

September 23, 2018
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Deuteronomy
Community Baptist Church
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from Deuteronomy 16:18-17:7.

1. How can right leadership demonstrate love for others?
2. What is righteous judgment?
3. Are we unrealistic to expect righteous judgment from earthly governments?
4. Compare God's command for the people to appoint judges and leaders with His promise that He ordains such positions.
5. Does God hold American's responsible to elect good leaders?
6. Describe the desires of the flesh.
7. How do the desires of the flesh interact with God's holiness?

FOLLOW THE GREAT COMMAND
Deuteronomy 16:18-17:7

We have heard the story many times about how Jesus answered the lawyer who questioned Him about the most important law. *And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first*

commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:35-40).

The most important part of this statement is that all the Law and the Prophets depend on this expression of the law. It is similar to what Paul wrote to the Galatian churches: *"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2).*

Obviously loving God and loving each other is very important. But what is love? What do expressions of love look like? Human nature has concluded that if God really loves me, He will give me whatever I want, and, likewise, if I love someone, I will give him or her whatever they want. Typically that view is stated as, "If God loves me, He will give me my desires, and if you love me, you also must give me my desires." Such introverted thinking, such perversion of love is the very same self-love Satan expressed for himself which was the beginning of sin.

The reality is that supreme love for God requires me to sacrifice self-love in behalf of God love. And love for my neighbor means that I am willing to sacrifice self-pleasure for the benefit of another so that he or she can gain what is best. What is always best is for us to worship God and be shaped into His image.

As Moses was preparing to send the second generation of Israelites into the Promised Land, he challenged them to remember this simple rule from God. If we would simply love God as we should and love our neighbor as we should, we would solve many of the problems that naturally arise within interpersonal relationships. Most of the problems that are plaguing our culture right now would disappear if we could possibly do what God required in our text. And if the typical person of our culture heard me make such a statement, he would likely respond, "Don't try to bring religion into the matter."

Maybe the wise person is able to discern that as our culture has continued to reject God and His Bible, it has at the same time declined deeper and deeper into insurmountable problems. For example, when I was in elementary school, we began each day with prayer and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. I also remember that there was a mandatory respect for authorities, no cussing allowed, a modest dress standard, personal responsibility taught, and no guns or drugs in school.

Thanks to lawyers and judges who hated God and rejected righteous judgment, prayer and Bible reading were removed from schools. Those backward, archaic things have been replaced by rebellion against authority, irresponsibility that must be accepted, unbridled sexual expression, total sexual and gender confusion, distribution of pot and drugs, and regular school shootings by frustrated sinners.

Now honestly, in which of those cultures would you rather rear your children? The answer is a no-brainer. The principle is simple: reject God's way and you will reap Satan's way. That is why God's instruction to the people He was sending to inherit His blessing seems quite austere. Austerity is necessary to maintain the boundaries for humans who are natural sinners and who will naturally sin.

Love Your Neighbor (vv.18-20).

It probably doesn't occur to us very often that God ordains human government as a way for us to show love for each other (v.18a). God's instruction to His people required, *You shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns that the LORD your God is giving you, according to your tribes (v.18a).*

This command was to be carried out in the context of the Lord God giving the blessing to His people. We read over and over how God had told His people that He is the source of their blessings. But the people seemed deaf to believe it. From the outset, this generation of Israelites' parents did not trust God. Sure they heard the promises of God that Moses relayed to them. But when it came time to prove their faith (entering the land), they proved instead that they relied solely on human strength and wisdom. They rejected God's blessing because they knew they did not have the power to overcome the people who lived in the land.

Then when God withdrew His promise because of their lack of trust and rebellion, they determined they would go ahead and do God's will through their own strength. That was the last straw in God's patience with them. He told Moses, *But truly, as I live . . . none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore*

to give to their fathers. And none of those who despised me shall see it" (Numbers 14:21-23).

The people heard God's verdict against them, changed their minds and decided to charge into the Promised Land in their own strength. The result was a disaster.

Now Moses repeated the same promise to the second generation. He told them that God would dispossess the inhabitants of the land. He told them that God's people would possess His blessing. It is that context that Moses instructed the people that when they settled the land and were enjoying God's blessing, they were responsible to appoint leaders. *You shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns (v.18a).*

God stressed the importance of people being involved in self-governing, in the appointment of officials. This is not in conflict with the reality that it is God who ordains those leaders. Paul taught us in the letter to the Romans, *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God (Romans 13:1).* On one hand, this means that God ordains all positions of authority in human relationships. Kings, presidents, congress, local leaders, your boss, your parents, and all positions of authority are God's plan. On the other hand, this includes the fact that God raises up the particular individuals who occupy those positions of authority. We go to the polls to elect our authorities, but God determines the result of the casting of the lot. Solomon's wisdom still rings true: *The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD (Proverbs 16:33).*

Knowing this, God's people ought to be in serious prayer right now about the election coming up in November. We need to pray that God will send people to the polls, and restrain people from the polls, in order to elect His choice. We need to pray according to Scriptural instruction. *First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:1-4).* Then we

need to get busy encouraging people to go to the polls and *appoint judges and officers in all your towns.*

Why should God's people be serious about this matter? We should be serious because God requires just government (vv.18b-20). Moses instructed the people to do essentially the same thing Paul instructed us to do through his letter to Timothy. Work toward appointing leaders who would judge with righteous judgment. The people were responsible to appoint the leaders, and the leaders *shall judge the people with righteous judgment (v.18b).*

God is intently concerned for righteous judgment. His goal for authorities is that they will judge the people with righteous judgment. The word *judge* placed great importance on the person in the position of passing judgment. While rules and laws were important, in the ancient middle east the *WHO* was very important. Thus we see Moses and then the seventy elders judging the people.

God required the individuals in authority to be very careful to make decisions that impacted the people with righteous judgment. "Rightness" was the standard for judgment. Yes, but what is "right"? This is the point where the judges of the people had to turn to the law of God. For example, when the man who broke the Sabbath was brought to Moses, Moses not knowing how to render righteous judgment resorted to the Lord for direct instruction. This is why God has given His law not only for the Israelites, but for all humanity.

And the Lord still expects His people to pass judgment according to what He deems right. Jesus taught the same truth: *Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment" (John 7:24).* Casting decisions according to right judgment prevents the perversion of justice. God's rule for leaders is also, *You shall not pervert justice (v.19a).* To pervert is to stretch, twist, bend or bow. In other words, there is an acceptable, a right standard of justice. Justice is not fluid and does not morph with a culture that is in decline. When the nation of Israel rejected God's law, their kings and judges began to pass judgment according to the perverse human nature. The result was great injustice toward the needy, the widows, the orphans. Authorities like Ahab stole land from the innocent people like Naboth. This is why God finally destroyed the nation and allowed Assyria and Babylon to take the people captive. Finally God sent His verdict against the people through Isaiah: *Your princes are rebels and*

companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not bring justice to the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them. Therefore the Lord declares, the LORD of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: "Ah, I will get relief from my enemies and avenge myself on my foes. I will turn my hand against you and will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy" (Isaiah 1:23-25).

God requires leaders to judge according to a righteous standard. This is why liars, false accusers, people who love to disrupt peaceful society dread the appointment of judges who intend to judge righteously. The Constitution of the United States is not inspired by God like the Bible is. However, the Constitution does strive to establish justice, insure tranquility, and pursue the blessings of liberty—all of which God ordains as righteous pursuits. People who are of their father the Devil hate all attempts of authorities to judge according to a standard that is righteous.

To that end also God told Moses to explain what righteous judgment is not. *You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous (v.19b).* Righteous judgment does not show partiality. To show partiality is to acknowledge one person over another contrary to righteous justice. To show favor for a sinner just because he is the son of the king was partiality.

Eli was the high priest of Israel. But his sons were wicked men who proved to be greedy and lustful. The people turned a blind eye to them because they were in the priest's family. That was partiality. Likewise King Zedekiah showed partiality against Jeremiah because the prophet told the truth about the pending judgment of God.

To avoid showing unrighteous favor for one person over another, God warned His leaders not to accept a bribe. This is because a bribe blinds the eye to truth and, therefore, subverts justice. Haman gave a bribe of 10,000 talents of silver to persuade King Ahasuerus to let him kill the Jews (Esther 3:9). Solomon warned that *the wicked accepts a bribe in secret to pervert the ways of justice (Proverbs 17:23).*

We know from experience that wicked judges from the Supreme Court to local magistrates render judgments that show partiality toward almost anything and everything that is opposed to God and

His righteousness. We need to stop to wonder how many donations from generous benefactors or PACs actually constitute a bribe? Bribery of officials in third world cultures is small bananas compared to American corruption of justice.

As often is the case when God sets down a particular stipulation, so this rule about judging according to righteousness is followed by the promise of reward for following justice. *Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the LORD your God is giving you (v.20).*

God's options for leaders is pretty slim: *Justice, and only justice, you shall follow.* Following that plan takes the guess work out of decision making. No doubt the followers of Satan will argue that justice is a matter of interpretation. The followers of God are confident that our Creator has the right to determine what justice looks like. We are confident that He has revealed all the principles of justice we need in His Word.

The promise for following justice and only justice is that you may live and enjoy God's blessings. The history of Israel proves that those who trusted God enjoyed blessing, and when the people rejected God they reaped pain, sorrow, and destruction. American history is proving that the same principles are in effect. The difference between modern America and ancient Israel is that we have moved from God's blessing to pain, sorrow, and potential destruction in a much shorter time frame. God's law demands that leaders make decisions according to righteous principles in order to demonstrate love to others.

Love God Supremely (16:21-17:7).

The rule for worship (16:21-17:1) was real simple: No other gods. *You shall not plant any tree as an Asherah beside the altar of the LORD your God that you shall make. And you shall not set up a pillar, which the LORD your God hates (16:21-22).* This statement is a fuller explanation or maybe an application of the first law of the Ten Commands. A few chapters back in Deuteronomy, we ran into the specific statement of this law. *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself*

a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Deuteronomy 5:6-10).

This instruction warned against trying to worship God with religious artifacts, paraphernalia that is connected with that which God abhors! The *Asherah* and pillars were connected specifically with the Canaanite religions. They were phallic symbols. The Canaanite religion worshiped gods and goddesses of fertility. It was an abomination to God; He abhorred their wickedness.

So how do we explain God's people being attracted in any way to what God abhors? And worse, how do we explain them wanting to implement such paraphernalia or practices in trying to worship God? And why is it so difficult for people who profess to love Jesus to make a connection between fleshly worship and sin that Jesus abhors? It is as though professing Christians honestly do not think that the impulses of the flesh, the desires of the flesh are contrary to righteousness. Why is it so impossible for professing Christians to identify the desires of the flesh? The extreme expression of this is possibly the attempt of a practicing homosexual trying to convince others that he or she is also a Christian.

Christians do not practice what God abhors. Rather our worship is supposed to demonstrate love for God. That love is required in the sacrifice. *You shall not sacrifice to the LORD your God an ox or a sheep in which is a blemish, any defect whatever (v.17:1a).* Simply stated in this context: Love offers the best. God required defect-free sacrifices to demonstrate that He is defect free (i.e. holy and sinless). Willingness to sacrifice the best was a manifestation of love for God.

In fact, God prohibited His people from trying to worship Him cheaply. True love for God will avoid offering anything God considers to be an abomination. Concerning second best or defective sacrifices God told Moses *for that is an abomination to the LORD your God (17:1b).* To offer God second best is an abomination to God.

The root issue here demands that the worshiper know WHO and WHAT God is. So we pose the question: “Who is God to you?” Is He your Creator, Master, Savior who bought you for Himself at great cost? Is He so superior to you that it is impossible to comprehend His majesty? Is He holy, so free from sin that you cannot imagine how sinless God is and how deeply He abhors sin?

Or “What is God to you?” Is He omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent? Is He infinitely wise, righteous, and just? Is He the altogether sovereign ruler of all creation? This is the root issue with cheap, shallow worship that is acceptable to and embraced by an unsaved, Christ-denying world. If God is who and what the Bible says He is, it is illogical that a person who is born in sin, thoroughly sinful, always an offense to that God would ever say about our worship of God, “I really enjoy that.”

How did God require His people to deal with false worship (17:2-7)? The punishment for the sin seems extreme. Implicit in this case is the fact that someone had done something God forbid. *If there is found among you, within any of your towns that the LORD your God is giving you, a man or woman who does what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God, in transgressing his covenant (v.2).* It was someone within the community of God’s people. They had done evil in God’s sight. They have stepped over the boundary of God’s covenant.

Specifically the transgression was a matter of worship. The person *has gone and served other gods and worshiped them, or the sun or the moon or any of the host of heaven, which I have forbidden (v.3).* They engaged in the worship of the creation or creature just like their pagan neighbors did all the time. Creature worship, the worship of ourselves, our desires, our pleasures is the most natural thing for sinners to do.

So how were they to deal with it? Someone heard about the sin. *And it is told you and you hear of it, then you shall inquire diligently, and if it is true and certain that such an abomination has been done in Israel (v.4).* First this kind of thing could be a rumor. That is why someone needs to investigate to see if there were witnesses to verify the sin. Assuming there were witnesses, it was verified that someone committed an abomination. An abomination is what God abhors.

How do we know God abhors it? We know His law, His word and judge according to it.

The response God required is astonishing. *Then you shall bring out to your gates that man or woman who has done this evil thing, and you shall stone that man or woman to death with stones (v.5).* The matter involved a public trial. Evidence was presented by the witnesses. *On the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses the one who is to die shall be put to death; a person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness (v.6).* If there was sufficient evidence to validate the abomination, sentence was passed. It was a very serious sentence. Often this is what “cut off from Israel” meant in the law.

On the basis of sin being confirmed, there was to be execution. *The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people (v.7a).* The accusers were to be the first to begin the execution. This would force them to be very certain of their accusation. This would prevent accusations by gossip. Why such harsh judgment? Was this judging according to righteousness? God’s reason is, *So you shall purge the evil from your midst (v.7b).*

Briefly let’s consider an explanation and application of God’s rule. God required such extreme responses because God knows the natural evil that lurks in our hearts. History indicates that God’s people were not very faithful to apply God’s rule. As a result, false worship proliferated until God destroyed the land and put the people in captivity.

By way of application to our circumstances, we must remember that the God who established these rules is still the God of the creation and us. God still abhors false worship and perversion of justice. God still desires for us to love Him supremely and to love others. Therefore, God desires for us to admonish each other, teach each other, encourage each other to these noble ends. When we begin to think that life is about us, our love for God and our love for others will wane, and before long we will reap the same bitter fruit that God’s people reaped in the past.