

DEUTERONOMY – PART TWO

Rules and Regulations for Daily Life

Chapters 12-28

These chapters are a continuation of the second part of Moses' Second Sermon. They contain laws and regulations governing every aspect of Israel's daily life: cultic, criminal, and social. Deuteronomy stresses that the covenant is tied to life in the land, and that misuse of the land, failure to create a just society, and dishonest policies of rulers, will cost Israel its right to the land. This understanding of God's dealings with Israel becomes very important when the people are exiled from the land (598-587 BC). They come to realize that they lost their land because of their infidelity to God and their failure to build a just society.

CHAPTER 12: One place of worship

Moses orders the destruction of all places of worship. *"Tear down their altars, smash their sacred pillars ..., shatter the idols of their gods, that you may stomp out the remembrance of them in any such place"* (v.3). These are harsh words intended to protect the Israelites from becoming involved in *any way* with the pagan practices of the Canaanites.

For us, it is clear that we are called to remove any false gods in our lives and to guard against worldly temptations that lure us away from God.

Verses 4-14. Moses tells the people to worship only at the places prescribed for that purpose (vv 4-14). Scholars tell us that the author of Deuteronomy (writing hundreds of years after Israel entered the Promised Land), was pushing for the centralization of worship in one place, namely, Jerusalem. But as we shall see in the next several books of the Bible, the people continue to worship at several shrines.

Verses 13-28. As a consequence of the legislation confining worship at a single sanctuary, a distinction has been made between the *profane slaughter of animals* (which can be done on the farms and consumed in the homes) and the *sacrificial killing of animals* (which may only take place at a chosen shrine and eaten there). Drinking blood is forbidden because it is a pagan practice in the land that Israel is about to enter, and because blood represents life—which is sacred to God.

CHAPTER 13: Pagan practices

This section on pagan practices begins with Chapter 12:29. A big danger for the Israelites when they enter Canaan is the temptation to adopt the pagan practices of their neighbors, which Moses strongly warns them to stay away from. They should not even inquire into the worship practices of their Canaanite neighbors (Ch 12:30).

The worship life of Israel is threatened. Threats may come from one of their prophets (vv 2-6), a family member (vv 7-12), or a whole city. But anyone who leads others astray is to be executed. We are reminded of Jesus' harsh words to those who are a source of scandal to others. (Lk 17:1-3)

Pause: What common practices today can keep us away from loyalty to God and his Word? What practices in the wider community pose a threat to us as we seek to remain true to God's ways?

CHAPTER 14: Dietary laws as a way to protect Israel's identity

The Israelites are forbidden to adopt the mourning practices of the Canaanites.

Concerning dietary laws (vv 3-21), the Collegeville Commentary on Deuteronomy states:

"Observance of these dietary laws helped early Judaism develop its identity. It effectively cut off socializing with non-Jews and thereby helped to fend off the impulse to assimilation. Gradually these dietary laws, as they were developed and enlarged in early Judaism, became so ingrained in the Jewish religious identity that the first Christians had a difficult time conceiving of the possibility of genuine religion without them (Acts 15:29; Col 2:21). The basic assumption behind these dietary laws is that the people of God cannot be like the people who worship foreign gods, and this distinction is to extend even to matters of diet." (p. 212)

The ancient practice of tithing (vv 22-29) serves two purposes: (1) to give God the first fruits of the harvest

as a way of reminding the people that God is the giver of the land and the harvest; (2) to help maintain the places of worship and to support the Levites, the priestly clans who had no land of their own.

Pause: Is Catholic identity important in our pluralistic society? If so, how do we hold onto our Catholic identity?

CHAPTER 15: Regulations for dealing with debts, slaves, and firstlings

To mitigate the widespread problem of poverty and debts, it is decreed that every seventh year shall be a year of *release*, when all debts are to be cancelled. Creditors are to be forgiving on their kinsmen who owe them, and those who own a lot of land shall be generous in loaning land to those in need (vv 7-8).

In the ancient Near East, some people who have large debts are forced to sell themselves into slavery as a way to work off their payment. It is decreed that slaves shall be released after six years of service, whether or not they have paid their debt, and that they shall not be sent away empty-handed (vv 3-4).

Only male first-born animals shall be dedicated to God as a reminder that it is God who gives the harvest. The animal shall be consumed before God in the place of God's choosing. Firstlings with blemish are not to be offered to God. They can be eaten in the homes or communities after discarding the animal's blood (v.23).

CHAPTER 16:1-18: Liturgical Feasts

Three of the main feasts in Israel's Liturgical year are Passover, Feast of Weeks and Feast of Booths (see commentary on Leviticus 23, article 9, for more on these feasts). These feasts are celebrated at a central sanctuary (vv. 5-6) rather than in the towns of the land, as was the previous custom (Lev 23:3).

Abib is the Hebrew name for the month in which the feast of Passover is to be celebrated (around March-April) (v.1).

CHAPTERS 16:18 - 19:21: Leaders and institutions

There are statutes and decrees that apply to positions of leadership and associated institutions. Introducing these chapters, the Collegeville Commentary states:

“An important concern in Israel was the quality of its leadership. The Deuteronomists describe their expectations of those who are to hold specific offices: judge, king, priest, and prophet. What is most significant in Deuteronomy's presentation is the assumption that Israel's leaders, especially the king, are subject to the written, authoritative law found in the Book of Deuteronomy. The rule of the king is not absolute. All Israel's leaders are bound by the sacred traditions that find expression in Deuteronomy. This serves to limit the authority of the leadership class and makes it more responsible to the people as a whole. Deuteronomy clearly espouses belief in the value of limited government.” (p. 215-16)

One key to enjoying life in the Promised Land is if a fair justice system existed which would help the people to be faithful to their covenant with God and enable them to redress the grievances within the community. To that end, it is decreed that:

- Judges shall be elected in each community (16:18-20).
- Procedures shall be established for uncovering the truth in court and carrying out the court's decisions (17:2-7; 19:15-21).
- A central court shall be set up for dealing with difficult cases (17:8-13).
- A sanctuary or safe haven shall be provided to a person charged with the unintentional killing of another to ensure that revenge does not take precedence over justice (19:1-13).

CHAPTER 20: Rules for war

The regulations regarding warfare are mentioned elsewhere in this book (21:10-14, 23:9-14, 25:17-19). All the attention to warfare in the Bible may offend our modern sensibilities, but it was through armed struggle that cities and nations were conquered. It is no great wonder that Israel acquired the land of Canaan, in part through violent means. The Collegeville commentary states:

“The treatment of enemy cities appears brutal, but what is described here (vv 10-18) is not any more brutal than the practices of other nations in the ancient Near East. In interpreting these verses, it is important to remember that Deuteronomy is more ideological than realistic in its presentation of Israelite military policies. Israel is not in a position to conduct itself according to these prescriptions. Israel

is more in danger of having its cities destroyed than its neighbors are.” (p.217)

Because Israel does not obey God’s command to totally wipe out the cities (mentioned in verse 17), they are constantly attacked by these enemies and they experience more bloodshed and destruction than if they had followed God’s instructions. Because the Israelites intermingle with these nations, they adopt pagan forms of worship. The general lesson we take from these difficult verses, (excluding the military bit), is that we need to recognize who (or what) are the real enemies of our faith. (More on the so-called ‘Holy Wars’ or ‘God’s Wars’ in our commentary on the books of Joshua & Judges).

Some comments on the individual verses:

- *Trust in God and not in your weapons. (vv 2-4)*
When going into battle, remember that God is with us to lead us to victory.
- *Show compassion for particular individuals with particular circumstances. (vv 5-8)*
If we followed the advice in verse 8, as it applies to parish life, we would have a small congregation of dedicated and single-minded Christians, rather than a large congregation of half-hearted and disconnected members.
- *Be reasonable and discriminating. (vv 10-18)*
The Assyrian armies were notorious for their brutality when they invade countries. The Israelites are to seek a peaceful approach before resorting to war.
- *Protect the earth’s resources. (vv 19-20)*
When invading cities, the Israelites are to protect the earth’s resources, especially those that produce food.

In his commentary on Deuteronomy, Patrick Miller writes: *“The above text presses us to ask if it is possible to find avenues of compassion, human concern, and care of the natural order in the midst of the death and destruction that is intrinsic to war... Such moves resist the disintegration into sheer barbarism that every military engagement forces.” (p.159).*

Pause: How do you feel about war? What or who are the enemies of our faith in our time?

Miscellaneous Laws

The next five chapters (21-25) deal with laws covering a variety of issues. They are not arranged in any particular order, but all serve to describe the pattern of Israel’s life in the land. They all are supported by one single principle: obedience to these laws will help Israel secure her future in the land.

We can also say that including a wide variety of topics communicates that one’s *whole* life was intended to be ordered towards God.

CHAPTER 21

Verses 1-9. The concern for the purity or holiness of the people and the land is the focus of these verses. When a murder occurs and the criminal gets away, the whole community is held responsible for the unlawful act, impacting them adversely. To cleanse the community and the land of its impurity, a ritual is carried out whereby the people entrust their predicament to God and plead with him to free them from recrimination.

Verses 10-15. If one falls for a captive woman on the battlefield, he may take her as his wife but only after she has gone through a cleansing ritual (e.g. shave her hair, cut her nails, etc). If he decides later to break their relationship, she is to be set free and not sold or enslaved. While Israel’s treatment of the captured woman may be appalling to us, it does not compare to the conduct of the other nations towards women.

Verses 15-17. Laws of inheritance in the ancient world favor the first-born. In a case where a father has two wives, each one with a first-born son, the right of inheritance belongs to the *true* first-born, even if he is the child of the woman less loved by the father. The laws seek to protect the rights of the first-born in such situations.

Verses 18-21. An unreformed son shall be handed by his parents over to the elders who may condemn him to death by stoning. While this is an extreme punishment, we should remember that (1) the son is first tried by the elders; (2) the punishment is rarely carried out; 3) if it does occur, it is to protect the family and community from possible danger.

Pause: The way we make out our Last Will & Testament says a lot about what is really important to us. It can also cause a big fight in the family. What are your thoughts and feelings on this issue?

CHAPTER 22: Protection and care of others and their property

Verses 1-4 advocate the return of lost animals to their rightful owners. This law debunks the adage “finders keepers, losers weepers.”

Verse 5 might read like a simple prohibition of wearing the opposite sex’s clothing but may actually be alluding to the importance of protecting, and not blurring, the distinction between males and females.

Verses 6-7 prohibit the killing of adult birds to protect them from possible extinction.

Verses 8-11 are practical laws for establishing good habits for everyday living. For example, a house roof must have a parapet or protective wall around it, lest someone fall off, for which the owner will be liable (blood guilt). This is important in a society where people sometimes sleep on the roof.

Protecting marriages (Chs. 22:13-23:1)

Here and in the next two chapters, we will find several laws intended to protect marriage and family life.

Verses 13-21 describe the harsh consequences of premarital infidelity and promiscuity.

Verses 22-27 set out the punishments for adultery in the case of betrothed as well as married women.

Verses 28-29 prescribe that in a rape case involving an unmarried woman, the offender must take her as his wife for life and pay her father the full bride-price.

The final law in this section forbids the incestuous relationship between a man and his father’s wife (Ch 23:1). Here, the father’s wife is most likely the son’s step-mother, for it is doubtful that an explicit law exists that prohibits incest with one’s natural mother.

Pause: What practices in our society threaten the stability of marriage?

CHAPTER 23: Membership in the community

Verses 2-9. *Who is to be admitted and excluded from the community?* These rules were drawn up at a time when Israel’s very existence was threatened by internal and external forces. The general intention of the laws is to keep the community free from any contaminating influence from groups or individuals who may betray the national or religious interests of Israel.

Verse 2 gets pretty personal. The law bans men with “crushed testicles” from joining God’s community. These may have been males who had themselves castrated in some pagan ritual. Likewise, children of incestuous unions or those conceived through Canaanite fertility rituals may not be admitted to the community.

The Ammonites and Moabites are excluded from the community because of their persistent hostility to the Israelites. Later in Israel’s history, these laws were relaxed (see Is 56:3-8).

Verses 11-15 demand personal cleanliness and holiness in the camp as God is always present with them. For the Israelite lawgiver, “cleanliness is next to godliness.” Having said that, we should not confuse uncleanness with sin.

Verses 15-16 define the action to be taken when one is confronted with a slave running from a foreign master and seeking asylum in Israel. In a world that is far more callous than ours, Deuteronomy constantly gives humane rulings.

Verse 18-19 condemn the practice of temple prostitution, which is common amongst Israel’s neighbors.

Verses 20-21. Loans are not intended for commercial purposes, which is to develop or use economic capital for profit. Lending is rather practiced as a form of humanitarian aid to the poor by those materially blessed. To charge interest on such loans is contrary to the spirit of the Sinai Covenant (see Ex 22:25-27).

Verses 22-24. Unfulfilled vows shall hold one accountable to the Lord. In Deuteronomy’s viewpoint not keeping one’s word is disastrous to community life.

Verses 25-26 allow feeding off a neighbor's yard (e.g. grapes, corn) but prohibit picking or plucking beyond what one can eat. This is another example of the Deuteronomist humanitarian approach, which of course should not be used as an excuse for taking advantage of one's neighbor.

CHAPTER 24: Laws regarding marriage, divorce, and justice

Verses 1-4 explain in which instances divorce and remarriage are considered an abomination before the Lord. The laws are by no means intended to advocate divorce or remarriage but rather to define the rules on what is common practice. These rules are meant to prevent casual divorce and remarriage. In divorce cases, it is important that the woman gets a *bill of divorce* from her husband to protect her from any accusation of adultery.

All the other laws in Chapter 24 concern justice, equity, and charity. Once again, Deuteronomy's concern for the poor comes through.

Pause: What verse(s) spoke to you most in Chapters 23-24? What are some common forms of injustice and exploitation in the work place today?

CHAPTER 25: Corporal punishment and Levirate marriage

Verses 1-3. Corporal punishment is a common way to deal with the guilty in ancient times. The concern here is that the punishment is just and not excessive. Verse 4 says that even the ox is to be treated humanely.

Verses 5-10 spell out the law on Levirate marriages. Levirate is from the Latin *levir* meaning "husband's brother." This law is intended to protect the name and inheritance of any man who dies without having children (for more see Article 6 page 1).

Verses 11-12 would surely draw an *Ouch!* from anyone who reads them. The law imposes a rather barbaric punishment for a woman who takes a bold action in attempting to defend her husband in a fight with another man. Her conduct is not only considered a gross act indecency, but wounding a man so badly as to prevent him from having children is a very serious offense in Israel, as verses 5-10 above show.

Verses 13-16 call for trust as people conduct business with one another.

Chapter 25 ends on a very revengeful note. The Israelites recall how the Ammonites attacked them in the desert (Ex 17:8-17), and how they continued to be harassed after they entered the Promised Land. Moses tells them that this bad cancer in their daily life will be wiped out from the face of the earth so they may live in peace.

CHAPTER 26: A liturgy of thanksgiving

Verses 1-4. The persons engaged in this liturgy of thanksgiving recall a time when their ancestors did not have *freedom* or a *land*. They speak of the experiences of the patriarchs, especially of Jacob, who migrated to Egypt with his whole household and found themselves maltreated there. They recall how they cried out to God and how God heard their prayer, delivering them with his strong arm and bringing them to this land flowing with milk and honey.

In taking possession of the land, the people remember to offer to God the first fruits of the harvest as an act of thanksgiving. They recite a Credo or profession of faith, the oldest in the Bible. They who have *received the gift* of the land now *return a gift* of thanksgiving. After the liturgy of thanksgiving, the whole household celebrates their blessings with a festal meal.

Verses 12-15 describe a second religious ritual which occurs every third year in the local community. In this case, the offering of first fruits is given to Levites and the poor who do not have access to land. No member of the community shall ignore anyone lacking the basic necessities of life. Then the offerer declares that he has followed all the regulations regarding the offering of the tithe. This service ends with a prayer of petition seeking God's continued blessing on Israel.

Verses 16-19. The Deuteronomic code, which began in chapter 12, ends with a mutual declaration of commitment between God and Israel.

The code of Deuteronomy—the statutes and ordinances given by God to Moses to teach people God's ways for their daily lives (chapters 12-26)—, comes to an end with this chapter.

Pause: Ch. 16:1-11 is one of the optional first readings for our Thanksgiving Day Mass. Can you see why?

CHAPTER 27. Blessings and curses

Having laid down the Deuteronomic code (Chapters 12-26), Moses now seeks to impress on the people the importance of keeping God's law front and center in their lives. The law, which is to be inscribed on stones, is to be placed at two shrines where the people offer sacrifices to the Lord.

Verses 17:11-28:68. We now move into a section of Deuteronomy that deals with blessings and curses.

Six tribes shall stand on Mount Gerizim and pronounce the blessings (e.g. prosperity, victory in battle) that will come to those who are faithful and obedient to the covenant. Obedience to the law is Israel's response to God's goodness to them.

Six tribes shall stand on Mount Ebal and pronounce the curses (e.g. afflictions, economic difficulties, political ruin, exile) that will come upon those who are unfaithful to the covenant.

If we read through the sections, we will quickly notice that the list of curses far exceeds that of blessings, the reason being that, at the time the book was written, many of the curses had become a reality. The authors were seeking to motivate the people to recommit themselves to obeying God's law.

It is interesting to note the distinction between the curses in 27:14-26 and those in Chapter 28. 27:14-26 simply identifies the twelve behaviors that warrant a curse, but does not impute any ramifications, whereas in Chapter 28, the consequences of acts of disobedience are clearly spelled out. For those who are faithful to the commandments, the blessings are also mentioned.

One common thread running throughout the blessings and the curses is how they are related to the land. Blessings yield fertility for the people and their land. Curses bring down poor harvests, drought, sickness, and attacks by neighbors, followed by exile from the land, and re-enslavement in a foreign land (Chapter 28:47-48). The Collegeville commentary states the land is God's great gift to a liberated Israel. Disobedience brings the reversal of all God's beneficent acts (vv 60-68). As great as God's deeds for Israel were, they could be undone by an ungrateful people. This is the curse for disobedience, which is specified in verses 15-18. Moses' second speech closes with a powerful call for Israel's fidelity. The

intensity of the language used in these curses shows how seriously Israel must take its relationship with God. It is indeed a matter of life and death. (ibid p 86-87).

Pause: How would you name the blessings and curses of your country, church, and family? Personally, what is the blessing you are most grateful for?