

August 26, 2018
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Deuteronomy
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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**LIFE GOVERNING PRINCIPLES
FOR GOD'S PRECIOUS POSSESSION
Deuteronomy 14:22-29**

I have a collection of principles I call “My life-governing principles.” These are simple, pithy applications of Bible truths and common sense conclusions that I have found to be helpful for making decisions. Principles are different than precise statements of laws. It seems like God’s people do better with the clear, unequivocal laws rather than the governing principles that come from those laws.

For example, it is obvious that we must refrain from coveting our neighbor’s wife, house, field, servants, ox, or donkey because those are the exact words God used in the statement of that law. But what about your neighbor’s job, popularity, or good looks? Does the law not apply to those things also? Or it is obvious that we must refrain from committing adultery because that is what God’s law requires. But as Jesus pointed out, it seems difficult to draw the connection principally that the law also covers lustful thoughts that are tantamount to adultery.

For some reason, it is difficult for Christians to take the precise truths from the Old Testament and draw an application for our modern lives based on the established principles of those truths. That is why the Old Testament is deemed antiquated and irrelevant by contemporary Christians. They wonder how could such odd laws as not eating bacon or not wearing clothes made of a polyester/wool blend be applicable to our lives? The key is for us to find the principle that is being taught by particular requirements or rules and then draw a comparison for our modern lives. That is how Jesus explained His fulfilling of the law in the Sermon on the Mount.

The theme that runs throughout the book of Deuteronomy is that the nation of Israel is God’s chosen nation. He repeatedly reminded the people through Moses that they were His precious possession. Therefore, because the people belonged to God, they would obviously be distinct from their neighbors who did not belong to God. Why is it so difficult for us to pull that same principle across the centuries into twenty-first century local churches? Should it also be true that because we are God’s precious possession that there are obvious distinctions between us and our unsaved neighbors, co-workers, and families? Our text lays down particular laws that worked to that end and which we should also be able to apply principally.

Tithes and Offerings.

Our text lays down certain requirements about tithes and offerings that are repeated in the Old Testament laws. According to verses twenty-two and twenty-three, the people were to annually set aside a tithe. *You shall tithe all the yield of your seed that comes from the field year by year (v.22)*. The tithe was one tenth of all produce. This principle would also apply to all manner of increase or profit. It was set aside for God’s purposes. Then, periodically the people took the tithe to the place God appointed. *And before the LORD your God, in the place that he will choose, to make his name dwell there (v.23a)*. This is reference to feasts in Jerusalem – three of them required all adult males to attend. And before the temple was in Jerusalem, they took the tithe wherever the tabernacle containing the Ark of the Covenant was.

But notice what the people did with the tithe. They were to take it to the right place, and *you shall eat the tithe of your grain, of your wine, and of your oil, and the firstborn of your herd and flock (v.23b)*. We have been taught that the tithe is equivalent to the offerings we give to support God’s church. Why did God tell the people to eat the tithe? God desired for His people to celebrate their uniqueness. They consumed what they set aside for God. Further instruction in the law makes it clear that these were offerings offered to God and also consumed by the people (Exodus 23:19; Deuteronomy 12:5-7).

God had a purpose behind this practice of the tithe. It was *that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always (v.23c)*. The festivals reminded the people that God chose them and they are His people. That is supposed to be the same kind of effect the ordinances like baptism and the Lord's table are to have on us. They are to remind us to highly respect the Lord.

There is an exception given here based on distance (vv.24-26). *And if the way is too long for you, so that you are not able to carry the tithe, when the LORD your God blesses you, because the place is too far from you, which the LORD your God chooses, to set his name there (v.24)*. If it was too far and too difficult to transport bushels of corn or an ox or sheep, the people could exchange the tithe for money. *Then you shall turn it into money and bind up the money in your hand and go to the place that the LORD your God chooses (v.25)*.

God reminded the people that He was a participant in their worship through these sacrifices. The whole tithe thing was about worshiping God. It was a reminder that all the material blessings they enjoyed were from God's hand. Being able to take a tenth of their profit reminded the people that God's plan was for His people to use the land, wisdom, opportunities that He provided to be self-sufficient in regard to others and, at the same time, wholly dependent in regard to Him.

But some people could not be self-sufficient. That would explain why God added the principle of the third year additional tithe. *At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns. (v.28)*. Each third year the tithe was not taken to the temple but gathered in each town to provide care for specific people groups.

One of those groups was the Levites. *And you shall not neglect the Levite who is within your towns, for he has no portion or inheritance with you (v.27)*. These were God's chosen servants to care for the worship of the nation. They did not have lands allotted to them and could not be self-sufficient. The full expression of the Law stipulated that the Levites and priests partook of the tithe annually as well as tri-annually. *For the tithe of the people of Israel, which they present as a contribution to the LORD, I have given to the Levites for*

an inheritance. Therefore I have said of them that they shall have no inheritance among the people of Israel" (Numbers 18:24).

Other groups of needy people who could not be self-sufficient were the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows. *And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns (v.29a)*. The emphasis in this instruction is on the fellowship with God and fellow Israelites and even sojourners. God's people were to *come and eat and be filled, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do (v.29b)*. The purpose of tithes and offerings was to serve as a reminder that God had blessed and will bless as they fellowship with Him.

The more specific details of the law of tithes and offerings are given in Leviticus 1:1-7:38; 22:17-21 where we find descriptions of the burnt offerings (1:1-17; 6:8-13); grain offerings (2:1-16; 6:14-23); peace offerings (3:1-17; 6:24-30); sin offerings (4:1-5:13; 7:1-10) and guilt offerings (5:14-6:7). All of these offerings served as expressions of confession, repentance, thanksgiving, and fellowship with God. They also provided a living for the Priests and Levites. These details give the over-arching law, while the statements in our text provide a narrowing focus on the purpose of tithes as times of fellowship and rejoicing – not a contradiction.

God's plan for the Church flows from those Old Testament principles. But at the same time, God's plan is different in that He does not prescribe a tithe for the Church. There is no indication in the New Testament that we are to give 10% of our increase. That idea generates debate and confusion. Is it 10% of our gross pay before taxes are withheld, or of our net pay? And does the amount on which we tithe include benefits like retirement contributions, health insurance, union dues, and all that stuff?

The 10% tithe law is a good starting place if we need a base from which to begin. But more exactly, we find in the New Testament four principles which describe God's plan for offerings in the Church. The first two are found in Paul's first letter to the Christians in Corinth. *On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come (1 Corinthians 16:2)*. Here

we learn that we are to give systematically (like every time we are paid), and we are to give according to how God has prospered us.

The third and fourth principles are found in Paul's second letter to those same Christians. *Each one must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7)*. The third principle for giving is that we give purposefully, having thought about it. Fourth, we are to give cheerfully. If giving to the Lord's work is drudgery or you hate it, either stop doing it or ask the Lord to change your heart.

Enjoy Whatever You Desire (v.26).

Now let's go back and focus on the central truth in the context of verses twenty-four through twenty-six. *And if the way is too long for you, so that you are not able to carry the tithe, when the LORD your God blesses you, because the place is too far from you, which the LORD your God chooses, to set his name there, then you shall turn it into money and bind up the money in your hand and go to the place that the LORD your God chooses **and spend the money for whatever you desire – oxen or sheep or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves.** And you shall eat there before the LORD your God and rejoice, you and your household (14:24-26)*.

First, let's consider what this instruction required or allowed. We begin by establishing an understanding of the words used. Look at the phrase, *whatever you desire*. That should stimulate a question. We are generally aware that the word desire means to desire, covet, long for, or crave. The word is used negatively in the Old Testament many times such as, "Don't covet." (Deuteronomy 5:21) or the statement in Numbers: "At Kibroth-Hattaavah they buried the people who lusted for food" (Numbers 11:4, 34). Eli's sons strongly desired (coveted) the fat and best meat (1 Samuel 2:16). Surely God does not instruct His people to practice greed, lusting, and covetousness!

The same word is also used in a positive sense in the Old Testament. David longed for some water from Bethlehem (2 Samuel 23:15). The psalmist wrote, *For the LORD has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his dwelling place (Psalm 132:13)*. Obviously the, strong desire can be good or it can be bad. God determines and reveals by His character which objects are fitting for strong desire.

God loves for us to have strong desires for His desires, which is why He promises to give us the desires of our hearts when those are in line with His will. That is what David taught in Psalm 37: *Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart (Psalm 37:4)*.

The particular desires mentioned include a couple of things that have created much interest, debate, and tension for Christians in our day. Wine and strong drink. The Hebrew word for *wine*. This word describes the very common juice made primarily from crushed grapes but also other fruits. It was fermented juice that was typically mixed with water 2 parts water to one part wine or even a 3/1 dilution. This was used as a common drink. Often is it described positively as a blessing from God.

But then there was *strong drink*. This word surprises us because it is almost never spoken of positively. The noun (*strong drink*) refers to the stuff that makes people drunk because it comes from the Hebrew root that means to be drunken. Drunken is never a good condition in either the Old or New Testament. Of the nineteen times the verb shows up in the Old Testament, only four references are positive in any way. This stuff was poured out as an offering to the Lord (Numbers 28:7). Whatever is happening in our text appears to be positive (Deuteronomy 14:26). And it was used as a deadening agent for those who were suffering physical pain (Proverbs 31:6). Other than those few uses, the word always describes a shameful situation.

To get a good grasp of the principle we need to understand the context. Wine and strong drink were an obvious part of the culture. But we know the strong drink was in conflict with God's character. Nevertheless it had some part in the people expressing their thanksgiving to God. But how could God approve of people desiring strong drink and getting drunk?

Now we need to try to solve the paradox. We find two statements in the Bible that seem to contradict each other. First is this statement in our text: *Spend the money for whatever you desire – oxen or sheep or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves (v.26)*. Standing in direct contradiction to this is the warning in Proverbs twenty-three. *Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who*

has redness of eyes? Those who tarry long over wine; those who go to try mixed wine. Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. In the end it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder. Your eyes will see strange things, and your heart utter perverse things. You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, like one who lies on the top of a mast. "They struck me," you will say, "but I was not hurt; they beat me, but I did not feel it. When shall I awake? I must have another drink" (Proverbs 23:29-35).

Both of these statements cannot be true on the surface. Possibly, God allowed the people to drink wine and strong drink but not to the point of getting drunk. We already have stated that the normal use of wine was in diluted form – which would prevent drunkenness. Is it possible that the purpose of the strong drink was to pour it out before the Lord as an offering? (Numbers 28:7). Whatever the case, we can be sure the possibility that God approved drunkenness was not in the argument.

That brings us to this important practice of learning a principle from the Old Testament so that we can apply it to our setting. What is the principle and how does it apply to followers of Christ? First, we must acknowledge that there is no clear, definitive statement in Scripture that forbids use of alcoholic beverages. But that is not necessarily an argument for its use. Nor does the Bible make a definitive statement forbidding smoking cigarettes, or smoking pot, or snorting cocaine, or mainlining heroin, becoming addicted to opiates.

In fact, I remember an example of a case in 1979 where a man was arrested in California for using marijuana. His defense in court was that God encouraged us to use every herb. Yep, that's what God said to Adam in Genesis 1:29. And then He repeated the same instruction to Noah in Genesis 9:3. Well, marijuana is an herb. How can a Christian argue that we shouldn't smoke pot?

On Tuesday I heard a news report that the companies that own Corona Beer and Heineken Beer are investing billions of dollars in marijuana companies because they plan to begin infusing marijuana into their beers. How can a Christian argue that we shouldn't drink beer infused with pot? And if that is okay, surely smoking the pot is okay.

But the fact is that almost all evangelical Christians argue against all of those practices based on conclusions by researchers that they are harmful to your health. Then do we forget that thousands of studies have affirmed that alcohol is addictive? Does that make it dangerous? If it CAN cause health problems, should you avoid it? How many people who are addicted to alcohol decry the first drink they ever took? All of them. Have you ever watched and talked to a yellowish-green alcoholic who was dying of cirrhosis of the liver? Does alcohol contribute to death of the alcoholic, traffic fatalities and maiming, broken families, lost jobs, bankruptcy, rape and sexual perversion?

While use of alcohol is not prohibited in the Scriptures, wisdom would cause a person to exercise great caution. It's kind of like handling poisonous snakes. We don't do that at Community Baptist Church because we conclude it is not wise.

It is true that Scripture does not prohibit the use of alcoholic beverages, but Scripture does prohibit drunkenness. In the Old Testament we have already seen the condemnation of drunks in Proverbs 23:29-35. Every mention of drunkenness in the Old Testament is shameful and results in damaging consequences.

Coming to the New Testament, we read the definitive statement for Christians about drunkenness: *And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit (Ephesian 5:18)*. Here God concluded that drunkenness is *asotia*, living an undisciplined life. It is what the prodigal son did in wasting his father's money (Luke 15:13). It is the opposite of what God desires in His people's lives. In this verse, God warned that you get that way from wine.

Can we draw the obvious conclusion that God's precious possession does not get drunk? Absolutely. That of course leads to the debate about what constitutes drunkenness, inebriation, or dulling of the senses. You are considered DUI in S.C. when you drive while your blood alcohol content is over .08%. You can Google a chart of BAC (Blood Alcohol Content) to discover how a person typically responds to various levels of BAC. For example, .02-.03 BAC causes slight euphoria and loss of shyness. The person becomes mildly relaxed and maybe a little lightheaded. That is typically the result of two beers for a 150 pound man and less for a woman. Or it is ten ounces of the average table wine.

When there is a BAC of .04-.06 (that is half to three fourths DUI), the person enjoys the feeling of well-being, lower inhibitions, and relaxation. Judgment is slightly impaired. There is minor impairment of reasoning and memory, and being less cautious. Your behavior can become exaggerated and emotions (e.g. happiness or sadness) felt more intensely. That is the common result of two to three beers for a 150 pound man and less for a woman. The same euphoria is experienced from about twelve ounces of table wine.

How does that compare with God's intent for us to be filled with the Holy Spirit? Ephesians 5:18 sets those two conditions in conflict. To be filled with the Spirit is to be under His control. In contrast, if you are a 120 pound woman and drink an eight ounce goblet of fortified wine, you are now in a condition that God told you not to be in. That leads me to ask a more pertinent question. "What else do you do regularly that you know full well God forbids?" Then we must wonder how can you regularly disobey Christ and still claim you love Him? "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments*" (John 14:15).

Furthermore we must take into consideration the fact that Scripture warns Christians to guard their testimonies. Sinners who long to be free from their enslaving sins want to see an example of a different way of living. And what does your practice do to fellow Christians who may not do well practicing your "freedoms"? Paul applied this principle to mere food when he concluded: *Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble (1 Corinthians 8:13)*. How much more should the principle be applied to something that is addictive?

And maybe most important is your testimony to your children. How do you know they will not become addicted if they practice what you practice? Our children generally take our freedoms to the next logical step. I have known multiple alcoholics who have admitted to me that they took their first drink from bottles of wine, whiskey, and brandy that mom and dad kept at home.

Finally, there is a problem in that current arguments compare apples with oranges. The only possible means for making alcoholic beverages before A.D. 650 was through the process of natural fermentation. Distillation, the process of infusing beverages with alcohol, was not discovered until the middle seventh century. By

natural fermentation, it is only possible to achieve an alcohol content of 10%. Once the fermentation process reaches that level, the process is killed.

Back to the word in our text, *wine* was a common beverage in the ancient Middle East. Typically, it was used at celebrations but even on a regular basis at meal time. As we already stated, it was typically diluted to 1 part wine and 2 parts water or 1 part wine and 3 parts water. That would render an alcohol content of about 3%-6%. This practice was partly to prevent drunkenness and partly to purify the water. This is what Jesus accepted on a sponge while He was being crucified (John 19:29-30).

Then there was the *strong drink* that was also common. This was undiluted 10% alcohol content. This drink was equated with drunkenness. The noun (strong drink) and the verb (to be drunk) come from the same Hebrew root. This is what Jesus refused to accept on a sponge while He was being crucified (Matthew 27:34).

Now let's compare the alcohol content of common, modern beverages to what we just learned about ancient alcoholic beverages. A typical beer is 5%-7% AC. Table wines generally have 12%-14% AC. That is 2% stronger than the strongest thing available in Bible times. Fortified wine have a whopping 16%-22% AC and vodka, whiskey, and rum register an astounding 40%-70% AC. But Christians argue that they don't drink the hard stuff. Maybe the worst they will do is to drink a goblet of champagne as they toast the bride and groom. That is only 12.5% AC, or 2.5% more alcoholic than the most alcoholic thing an ancient Jew could find. Yes, but the champagne makes the drinker drunk quicker because gas (bubbles) in the champagne allows the alcohol to get into your bloodstream faster.

In conclusion, it does seem like wisdom requires a follower of Christ, a child of God, a vessel of the Holy Spirit, to avoid consumption of alcoholic beverages. My opinion on the matter is that the popularity of Christians using alcoholic beverages is an example of spiritual immaturity, or you could use the word carnality. Though I am also of the opinion that a "carnal Christian" is indeed carnal, but not Christian.

I conclude that the issue is often spiritual immaturity. The same peer pressure I learned to deal with in a public highschool, many

evangelical Christians do not face until they have graduated from their home school, Christian school, and Christian college. That peer pressure is the pressure to be acceptable to people who have traditionally been the American culture, people who do not know Christ, do not love Christ, and have no intent or desire to obey Christ.

This opinion then leads me to this question: “Why is it necessary?” When I am asked why I don’t drink alcoholic beverages, I ask, “Why should I?” “What is there to be gained?” “Explain the benefits to me.” “How will I be edified by this practice?” Most people respond to that line of questioning by explaining that the reason to drink alcohol in moderation is to experience the buzz, a warm feeling. Actually, I have discovered that when I sit down with my Bible and I pray that God will truly meet with me and speak to me from His Word, He does. And in those times I get such a good feeling that I can’t imagine how a drink could put me in better spirits!

Does the Bible condemn all use of alcoholic beverages? No. Is the use of alcoholic beverages questionable or even dangerous? Yes. Is it possible that Christians engage in this practice due to peer pressure? It is likely. The next time you feel the pressure remember: *A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother (Proverbs 18:24)*. Hang out with that Friend.