

Date : 21 January 2024
Theme : Our identity as God's people
Topic : How to be a holy and generous people
Key passage : Deuteronomy 14-15
Key verse : for you are a people holy to the Lord your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession. (Deuteronomy 14:2)

The uniqueness of Israel is expressed in Deuteronomy 14:1 where Moses says, "You are the children of the Lord your God." This speaks about a spiritual adoption that brings us into a covenantal relationship. As children of God, we can have an exclusive relationship with God. It is not earned but received through faith in Jesus Christ. Since we belong to God as a child belongs to a father, this sense of belonging should shape our daily lifestyles in accordance with our faith.

Deuteronomy 14:2 continues to say, "for you are a people holy to the Lord your God". The idea behind holy is "separate." The people of Israel were a people separate for God and His service. We are under a new ownership, and in this, we find meaning and purpose. Deuteronomy 14:2 also ends with an election, "the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession." God's treasured possession is not arbitrary; it is grounded in the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ on the cross. The price paid for our redemption reflects the immense worth God places on us. God sees each of us as unique with a purpose that contributes to His divine plan.

As we study these 2 chapters, we are going to see a principle that is: as a people belonging to God, our behaviour, practices and attitudes need to be different from that of others to mark us out from everyone else.

The questions we want to address today are:

- 1) How can God's covenantal people be distinct in our grieving, eating and giving?
- 2) What are the blessings of being distinct?

1) How can God's covenantal people be distinct in our grieving, eating and giving?

- a) Does our grieving reflect victory over death?

Q: Why did people shave or cut themselves?

"Do not cut yourselves or shave the front of your heads for the dead Deuteronomy 14:1"

- Among the pagan cultures surrounding Israel, it was common to cut oneself or shave the front of one's head, for the dead. This is a part of pagan burial rituals that are still practised now.
- Self-mutilation and shedding one's blood was also the pagan way of appeasing and honouring to their gods.
- POWs are shaved as a sign of subjection to the enemy.
- These days, self-harm is common among people who try to cope with adversity or stress in a destructive manner.
- Is tattooing a form of cutting the flesh and printing of marks for God's people?
 - Tattooing is a common practice among tribal people to honour their gods.
 - People who tattoo their bodies seek to remove them within a few years after.

Q: How do Christian funerals testify of Jesus' victory over death?

- As believers, our grieving should not be without hope. We may mourn and weep, cover ourselves with sackcloth and ashes because of the temporary separation — but that is all. Our hope is in the redemptive work of Jesus and the promise of life beyond death.
- And as a people of God, we can bear witness as children of the LORD Jesus Christ, by the way we handle grief, loss, and anxiety. When we are distinct from the world, we offer a powerful testimony to the transformative work of God in our lives.
- What are religious funeral practices that Christians should or should not participate in non-Christian funerals?

b) Do our eating practices reflect our covenantal holiness with God?

Q: How is holiness reflected in eating regulations?

“Do not eat any detestable thing Deuteronomy 14:3”

- It is a long list of dietary requirements, carefully designed to avoid contact with any “detestable” thing. The word “detestable” was closely associated with the word idolatry.
- Some of the forbidden animals were used as symbols or sacrifices in pagan religions.
- The context of Deuteronomy 14-15 has to do with Israel's impending entry into the land of the Canaanites whose practices reflect their worship of idols and false gods such as Baal, and Ashtoreth.
- Some of the prohibitions could be reflecting health or hygiene concerns. God is very concerned in the realm of what people eat. These dietary regulations and sanitary laws did indeed operate to preserve Israel from diseases and epidemics which were rife in the nations around them.

Q: How should a holy people conduct themselves?

“you are a people holy to the Lord your God Deuteronomy 14:21”

- Holiness is separating from everything that contradicts God and His Word or that which violates our covenant with God.
- As a holy people, we should distinguish ourselves from holy and unholy. Anything associated with false gods must be rejected.
- Although food laws have been superseded after Jesus came, there is a distinction as to what we should or should not eat. We are not to eat any food sacrificed to idols.
- The partaking of the holy communion is sacred and must not be taken just like we eat our meals.
- Whatever cannot be partaken in faith should not be eaten from a practical viewpoint.
- We are a holy people, we are to be different from the pagan peoples around us, and that difference is to permeate every area of our life – what we eat, wear, where we go, and what we watch.

c) Does our giving of generosity and kindness reflect covenantal blessing from God?

Q: Why did God instruct about tithing?

“Be sure to set aside a tenth of all that your fields produce each year Deuteronomy 14:22a”

- Tithing is a guideline for how much is a good estimate to give God.
- It is out of gratitude to God for supplying all our needs, and we are completely dependent upon the Lord.

- Giving to the Levite represents our support for the work of the Lord. For example, community services and helping those in the mission's ministry.
- The New Testament does speak with great clarity on the principle of giving; that giving should be regular, planned, proportional, and private; that it must be generous, freely given, and cheerful.

“Eat the tithe of your grain, new wine, and olive oil, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks in the presence of the Lord your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name..... Deuteronomy 14:22b”

- Tithing not only acknowledges God as the provider but also serves as an act of worship.
- Giving is an act done consciously in the presence of God, emphasizing awareness and accountability.
- When we give unto the Lord, we will learn to revere the Lord our God and trust that God knows best.
- It is in our generosity, fuelled by the fear of God, that we find ourselves aligned with His heart and His purpose.

Q: How should we help the poor?

“If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them Deuteronomy 15:7”

- What is distinct about the people of God is this; We don't clutch or hoard, we give with open hands and have tender hearts towards those in need.
- The generosity of the Lord that we have enjoyed should make us generous to others. Generous giving is a beautiful reflection of the Father's heart.

Q: How should we treat servants?

“If any of your people—Hebrew men or women—sell themselves to you and serve you six years, in the seventh year you must let them go free Deuteronomy 15:12”

- To set slaves free is an expression of kindness and compassion, highlighting the importance of treating others with mercy and generosity, even in situations of servitude.
- To remind Israel that they had experienced God's grace when He released them from their enslavement in Egypt and then provided a sacrificial system for their sins.

2) What are the blessings of being distinct?

a) Permission to eat in the presence of the Lord

“Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God and rejoice Deuteronomy 14:26”

- It suggests that our times of celebration and enjoyment can be moments of worship when shared with gratitude before God.

b) Portion to bless the priests and the poor

“so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied Deuteronomy 14:29”

- A compassionate response to those around us will be a reflection of God's love from us to them.

c) Promised blessings from God

“so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands Deuteronomy 14:29”

“and you will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. You will rule over many nations but none will rule over you. Deuteronomy 15:6”

- When we take care of God’s kingdom and when we live distinctly in our lives, not just in how we deal with finances, but in our time and resources, there is a blessing that is waiting from God.
- God established an economic system if people obey the LORD, they will enjoy the blessing of God’s prosperity.
- But this must not be confused as a business transaction, it is a heart issue, not a financial one.

Application:

1. What are some habits you would need to work on to live a distinct life for God?

2. Do you have questions about what you can or cannot participate in non-Christian funerals?

3. What have you determined about your giving to the Lord in 2024?
