

**“Deuteronomy: The Gospel according to Moses”**

**Sermon 21 – “A Righteous Judge”**

**Introduction**

The Fifth Commandment seems pretty straightforward and specific, doesn't it? “Honor your father and mother.” Pretty direct, pretty clear. But the Reformed have always seen behind and underneath this deceptively simple command a broader principle that applies in many, many areas of life, not just in the relationship between children and parents. It does include that relationship, to be sure; but the Reformed have taught for hundreds of years that the child-parent relationship spoken of in the Fifth Commandment is just one example of a much broader principle, namely, that one must honor not just his parents but all legitimate, God-ordained authorities in his life. The Fifth Commandment is all about respecting and obeying all such authorities. Yes, children are to honor their parents; but our duties under the Fifth Commandment don't end there. We must also honor our authorities within the realms of the state, our places of employment, and the church. The broader principle behind the Fifth Commandment is that we must honor all legitimate, God-ordained authorities in our lives.

But the Reformed have also traditionally seen that the Fifth Commandment doesn't just address the responsibilities of those under authority toward those in authority over them: it also has implications for those in authority toward those under their authority. Not only must those under authority honor and obey those in authority; those in authority must also wield their authority in such a way as to deserve the honor of those under their authority. For a much fuller treatment of these matters, I would refer you to the Westminster Larger Catechism Q&A's 124-133.

But are the Reformed right in this understanding of the Fifth Commandment, or are we just reading too much into it? Well, I think the traditional Reformed understanding is indeed correct, and I think Moses here in Deuteronomy reinforces it and gives it Biblical warrant. Once again, the various laws in Deuteronomy, though seemingly randomly arranged, are actually very carefully organized according to their relationship to each of the Ten Commandments in order; and here in 16:18, Moses begins his exposition on matters related to the Fifth Commandment. And what does he discuss in this section? The various civil and religious authorities within the nation of Israel. He speaks of judges, kings, priests, and prophets. And with each one of these authorities, he does not only give instruction to those under their authority, how they are to honor those in authority over them; he also gives instruction to those in these positions of authority as to how they are to maintain the honor of their offices. And in our passage for this morning, Moses discusses one specific office of authority within Israel: that of judge. Now, as we've been discussing these various laws within Deuteronomy, with each one we've really been doing three things: first, considering the law within its OT context; secondly, considering how it might apply within the lives of NT believers; and then thirdly, considering how it has been fulfilled in Christ. Well, this morning, I think it might be helpful just to make each one of those considerations explicit, so those will

be our three main points: Instruction in the Old Covenant, Application in the New Covenant, and Fulfillment in Christ. So first . . .

## **I. Instruction in the Old Covenant**

What does Moses command concerning judges and their role within the OT nation of Israel? Well, again, here he gives instruction both to the judges themselves as well as to those under their authority, both duties of a righteous judge and duties toward a righteous judge. The duties of a righteous judge are found first in 16:18-17:9. In a nutshell, they are to uphold justice within the land: read vv. 18-20 again (read). Overall, they are to uphold justice, but they are to do so in at least three specific ways, first by maintaining impartiality, which includes refusing to take bribes (read v. 19). The second way in which judges were to uphold justice was by ensuring due process in their examination of specific cases. The three verses that come next in our passage, 16:21-17:1, might seem at first to be out of place, but here Moses is getting ready to discuss how judges are to handle especially cases of serious sin within Israel, and so he begins by giving examples of particularly heinous crimes that would be punishable by death if indeed they had truly been committed by someone: idolatry and offering a blemished animal in sacrifice to God. The one is said to be something God hates in 16:22, and the other an abomination in 17:1. Moses then continues with this idea of egregious sin in v. 2 (read to v. 4a). So there is a report that one of these death-penalty-worthy crimes has been committed, what is the judge to do? Is he just to believe it and put the accused immediately to death? No, he is to ensure due process: continue reading (read v. 4-7). Due process included diligent investigation (v. 4), sufficient evidence, and credible testimony (vv. 6-7). The requirement for more than one witness and also for the witnesses to be the first to stone the condemned would help protect the integrity of the judicial process. Two or three false witnesses are harder to come by than just one; and even if you could buy two false witnesses, they'll be much less likely to testify against an innocent man if they will have to be the ones to help put him to death with their own hands. It's a pretty brilliant requirement. But all of this is to ensure due process in an attempt to uphold justice.

So, in order to uphold justice these judges must maintain impartiality, must ensure due process, and, thirdly, must be willing to defer to higher authorities in cases too difficult for them: read vv. 8-9 (read). The judges within the individual towns were probably not legal experts, not full-time, professional judges, but prominent men in the community who would serve as judges on an as-needed basis. So frequently a case might be too difficult for them, and at those times they were to refer the case to the Israelite "Supreme Court" in the place God would choose, eventually Jerusalem. This Supreme Court consisted of priests and "the judge" who happens to be in office at the time. This one highest judge would be someone like the judges of the book of Judges or eventually the king. But this willingness to defer to a higher court would reveal a kind of humility on the part of the village judge: if a case was too difficult for him, in the interest of upholding true justice, he had the responsibility to acknowledge his limitations and refer it to a higher authority.

So those are the responsibilities of the judges, the duties of a righteous judge; but what of the responsibilities of those under their authority, the duties toward a righteous judge? Well, Moses seems to turn to these in 17:10-13 (read). The people of Israel were to honor their judges by respecting their

decisions, submitting to them, and abiding by them. And so seriously did God take this requirement, there was a stiff penalty for disobeying or defying the judicial authorities: death. And why such a stiff penalty? Because dishonor toward and disobedience to these human judges was seen ultimately as dishonor toward and disobedience to God Himself. The authority of these judges was theirs because God had given it to them. God is the ultimate Judge, but He delegated some of His authority to these chosen men; and His people needed to recognize and respect that fact.

So, that's about it for this instruction in the Old Covenant. That brings us, secondly, to the . . .

## **II. Application in the New Covenant**

Now, here is where we need to be careful, because, especially when it comes to the civil laws of OT Israel, we can never simply assume that they carry over automatically into the NT church. In fact, great harm has come from people attempting to do just that: rule the church according to the civil laws of Israel. And here is where I would refer you to our handy Confession and its discussion of the Law of God in chapter 19. In Paragraph 4 of that chapter, it reads (read). In other words, the judicial, civil laws of Israel are no longer binding. But, "their general equity" can be of "moral use." Now this is a very important concept for us to understand, because I will be drawing applications from many of the civil laws of Deuteronomy based on that exact idea. This concept means that while the specific details of Israel's civil laws are no longer binding on God's people – we don't have to implement this same exact judicial structure within our country in order to be obedient to God's law – nevertheless, the "general equity," the broad principles of justice undergirding those specific laws, still can be of "moral use" to us. We can still learn from those general principles of justice and seek to apply them within the specific civil structures in which we now live.

So what, if any, "general equity" might we draw out and make "moral use" of from this passage? Well, let's consider these general principles of justice described here in relation to civil matters and then separately in relation to religious matter. First, how might this passage apply within the New Covenant believer's life in civil matters? Well, we might not all be judges, but are we all under some kind of legitimate, God-ordained judicial authority? Yes: here the words of Paul in Romans 13:1-7 (read). Paul here, also, is just expounding upon the Fifth Commandment. And if he could say these things about the corrupt, tyrannical rule of the Roman Empire, I don't think we have any excuse for failing to render this same honor and obedience to our current judicial authorities. Now, of course, such obedience to human authorities is not without its limitations. From the example of the apostles in the book of Acts, we know that if a human authority oversteps his authority and demands of us something contrary to God's law, we must obey God rather than man. Interestingly, the authority the apostles were there struggling with was the exact authority described in Deuteronomy 17, the Israelite supreme court in Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin. But that is the only exception to the honor and obedience we are to render to these God-ordained authorities in our lives, if the command something directly contrary to God's Law: in all other matters, we too, like the Israelites under their authorities, must honor and obey in order not to violate the Fifth Commandment, because ultimately their authority when they do act righteously is undergirded by the authority of God Himself.

But there is also a word here to those who are in such positions of judicial authority: they, too, are to seek to the full extent of their ability to uphold justice. That is what Paul says their purpose is in Romans 13, to protect and reward the righteous and to punish the evildoer. And how are our judicial authorities to uphold justice? Well, in much the same way as were these Israelite judges: by maintaining impartiality, not accepting bribes or giving preferential treatment to one person over another; by ensuring due process in trying cases through diligent inquiry, sufficient evidence, and credible witnesses; and by being willing to appeal to higher authorities in cases too difficult for them. These are all, I think, matters of general equity, universal principles of justice. And these are the kinds of things that we should be praying for our judicial authorities. And, though I said, not many of us ever have been or ever will be judges, but many of us will have the opportunity to act as judges in jury duty. That is how our judicial system is structured: frequently the role played by a judge in OT Israel is now played by a jury of one's peers. A jury evaluates evidence and the credibility of witnesses and ultimately decides the fate of the accused. So, yes, even many of us will have the opportunity to put many of these principles into play in our own lives, to be impartial and diligent in our small efforts to uphold justice within our civil society.

But there is instruction for us here, not only in civil matters, but also even in religious matters. This is one of the ways in which our lives in the New Covenant differ from the lives of Israelites in the Old Covenant: in OT Israel, the civil and religious authorities were one and the same. It didn't matter in the OT whether you had stolen a goat or sacrificed to an idol: you would be tried by the same judges. This mixing of the civil sphere and the religious sphere in Israel is indicated in our passage by the fact that this Supreme Court was made up of judges and priests. But under the New Covenant, the spheres of civil authority and religious authority are separate: the State has no competency to judge religious matters. That is the church's responsibility and sphere of authority. So, not only in the civil realm, but also in the religious realm, we each of us from time to time have the responsibility to judge. Now, I made this point before in my sermon on Deuteronomy 13, but look at Deuteronomy 17:7 again: after describing this due process of investigating cases, Moses writes, "So you shall purge the evil from your midst." And again at the end of v. 12: "So you shall purge the evil from Israel." Now turn to I Corinthians 5. This, again, is one of the key passage describing the process of church discipline, how the church ought to try and deal with cases of a religious nature. At the end of this discussion, Paul writes in vv. 12-13 (read). Paul here quotes from Deuteronomy's description of OT Israel's judicial process, and he applies it directly to the NT church's judicial process. I think the broader point Paul is making by doing this is to teach us that those same principles of general equity need to be employed in the judging of religious cases within the church, in church discipline: there needs to be impartiality and careful investigation and sufficient evidence and credible witnesses so that no injustice is done to a brother in Christ through false accusation. And who is the judge in matters of church discipline? Who determines the guilt and punishment of the erring brother? Paul says in v. 12 (read). The judge is the church: every church member is a judge in such cases and therefore must do all he can to uphold justice within the church. This is an area in which we disagree strongly with our non-Baptist brothers in Christ. In other forms of church government (in which, by the way, the structure of the church is explicitly modeled after the specific structure of OT Israel's government), the judges in religious matters are the pastors and elders or all kinds of ascending church courts made up of pastors and elders of multiple churches. But that is not the way the NT depicts the government of the church, especially in matters of church

discipline. You are the judges, and that is a very sobering responsibility indeed. It's one that needs to be taken seriously and executed righteously. And just as the Israelites were to honor and submit themselves to the judgments of their judges because they were acting on the ultimate authority of God Himself, so we too must honor and submit to the judgments of the church because the church too, when it judges righteously, is acting on the ultimate authority of Jesus Christ her head (read v. 4).

So, yes, I believe there is much general equity even here in this passage that can be of much moral use to the NT church. But that is not all that is to be said about this passage, for not only is there instruction for those under the Old Covenant and application for us under the New Covenant, we need also to recognize this passage's . . .

### **III. Fulfillment in Christ**

As He has done with every page of the Old Testament, so Christ has done with this passage: He has fulfilled it, and He has done so in two ways. First, He has kept the law that we have broken. We are all, we must admit once more, violators of God's Law and at each and every point. Since we're thinking about the Fifth Commandment this morning, then we must admit that we have broken the Fifth Commandment: we have not perfectly honored and obeyed those legitimate authorities that God has placed over us. Whether that authority be within our homes, or workplaces, our church, or our government, we have in some way dishonored and disobeyed it. We are thinking especially this morning of our government authorities: are we honoring all of those men and women whom God has placed over us? Have we been obedient to everything they have commanded us so long as it does not directly contradict God's Law, for that is the only legitimate exception? We may not agree with everything our judicial authorities say and do, we may not particularly like them, but we must honor them and we must obey them. We can disagree with them, but we must do so respectfully. But how often do we let drop a derogatory comment about our leaders? How often do we ignore one of those seemingly minor laws? We may not be committing major felonies on a regular basis, but when was the last time we jaywalked because we were too lazy to walk the additional 20 feet to the crosswalk. When was the last time you drove without a seatbelt or while talking on your cell phone without a Bluetooth? These authorities are God's ministers: they are invested with part of His authority. And yet we have dishonored them and disobeyed them, and by doing so we have dishonored and disobeyed God.

But even this law which we have broken Christ has kept for us, if only we will trust in Him. While He walked this earth as a man, as one of us, he ever honored His authorities. Think of that: God Himself submitting to the authority of His own creatures! But He did! He honored and obeyed His parents, His religious leaders, even His pagan government. Even when He was being subjected to the grossest of all injustices in His trial and wrongful execution, he was respectful even to His accusers. In this as in every part of God's Law, Christ was perfectly obedient, perfectly fulfilling every part; and the righteousness He earned from His obedience He offers to all who will trust in Him.

But Christ fulfilled this passage not only by keeping this law that we have broken but also by being the only truly righteous Judge. According to Scripture, God has chosen to judge all the world through Jesus Christ: and He will be perfectly righteous in the execution of that office. He will not be

partial or accept a bribe. His judgments will be absolutely righteous and true. And this righteous judgment of Christ is both an encouragement and a warning. It is an encouragement because it is an assurance that justice will prevail in the end. There are so many wrongs in this world that have never been righted. There are so many horrible crimes that have never been punished by any human court. But in the end, every man who has ever lived will stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ and receive exactly what his deeds deserve. But that is certainly a warning, too, isn't it? I don't think any of us want to get what we truly deserve. We are covenant-breakers, sinners, violators of God's holy law who deserve only the curses of God's covenant, death and eternal destruction. The only way for any man, woman, or child on this earth to escape that terrible judgment is by trusting, believing in Jesus Christ. As we've said, he fulfilled God's law, kept God's covenant perfectly, and anyone who believes in Christ for salvation has already been declared righteous in Him and will be proven to be so on that Great and Final Day of Judgment. So, as we close, I urge everyone here to trust in Christ. If you already are trusting in Him, then continue to do so. If you never have, do so today. For the true and righteous Judge is indeed coming, and He could come at any moment. Are you ready to meet Him?