

Date : 4 February 2024

Theme : Our identity as God's people

Topic : Love your neighbour

Key passages : Deuteronomy 19 - 21

Key verse : *So you shall put away the guilt of innocent blood from among you, when you do what is right in the sight of the Lord. Deuteronomy 21:9 (nkjv)*

Introduction

Deuteronomy instructs us on how God's people are to relate to Him as well as to one another. Last week we considered what things are detestable to God in our relationship with Him. Our relationship with one another and how we respond to wrongs done against each other also matter to God. The exercise of brotherly love and care involving law and justice is behind the provision of cities of refuge. Today we shall address the exercise of justice in the killing of the innocent, dealing with theft and the false witness.

Key thought: Put away things that defile the land.

- Problem with this topic

The danger we face as we look at passages like *Deuteronomy 19 - 21* is to dismiss them as teachings that do not apply to us any more, since we are not murderers. We do not need cities of refuge because we have our legal system of lawyers and courts. Also, our nation is not going out to war against other nations.

- Life is in the blood

(A cursory reading of these passages may lead us to conclude that God is obsessed with blood.) Behind the idea of the cities of refuge is that blood had to be atoned. Because God is so pro-life, there had to be blood atonement for every human death caused by a murder.

Today's study of Love your neighbour in *Deuteronomy 19-21*, calls for 3 things to be put away

1. Put away shedding of innocent blood. ...*Thou shall not kill...*
2. Put away evil from the land...*Thou shalt not bear false witness...*
3. Put away fear *Deuteronomy 20*

1. Put away shedding of innocent blood. *Deuteronomy 19: 1 - 10, 12; 21: 9*

The shedding of innocent blood desecrates the land.

a) Why was blood atoned for every human death? Why cities of refuge?

- A murder, on the basis of the evidences of two or more witness, was atoned for by the death of the murderer. (Murder demands the death penalty because life is valuable to God. Revenge killing which sheds innocent blood is therefore wrong).
- Unintentional killing (manslaughter) did not deserve the death penalty. (example the wood cutter's axe head came off as he swung his axe and killed a man nearby). He should have taken precautions, but the unfortunate event had already happened. Regrets would not undo the problem.

The one who killed another without malice needed a place of safety. His life was safe in the city of refuge while thorough investigations were completed. The avenging relatives, in the heat of the moment, were prevented from taking the law into their own hands.

- If the conclusion of the investigations proves the refugee to be guilty of murder, the elders of the city would surrender the murderer to the court for trial and sentence. But if found innocent on the testimony of 2 - 3 witnesses, the elders would protect him from the avengers. If no witnesses could be found, the elders of the city nearest to the scene of death, must take steps to atone for the land.

b) How was the shedding of innocent blood put away?

(Justice is a moral value that society requires our legal system to impose on criminals, losses equal to those they had inflicted on innocent persons).

- Someone killed another without intent (example traffic accidents caused by unpredictable weather or poor road conditions; or out hunting when a bullet killed a person instead of the animal).

It is natural for a close family to seek revenge. Although unintentional deaths in these accidents, may or may not be criminal, it does not mean he is completely not at fault.

If a trial was conducted and unintentional killing was established, the man is innocent of murder. If guilty, the punishment would be death.

(This punishment, often carried out by a family member, is known as the avenger of blood or kinsman. The concept of relatives looking out for each other was very strong in those days).

c) Application

- Today, the state sanctions the daily killings of millions of unborn babies in the womb by abortion. This issue is seldom raised in public. Because the law allows it, it is not considered intentional killing. Since many nations approved it, the government allows it, the population acquiesce to it.

(However, recent provocative images of the foetus, generated by ultrasonography, have revealed foetal capabilities to feel pain at 7, 18, 26 weeks' gestation. Some western states are considering legislation to inform women seeking abortion, that their action will cause the unborn child pain).

- Reasons given by mothers to justify the abortion are the inconvenience of a baby's arrival, cover-up of illicit sex etc.

- Does God hold the mother accountable?

Since this is shedding innocent blood, the one who sheds it will not be innocent.

- Put away the guilt of shedding innocent blood *Deuteronomy 21:9*
- The killing of an infant in the womb, by the mother, is the modern dressing of the spirit of Molech = child sacrifice.
- If you are thinking that abortion is the option, restraint is called for. Pray and get your facts right before jumping the gun.
- For unidentified deaths *Deuteronomy 21:8 - 9*

Provide atonement for cleansing the land to put away the guilt of innocent blood

...accept this atonement for Your people Israel, whom You have redeemed, O Lord, and do not hold your people guilty of the blood of an innocent man. Deuteronomy 21:8

If you had an abortion in ignorance in the past, God has provided a place of refuge in Christ. There is forgiveness. There is now no condemnation for them who are in Christ Jesus. We do have a refuge for our wrongdoings.

2. Put away evil from the land *Deuteronomy 19:11 - 19*

a) Do not remove boundary stones (stealing someone else's land)

- Boundary markers, often made with stones or piles of stones, as evidence of personal ownership in ancient times, were supposed to be inviolable to establish limits of one's property. Basically, we are to respect property ownership.
- Markers which *...men of old have set... Deuteronomy 19:14 (nkjv)*
 - A spiritual principle not to ignore the boundaries set by our elders.
 - Do not clamour to remove this marker / rule (could be physical, moral) without finding out why it was there in the first place.
- *...the Lord your God giving you to possess...*
God established an important foundation for human society – the basic right to private property. Respect your neighbour's lawful landmark. Do not change it without due process of law.

b) Application

- Criminalise land grabs
 - Deal with thieves who remove neighbours' boundary marks surreptitiously
Deuteronomy 19: 14
- Investigate crimes, reported verbally *Deuteronomy 19: 16 - 19*
 - Interview more than 1 witness to stop the perjury of saying someone else committed murder, for the penalty for perjury is like the penalty of murder = death.
 - ...do not bear false witness (10 Commandments) ...
If you said you were a witness to a crime that did not happen, the penalty was that you would receive the same punishment as the one you had accused.
 - This is a violation of the 8th and 10th commandments.
It is theft and coveting someone else's property.

3. Put away fear *Deuteronomy 20*

- Spiritual and practical preparation for warfare
(Israel then, a small nation surrounded by great empires, was rarely in a strategically superior position).
We may not be facing a war situation now but we all face crisis situations when the odds are against us, and the consequences incurring great losses may be life threatening.
What can we learn from this chapter that can prepare us to face such crisis?

Steps we can take when facing crisis situations?

1. Do not be afraid of the enemies' superior numbers or equipment.

(Fear is our big enemy, as fear of rejection, unretrievable losses, death or sickness.
It paralyses our thinking straight, undermines our ability to act rationally).

- Every new venture / work, carries the possibility of failure. We are to handle fear with God's promise...
...you must not fear them, for the Lord your God Himself fights for you... Deuteronomy 3:23
- The assurance from the Lord is that He will be with us and fight for us. Particular situations where the Lord promises to be with us is when we obey His Great Commission. Here, the Lord had said He would never leave nor forsake us...

2. Know God's conditions for fighting for us.

- His promise *...For if you carefully keep all these commandments which I command you to do, to love the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to hold fast to Him...
...Then the Lord will drive out all these nations from before you and you will dispossess greater and mightier nations than yourselves... Deuteronomy 11: 22, 23*
- God is a Covenant-Keeper. So must we be. Leaders must speak out God's instructions and promises. First, the priest as guardians of God's word, must declare it. Then the commanders and captains down the line must transmit the same message.

(Facts of ancient warfare)

- In the ancient world, enemies were simply killed. Plunder provided the wages for the army in ancient warfare and underwrote the expenses for the battle.
- Complete destruction of the Canaanites whose culture was socially, morally and spiritually corrupt; Israel was to bring God's judgement upon the Canaanites. But God repeatedly warns...*lest they teach you to do according to all their abominations...and your sin against the Lord your God. Deuteronomy 20:18).*

Application

a) Where do you fit in the Lord's army?

- God was concerned with the heart of the army, not the size. (those who were fearful, fainthearted and distracted by home, vineyard and fiancée could leave) *Deuteronomy 20: 1 - 9*

b) Are you fighting as a loner or part of the army?

- God commanded that His army have leadership (men courageous enough to move His army forward).