



PREPARATION FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM (LOOKING BACK AND GROWING FORWARD) STUDIES IN THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY LESSON 5

Holiness in Person and Compassion to Others **Deuteronomy 14 -15**

Kids are so great with their understanding of God. A little boy prayed: "Dear God, I hope you take care of yourself. 'Cause if anything happens to you, we would all be in a terrible mess." Another little boy wrote to God: "Dear God, Are you in charge of babies? I have three sisters which is good. But I would like to put in an order for a brother. I hope this special order won't upset you." Little Anita wrote: "Dear God, My sister Tina has a girlfriend, Wendy, who never stops talking. It would take a miracle to shut her up. Have you got any left?" Little Ralph wrote: "Dear God, I love to eat. Thanks for all the food. Pizza was the best idea you ever had." These kinds of prayers express something of the firm belief in the personal nature of God. This belief in the holy, faithful God was what underlaid all of Israel's laws.

Deuteronomy is not a book of laws; it is a book of the heart, instruction (Heb: *torah*) in how to live intentionally as God's people in response to His love and mercy (e.g., 4:29; 6:4; 11:1). One of the most important features of the book is its homiletical style. The commandments are not presented in legal format, but are cast in the style of three sermons, interwoven with pleas and exhortations to obedience, all grounded in the prevenient (initiating) grace of God.

Also, the concept of covenant around which the book revolves is not primarily a legal concept, but a cultural way of expressing relationship between Yahweh and His people. The call to obedience throughout the book is an appeal to order all of life in relation to the One who had revealed Himself in their history as the true and living God. It is not just the imposition of law; it is a call to choose God (30:15-20; cf. Josh 24:14-15), which worked out in practical instructions. The emphasis on intentional and joyful obedience of the heart as the proper response to God's grace moves toward more responsibility for the individual (e.g., 30:11-14), and a subsequent emphasis on motive and intention also advocated by the prophets (e.g., Jer. 7:21-23). Other characteristics of the book are closely related to this emphasis. Total loyalty to God was crucial, which meant rejecting the worship of any other gods (6:13-15; 8:19; 9:7-12; 30:15-20). God's love for His people and a desire for a mutual loving relationship are prominent (6:5; 7:13-14; 23:5; 30:6,19-20), but there is concern with justice, especially toward the weaker members of the community (10:18-19, 14:28-29; 15:1-18; 24:14-15). The book develops the idea that obedience brings blessing and life, and disobedience brings curses and death (11:26-28; 30:15-20), a way of affirming the positive results of life properly ordered under God. While that view would later be distorted into legalism, Deuteronomy itself stresses obedience on the level of proper love (10:12-15; cf. Mic. 6:8). There is concern expressed throughout the book that the people might (will) fail. This leads to two emphases held in juxtaposition: the people should be diligent to follow God and not forfeit the benefits of the land (28:47-68), yet God would be merciful in the midst of their failures and bring them (again) into the land (30:1-10). The influence of Deuteronomy on the life of Israel was tremendous. It provided the criteria by which Israel examined and judged itself. The authors of the books of Joshua through 2 Kings weigh Israel's history against the background of Deuteronomy's instructions. With its strict warnings not to add or delete anything from it (4:2; 12:32), Deuteronomy also represents one of the first steps in forming a canon of written Scripture. Deuteronomy is one of the books most often quoted in the NT. Jesus quoted part of the Shema (6:4-9) as the summary of both legal (priestly) and prophetic teachings (Matt. 22:37; Mark 12:30; cf. Luke 10:27), underscoring the obligations of people under God in community. The Gospels also record that Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy in facing the three temptations (Matt. 4:1-10; Luke 4:1-13; from Deut. 8:3; 6:13, 16).

THE ONE PLACE OF SACRIFICE

The phrase "the place YHWH your God will choose" (15:20) is an oblique way of referring to Jerusalem. The exact place could not be named because Jerusalem had not been founded by that name as an Israelite city.

The various types of sacrifices and offerings in this passage indicate that all forms of worship and the payment of all dues were to be made at this central sanctuary. Worship centers traditionally were located on hills or other high places, frequently in forests and groves. That goes for the Canaanites and other inhabitants of Palestine ("the nations you are dispossessing") as well as for the Israelites. Both of the places Israel's God revealed Himself were mountains. Mount Sinai was where the covenant was given, and Israel's chief sanctuary was located on Mount Zion in Jerusalem.

The Israelites were warned away from using traditional Canaanite high places because of the danger of syncretism--blending Yahwism with Baalism, or some other foreign religious element, in maybe unintentional ways.

The later experience of the Northern Kingdom suggested that a variety of worship centers could be very dangerous to the faith life of the people. In the north before its destruction many cities contained shrines. Usually they were located in places where Baal and Asherah used to be worshiped, and aspects of the worship of Baal were frequently assimilated to worship of Yahweh at those places. Sometimes it was difficult to tell the difference between worship of Yahweh and worship of Baal. Prophets frequently condemned such worship places (Hosea 8:11; Jeremiah 11:13). The attraction of such shrines was one of the major reasons for the fall of the Northern Kingdom.

God knew well in advance the price of such disloyalty. The centralization of worship in Jerusalem mandated in this text was revived during the reign of Hezekiah. He abolished the offering of sacrifices anywhere but in the capital. Josiah went even further. He abolished all sanctuaries and temples throughout the land, except for the Solomonic temple in Jerusalem. In this way stricter control over the religious practices of the people could be maintained.

Archaeological excavations at Arad, a Judean city in the south of Palestine, support the biblical description of these religious reforms. Arad contains remains of a temple structure and altars, all built according to the specifications of the Jerusalem temple and its altars. Such a temple was found dating to before the time of Hezekiah. It was destroyed during Hezekiah's reign and rebuilt, but without an altar for burnt offerings. When later the Hezekiah-age city of Arad was destroyed, it was rebuilt during the time of Josiah, but the temple itself was not redone. These changes at Arad are consistent with the centralization efforts of Josiah, as mandated in Deuteronomy.

By this command God typified the one sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross (Rom. 5:12 -19; Heb. 10:12 -14; Acts 4:12).

TITHES

The command to yield a tenth of one's sustenance to God is rooted in the recognition that He is its source, and since He has a special concern for the Levites and the poor, we too must show concern to them. According to Deut. 14:22ff. tithing was an annual process, and its portions were to be consumed at the sanctuary. If the distance from one's home was too great, the produce could be converted into money, and with the proceeds the food for the feast could be purchased at the locale of the sanctuary. Every third year, however, the tithe was kept in the home community and distributed to the Levites and the poor, who depended on such contributions. This procedure differs significantly from that set forth in Num. 18:21. There, tithes are to be given to the Levites who in turn will tithe to the priests.

The Rabbis harmonized the difference by stipulating three tithes: the first tithe was to go to the Levites; a second (*ma-aser sheni*) was to be eaten at the sanctuary by the owner of the land; and a third (*ma-sar ani*, "tithe of the poor") was raised every third year and sixth year, in which case it took the place of the *ma-aser sheni*. During the period of the Second Temple, tithes were no longer given to the Levites and instead were transmitted directly to the priests, since there were relatively small numbers of Levites in attendance at the sanctuary. One talmudic opinion saw this altered procedure as a divine punishment for the Levites because so few of them had returned with Ezra from the Babylonian exile. Still later, it became a custom among the pious to tithe voluntarily even

from their grain purchases (though only the farmer who grew the produce was obligated to tithe), inasmuch as there was grave suspicion that farmers were lax in their observance of the law. The halachah concerning tithing is contained in a number of mishnaic and Palestinian talmudic treatises, notably *Terumot*, *Demai*, *Ma'aserot*, and *Ma'aser Sheni*.

In medieval times the church levied special tithes on Jewish communities and also applied the biblical prescription to its own faithful. The great European cathedrals were paid for to a large extent by these levies, which were obligatory in many states until the French Revolution.

Scholars have attempted to elucidate the historical development of tithing from the different provisions in Numbers and Deuteronomy, and from the mention made of it in Genesis. It seems certain that the concept of contributing some portion of one's increase as an expression of gratitude to God was very old, reaching into pastoral days (Jacob vows to tithe if God will protect him, Gen. 28:22; see also Gen. 14:20) and finding its parallels in Ugaritic and Mesopotamian practice.

Taken from *The Torah, A Modern Commentary*, W. Gunther Plaut, Ed.

THE KOSHER LAWS

Dietary Laws

1. General Rules

The biblical regulations provide that although all plants are permitted as food not all animals are.

Allowed are:

Four-legged land animals with parted hooves and a regurgitative digestion; fish **that have fins and scales** (other water animals are forbidden); birds, except those expressly forbidden (mostly predators); some insects.

Forbidden are:

Animals that have died other than by slaughter; a kid boiled in its mother's milk; *sheretz* (swarming or creeping things) like insects and worms with some exceptions; by application, reptiles and amphibians.

Rabbinic tradition developed a complex system of *kashrut* from these basic laws (to which must of course be added the rules of Passover and of fast days).

2. Purpose

Five reasons have been identified as underlying the Torah's dietary laws:

a. Distinguish

They were to distinguish the Israelites from their Canaanite neighbors and, later, from the nations. Indeed, such separation became a major consequence of *kashrut* observance.

b. Discipline

The laws constituted a rigorous discipline by which Israel was to consecrate itself to God.

c. Hygiene

Kashrut promotes human hygiene. This position was held by Maimonides and Nachmanides but vigorously opposed by others.

d. Hesitation

The main skein that runs through these laws is to arouse in us a sense of hesitation, even guilt, concerning the consumption of meat.

e. Holiness

Kashrut expresses an aspect of holiness in that it aims at completeness.

It is likely that a number of such purposes, separately or together, added to already existing taboos and helped to form the Biblical system, which must be taken in its entirety as an approach to holiness. It was part and parcel of sacred practice without which Israel could not function in its relation to God. The individual laws now found in the Torah had developed over a long time, and in similar fashion later centuries

shaped them further into the observances and rules that now form the body of traditional *kashrut*. Reform Jews, in their eclectic approach to halachah, have generally abandoned most biblical and postbiblical restrictions on the consumption of meat, but many still observe the prohibition of eating pork and (less so) shell fish; others take upon themselves the laws of *kashrut* as a personal discipline; and still others observe such practices as a sign of solidarity with fellow Jews. Where food is served in Reform synagogues, the *biblical* rules set forth above are usually observed, while *postbiblical* rules are applied but rarely.

3. The Prohibition of Pork

Among all the laws one prohibition stands out and, indeed, in Jewish history assumed special significance: the biblical and postbiblical aversion to the eating of swine's flesh. It appears from Isaiah 65:4 and 66:3, 17 that during exilic times in Babylonia some Israelites brought swine's blood as an oblation in sacrifices and consumed its meat on such occasions. However, such illicit sacrifices were exceptional. The Egyptians ate or sacrificed to their gods the blood and meat of swine, as did other nations at the time.

THE YEAR OF RELEASE

Release of debts

1. Every seventh year Israel is to grant a remission of debts whereby every creditor shall release what he has loaned to those within the nation [excluding foreigners] (15:1-3).
2. The Lord promises that if the nation will obey that He will bless them so that they will not be poor and indebted to other nations but will lend to other nations (15:4- 7).
3. If one in the nation comes upon a poor brother in need (as one always will) and even if it is near the seventh year, one is to willingly and generously lend to him a sufficient amount for his need because the Lord will bless the giver for this (15:8-11).
4. If one of Israel's kinsmen (a Hebrew man or woman) is sold to them in slavery, it is to be for only seven years, after which one must either release him with a liberal amount of produce, which the Lord has given and which he has worked double-time for, or one is to mark him as his servant forever at his desire (15:12-18).

As the title suggests, the sabbatical year occurred every seventh year. Seven, in Scripture, is the number of completion or perfection. There are seven days to a week. For the Hebrew of old there was one feast day in each seventh month, and every seven years there was the year of release. The culmination of the sabbatical years occurred each fifty years when the jubilee was celebrated with the blowing of the jubilee trumpet.

The year of release was instituted because God's people were an agricultural community and the land needed a periodic rest in order to insure fertility. From that economic character of the year it later developed into a social convenience and its scope was enlarged to cover various situations. It is likely that the year began on the Day of Atonement. Much of the purpose of this law was to help the poor. Had Israel kept it, poverty would have been virtually eliminated. Israel, under the blessing of God could have been enormously rich!

It is quite remarkable, but in 1958 the state of Israel reported that for the first time since the days of the second temple in the first century Jewish farmers in Israel obeyed this command to observe the sabbatical year. Fifteen villages, affiliated with the movement known as Poalei Agudat, ceased to cultivate their land for twelve months. It has been estimated that over 5,000 people in 1958 decided to observe once again the "year of release." In spite of privation and even famine the law has once again been observed.

It must be understood that these debts released were not loans for the purpose of purchasing luxuries or entering into business transactions. These were not debts that had occurred through buying a house or expanding one's business. Ordinary trading debts belonged to a different category and did not come under the year of release. These were debts that had been contracted because a man had fallen upon hard times -- misfortune or calamity had befallen him. Neither must it be assumed that the debts were automatically wiped out forever. It may have been of a temporary nature, for the seventh year only, a brief respite from paying high rates of interest. That is logical, for if it meant the cancellation of the debt forever, people

would have been tempted to get into debt during the sixth year so that it would be cancelled in the seventh. That explains why the non-Jew (the "foreigner" of verse 3) did not share in this year of release. A debt contracted by a Gentile would probably be a business debt incurred while staying temporarily in the land.

One commentator states that in this section "we get near to the heart of God, full of compassion and mercy." Not only was the man in debt blessed by the year of release, but the money lender also, for he would have to trust God to supply his needs for twelve months while he was not receiving his repayments and interest. God is no man's debtor and in verse 6 we see that the man who thus foregoes his just exacting of the debt will be divinely blessed.

Surely there are three abiding lessons from this section for Christians. First, we ought to acknowledge our own spiritual indebtedness to Christ who has forgiven all our sins and blotted them out like a cancelled debt *forever*. Never again can the penalty for sin be exacted; Christ paid it all on the cross. Next, we must learn to be long-suffering and patient to those who are in difficulties, who are passing through stringent times. Finally, God expects the Christian to use his money wisely, putting it to good use, that it might do good to others.

Release of slaves

This is not such a drastic change of subject matter as might appear at first sight. A man's misfortune in those ancient days might have been so bad that even a loan of money from a friend could not save him. In order to avoid utter destitution he would have to sell himself temporarily and become a member of another's household, earning food and shelter for himself by doing menial service. In other words he sold himself into service for another; he became a slave. The slavery of the Old Testament must never be confused with that of the New. The Hebrew slave was comparatively well looked after for the master was governed by divine law in his treatment of his servants. There were rules and regulations governing his bodily injury and so forth. It was not so in the case of the slaves of the Greeks and Romans.

In the seventh year a voluntary slave or bondman was automatically set free and the master was obliged to equip him for his new freedom so that he could begin life again with confidence. There is a lovely thought in the original language of Deut. 15:14. It may be translated: "Thou shalt adorn him with a necklace." The sign of the slave was an iron and leather collar - a dog collar! By contrast the freed slave was adorned with a necklace of goods given him by his former master. As we sometimes speak of "showering gifts" upon people, so the slave was given cattle, food and drink to "set him up" in his new freedom. The spur for this was the memory of Egyptian bondage by the Hebrew master. Remembering how all God's people were once enslaved and then set free by God Himself, liberated with a goodly share of Egyptian spoil, the master liberated his slave in the year of release with a "necklace" of good things (verses 14, 15).

If a slave liked his master and had been treated well during his time of service then he need not take advantage of the regulations for the year of release. He could elect to remain a slave forever. The sign of that decision would be a hole bored in the slave's ear. The servant would place his ear against a post and the awl or brace and bit would drill the hole. Verse 17 infers that similar requirements were in force for women servants during this year of release.

Once we were in bondage to Satan, servants of sin. The Holy Spirit worked in our hearts as we came under the sound of the Gospel and one day we took advantage of the year of release. Nothing had to be paid for "Jesus paid it all, All to Him I owe." Jesus did it all, and more than that He put a necklace about us, giving us all the peace and joy and privileges of the Christian life. Now, however, we become willing slaves, "bond-slaves" as the Apostle Paul termed it, "branded" with the mark of ownership of Jesus Christ.

CONSECRATION OF FIRST BORN MALES

All of the first-born males of the herd and flock are to be consecrated, separated from work and then sacrificed in a family meal before the Lord in the place which He chooses except for those which have a defect which are not to be sacrificed before the Lord but are to be legally partaken of in one's own city (15:19-23). This rule was to make them remember their redemption and point to the redemption we have in Christ (I Peter 1:18,19).

In the Book of Exodus it had been decreed that the firstlings of the cattle of the children of Israel should be sanctified or consecrated to the Lord. This we presume was in gratitude for the sparing of the first sons when those of the Egyptians were overtaken by death on the night of the Passover. Now verse 20 implies a special service and place for this consecration. No male "firstling" of any herd or flock was to be "worked" but instead sacrificed to the Lord. Verse 21 governs; the sacrifice itself: the animal had to be unblemished. If found to be lame, or deformed in any other way, then it had to be eaten within the gates (verse 22) with the blood poured out upon the ground (verse 23). In other words, only the best is good enough for God -- a lesson that Christians are a long time learning -- the best of our possessions and the best of our service. How easy it is to perform conscientious service for an earthly master (for financial gain) and yet do "slipshod" work for our heavenly Master -- merely because His reward is yet to come.