commandments together as stealing and covetousness go together. They are desiring or taking what does not belong to us. Covetousness leads to stealing and perhaps murder. It can also lead to adultery and when caught one may resort to false witness. It can be seen that covetousness is the root problem in our ethics, in our dealing with others, and what is difficult is that it cannot be policed. It resides in the human heart. One cannot say that one has obeyed all the commandments to love God and to love another without having dealt with the covetousness in the heart. And because of covetousness we have not loved our brothers and how then can we say that we love God. We need to see that obedience to the Ten Words depends on this last commandment. And changing the covetous human heart is not a human possibility. It is the work of the Creator to reset it.

Property (19:14)

¹⁴ "You shall not move your neighbor's landmark, which the men of old have set, in the inheritance that you will hold in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to possess. (19:14)

The moving of the markings of the land is the stealth of property. Land was important to the Israelites in those days as every inch of land means an extra crop for harvest. It is the consideration for the livelihood of the neighbour.

Your brother's ox (22:1-4)

²² "You shall not see your brother's ox or his sheep going astray and ignore them. You shall take them back to your brother. ² And if he does not live near you and you do not know who he is, you shall bring it home to your house, and it shall stay with you until your brother seeks it. Then you shall restore it to him. ³ And you shall do the same with his donkey or with his garment, or with any lost thing of your brother's, which he loses and you find; you may not ignore it. ⁴ You shall not see your brother's donkey or his ox fallen down by the way and ignore them. You shall help him to lift them up again. (22:1-4)

What was to be restored here were not merely the animals, but means of livelihood. The ox and the donkey were the workers on the land. To lose them is to lose the help one gets to cultivate the land and to deliver the produce.

Runaway slave (23:15-16)

¹⁵“You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you. ¹⁶He shall dwell with you, in your midst, in the place that he shall choose within one of your towns, wherever it suits him. You shall not wrong him. (23:15-16)

The slave referred to here is not an Israelite as he would be returned to his master (see Philemon). It is the foreign slaves that are referred to. Runaway foreign slaves, if returned, would be killed. Here is the humanitarian rule for Israel, the protection of the life of one who is unfortunate to be in a low estate in society.

Loans (23:19-20, 24:10-18)

¹⁹“You shall not charge interest on loans to your brother, interest on money, interest on food, interest on anything that is lent for interest. ²⁰You may charge a foreigner interest, but you may not charge your brother interest, that the LORD your God may bless you in all that you undertake in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. (23:19-20)

An Israelite cannot charge interest on loans made to another Israelite. They are brothers and the Lord had delivered them from Egypt. They are not to profit from one another. In the same way, interest free loans to the church or to a brother is very much a Mosaic injunction. We do not profit from one another and much less from the church community. The reason for asking for a loan is because of need. Just as our God supply all our needs, we ought to come willingly to the aid of another. To profit from aiding another is not the spirit of things. It is different for those who are not part of the community of Israel. The loan of the foreigner may be for business or otherwise. Interest may be charged then.

¹⁰“When you make your neighbor a loan of any sort, you shall not go into his house to collect his pledge. ¹¹You shall stand outside, and the man to whom you make the loan shall bring the pledge out to you. ¹²And if he is a poor man, you shall not sleep in his pledge. ¹³You shall restore to him the pledge as the sun sets, that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you. And it shall be righteousness for you before the LORD your God. (24:10-13)

It was normal for the lender to take some kind of a pledge for the interest free loan that was made. However, it was the freedom of the borrower to offer the pledge. The lender was not allowed to enter the house to take whatever pledge he wanted. If it were to be a cloak, then it had to be returned to the borrower at sunset so that he might be kept warm in the cloak at night. This was applied to whatever the borrower might need. In doing so, one has acted righteously because one has the welfare of the other at heart.

¹⁴“You shall not oppress a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brothers or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns. ¹⁵You shall give him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets (for he is poor and counts on it), lest he cry against you to the LORD, and you be guilty of sin. (24:14-15)

The concern for a hired worker is the same, whether he be an Israelite or a foreigner. He needs to be paid on time in order to buy food for the family. Not paying a worker on time is the same as stealing from him.

¹⁷“You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge, ¹⁸but you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this. (24:17-18)

Where a loan had been made to the poor, one may not take a pledge as the possessions they had were minimal. A widow's garment may be the only change of clothing she had. Israel needed to have special consideration for the poor and the defenseless because they 'were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there'. All that we have are from

God and we too need to look after the interest of the needy and not only our own.

Gleaning (24:19-22)

¹⁹“When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. ²⁰When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. ²¹When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterward. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. ²²You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this. (24:19-22)

This is the principle of gleaning and we read that in the book of Ruth. This is also a way of expressing our concern for the poor and needy.

Dishonesty in trade (25:13-16)

¹³“You shall not have in your bag two kinds of weights, a large and a small. ¹⁴You shall not have in your house two kinds of measures, a large and a small. ¹⁵A full and fair weight you shall have, a full and fair measure you shall have, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. ¹⁶For all who do such things, all who act dishonestly, are an abomination to the LORD your God. (25:13-16)

Dishonesty in trade is also an aspect of stealing from others. We do not need to say much more. Much of these injunctions are part of our western culture as these have come from the Judeo-Christian tradition. We have sayings like, ‘honesty is the best policy’ and ‘a fair go’, etc.

Not much was said specifically regarding covetousness in these chapters. However, all that had been said regarding the last five commandments are about the covetousness of the human heart. Our sins are expressed in our actions but its seat is in the human heart. Unless we can deal with the covetousness within then however we may hide or whitewash our actions, we will be caught out some time. We are powerless to do that and Moses has more to say about that in his concluding discourse. We will see that next week.

Worship and the credal response (26:5-11)

⁵“And you shall make response before the LORD your God, ‘A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. ⁶And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. ⁷Then we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. ⁸And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. ⁹And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O LORD, have given me.’ And you shall set it down before the LORD your God and worship before the LORD your God. ¹¹And you shall rejoice in all the good that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.

Moses was coming to the end of his discourse and this is the creed that he taught the Israelites to repeat when they come before the Lord, ‘A wandering Aramean was my father ...’ (26:5-10). This is the first credal statement we have. Today, we have several credal statements, like the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. I use them often in the worship as it states very succinctly the essence of our beliefs and why we come before the Lord.

It is appropriate here to refer back to an earlier chapter when this credal statement needs to be taught to subsequent generations.

²⁰“When your son asks you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the LORD our God has commanded you?’ ²¹then you shall say to your son, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. ²²And the LORD showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes. ²³And he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our fathers. ²⁴And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD

our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day. ²⁵ And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us.' (Deut. 6:20-25)

Covenant ratification (26:16-19)

¹⁶ "This day the LORD your God commands you to do these statutes and rules. You shall therefore be careful to do them **with all your heart and with all your soul.** ¹⁷ You have declared today that the LORD is your God, and that you will walk in his ways, and keep his statutes and his commandments and his rules, and will obey his voice. ¹⁸ And the LORD has declared today that you are a people for his **treasured possession,** as he has promised you, and that you are to keep all his commandments, ¹⁹ and that he will set you in praise and in fame and in honor high above all nations that he has made, and that you shall be a people holy to the LORD your God, as he promised." (26:16-19)

And before Moses finished off this section of his discourse, he reminded them again of the *shema*. These things that he had commanded them to do were not just mere repetitive actions, but they needed to exude from the heart and soul. It is not mere legality but the very essence of the covenant relationship, 'you are a people for his treasured possession' (26:18).