

February 3, 2019
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Deuteronomy
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
© 2019 David J. Whitcomb

UNIQUE LAWS ABOUT PURITY Deuteronomy 23

Paul made an enigmatic statement in the letter he wrote to Pastor Titus. He wrote, *To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled (Titus 1:15)*. Some people have tried to convince me that this verse allows them to live any way they choose as long as they have a clear conscience that what they do is pure. I'm sorry, but adultery is never pure. Murder is never pure. Lying, cheating, stealing, and throwing garbage on your neighbor's lawn is never pure.

The statement from Paul means that people who have a pure heart will demonstrate that purity in the way they live. They will live purely. At the same time, the person who has an impure heart will live impurely because that's the way he is. Oh, but here is the rub. Who is to say that what I do is not pure but what you do is pure? God. Go back to my assertion that adultery, murder, lying and stealing are never pure. How do we know that? Those are some of the most basic laws found in the Ten Commands. That is the standard for pure living.

Now here is the dilemma. On one hand are the people who want to live in sin and claim they are pure. They generally make that claim because they know in their conscience that God requires purity in His people. But they are not really pure because they break God's law all the time. On the other hand are the people who strive to be pure before God by dotting every "i" and crossing every "t." They are making a list and checking it twice, going to make sure they're not naughty but nice. But this means they think they will ingratiate God to themselves. Both of these positions or practices are wrong.

God gave His law in order to describe Himself to us. Through God's law we learn about His pure character. Therefore, His law acts as the measuring stick for purity. If we are truly honest about God's laws, we will be quick to admit that we fall far short of measuring up. We are not pure nor can we make ourselves pure by trying harder.

At this point, we come face to face with our great need for the Savior Jesus Christ. God the Son came to earth as one of us. He lived in a body like ours— but never broke one law. He is the only person on earth who lived perfectly purely. Therefore, His shed blood is the fitting and acceptable sacrifice to cover our impurities. When we embrace that truth by faith and He forgives our sins, He also clothes us in His own righteousness. He gives us a standing of perfect purity in His presence. Now our desire is to live out that standard. Sometimes we do okay. Sometimes we don't do so okay. But always we desire to live according to God's character because we are His children.

Those were the lessons God taught His people in Israel. He wanted them to know that He was far purer than the mythical gods of the pagans. He desired for His people to live according to His character. He longed for them to understand that God's law revealed His character, but that they could not keep that law. God desired for His people to look forward with faith to the substitute who would purify them with His own blood. And along the way, God desired for His people to demonstrate to all who see that they belong to the pure God. That is the reason for these laws.

Ceremonial Cleanness in Public Worship (vv.1-8).

This first law in the list in Deuteronomy twenty-three addresses an issue with mutilated men. *No one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the LORD (v.1)*. This kind of practice was common among the pagans. God warned His people to be distinct from the pagan inhabitants who He was driving out. This was just another common area where distinctions were to be maintained. Or the emasculation might not be the result of a pagan rite, but rather a birth defect. A problem like in the ancient Babylonian cultures where they used mutilated men who often dressed like women in their pagan worship.

The assembly was reserved for God's people. As we will see, pagans were banned from joining in the Israelites' gatherings for worship. That is what the word *assembly* refers to. Therefore if any of God's people were characterized by pagan traits, they were to be banned. A more precise explanation of this law was the prohibition of such people from the priesthood (Leviticus 21:20).

This rule is one of the most obvious contrasts between grace and law. Consider for example, Evangelist Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch. Luke recorded, *And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship (Acts 8:27). Once the Ethiopian grasped the truth of the gospel and was born again, he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him (Acts 8:38).* The mutilated Ethiopian was brought into the family of God. He, like all of us, was free to worship God in fellowship with all other believers. The grace of God tore down the differences.

Another law addressed the offspring of a forbidden union. *No one born of a forbidden union may enter the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of his descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD (v.2).* What is a forbidden union? In other Old Testament statements, we gather that this person might have been the offspring of the union between an Israelite and a Philistine, Ammonite, or Moabite. The actual Hebrew word translated as *forbidden union* is found again only in Zechariah 9:6 where it speaks of the offspring of incest. In a broader sense, it refers to the offspring of a mixed union between Israelites and pagans.

These people were prohibited from the assembly forever. The phrase *tenth generation* is another way of saying, "never." Again, the assembly does not prohibit such people from becoming proselyte Jews, but does prohibit them from gathering at the feasts and other worship events at the tabernacle and temple.

Maybe it should not be surprising to read that the next group of people identified as outsiders to the assembly were Ammonites or Moabites. No entrance was granted to them either. *No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of them may enter the assembly of the LORD*

forever (v.3). This is the same instruction as the previous verse, but now the prohibition is narrowed down to two people groups.

It may be instructive for us to remember that the boys Ammon and Moab were the offspring of Lot's incest with his two daughters. People from those nations could come to know and fear God and become identified with the Israelite community. But they could not participate in worship with the gathered assembly of God's people.

For these two people groups, the reason was more than just the fact that the principle of purity had been breached through incest. Neither of these nations were helpful to Israel during the exodus. God's law prohibited them *because they did not meet you with bread and with water on the way, when you came out of Egypt (v.4a).* When Israel came out of Egypt and wanted to pass through their land, the Ammonites and Moabites were hostile toward them. They refused to offer common Middle Eastern courtesy. This in spite of the fact that they were distant relatives of the Israelites. And furthermore, they had nothing to worry about because God had already instructed Moses that He was not going to give any Ammonite or Moabite land to Israel.

Not being content with just being unfriendly, the Moabites intentionally tried to curse God's people. Moses reminded the people that God barred the Moabites from the assembly *because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. But the LORD your God would not listen to Balaam; instead the LORD your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the LORD your God loved you (vv.4b-5).*

Therefore, Moses told the people to hold a grudge against the Ammonites and Moabites! That is what the text appears to say. *You shall not seek their peace or their prosperity all your days forever (v.6).* Actually, this was to be the general rule regarding their attitude toward the nation as a whole. Individual Ammonites and Moabites could become part of God's nation, being God-fearers. Let's not forget that Ruth was a Moabitess.

It seems that this continuing response rests on the principle of God's promise to Abraham and all his posterity. *"I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"* (Genesis 12:3). If this

principle is still in force, I know of a congress woman in Minnesota who is in a lot of trouble with God.

In contrast to that rule, God offered a modified rule for Edomites and Egyptians. *You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother. You shall not abhor an Egyptian, because you were a sojourner in his land. Children born to them in the third generation may enter the assembly of the LORD (vv.7-8).*

These are two unique people groups. Edomites were near relatives of Israelites. They were born in the line of Esau, Jacob's brother. They were not always friendly to Israel, but God required Israel to treat them kindly. Egypt could be perceived as the enemy to God's people because they had enslaved them. But in a way Egypt had provided the environment in which Israel became a nation. What an illustration of forgiveness. This rule reminds us that God's ways are not always our ways.

Specifically the modification of the rule allowed for people from these pagan nations to join the assembly, the time of worship after the third generation. The third generation seems to refer to the great-grandchildren of those Egyptians and Edomites who chose to live among the Israelites. In other words, it appears that it took about one hundred years to prove sincerity.

Physical Cleanness in Personal Matters (vv.9-14).

The general rule is that the people were to keep themselves from evil stuff (vv.9-13). The principle: *When you are encamped against your enemies, then you shall keep yourself from every evil thing (v.9).* Our natural response is to think about all the *evil things* practiced or represented by the pagan neighbors the Israelites were supplanting. But this is not a reference to worshiping false gods, polygamy, child sacrifices or other social vices. This is a call for personal hygiene which effects social hygiene. Notice that it is applied specifically while the Israelites were near the pagan inhabitants of the Promised Land. There is obviously something here in these very, very practical rules that carries overtones of Godliness.

Let's consider the details of the rule. It addressed the issue of various bodily emissions. *If any man among you becomes unclean because of a nocturnal emission, then he shall go outside the camp*

(v.10a). We can compare Leviticus 15:25-29 and find similar instruction regarding a woman's discharge and the required sacrifice to be made in connection with ceremonial purification. The rule forbid a person with bodily emissions from entering *inside the camp, but when evening comes, he shall bathe himself in water, and as the sun sets, he may come inside the camp (vv.10b-11).* It was a practical purity issue.

A similar rule dealt with the problem of human waste. During the wanderings and even after the people settled the land, there were no public restrooms and certainly none of the plumbing conveniences that we have in our homes. They didn't even have outhouses or port-o-johns. Therefore, *"You shall have a place outside the camp, and you shall go out to it. And you shall have a trowel with your tools, and when you sit down outside, you shall dig a hole with it and turn back and cover up your excrement (vv.12-13).*

The people simply assigned a particular place outside the camp. The individual was responsible to maintain cleanliness. We cannot consider all the burdensome ramifications of this situation publicly. But in our minds we should understand how difficult it would have been to obey this law (not the least of which is how much warning one would need in order to make it to the "spot" on time).

Verse fourteen offers the reason for physical cleanliness. Be hygienic because God is always present. *Because the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp, to deliver you and to give up your enemies before you (v.14a).* We know that God's presence is always among His people. For Old Testament Israel, God promised His presence at the mercy seat on the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies in the tabernacle. But God, being omnipresent, was with His people everywhere. In the same way God is present with us—a fact we easily forget.

Connected with God's presence is God's desire to give victory over the enemy. That was the promise God gave from Abraham even up to Moses. And now the people were on the verge of going into battle to prove God faithful—even as God desires for us to have victory in our battle against sin and Satan. But, God's blessing flows through channels of fellowship. If the Israelites ordered their lives in a way that offended God, they would not enjoy victory (proven during the judges period). And when we are out of fellowship with

our ever-present God because of sin, we too forfeit His promised blessing.

Because God is present, God sees. The reason for hygiene is: *therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you (v.14b)*. How practical is this law! There are practices of common decency in life that matter to God. One well known saying is actually quite accurate. The phrase, “Cleanliness is next to Godliness” is attributed to John Wesley around the year 1778. In fact, evidence of this same principle is found in ancient Hebrew documents (like here) and ancient Babylonian documents.

Ethical Cleanness in Interpersonal Relationships (vv.15-25).

Here we come to a law that is very difficult to apply to our setting in that it deals with escaped slaves (vv.15-16). The principle was that God’s people were not to report runaway slaves. *You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you (v.15)*. Slavery was common among all people groups, even Israel, in that day. But if a slave escaped, you didn’t turn him in.

That law seems simple enough to us and reminds us of the underground railroad that ran through the north into Canada during the war between the states. However, the words *to you* are clearly a reference to the nation of Israel as a whole, not the individual (as all of these laws are). God’s law provided clear guidelines about Hebrew slaves to Hebrews and non-Hebrew slaves to Hebrews. And so, this is a law that applied to the case of a slave from a different nation or people group taking refuge in Israel.

The rule simply required that Israel do not wrong the slave. *He shall dwell with you, in your midst, in the place that he shall choose within one of your towns, wherever it suits him. You shall not wrong him (v.16)*. God’s people were to let the escaped slave live wherever he or she chose. Doing injustice to the slave was not permitted.

While we struggle to know how to make application with a principle like this, we do well to remember that slavery is not dead in our modern world. Some groups who watch this horrible practice conclude that slavery is more rampant today across the world than at any previous time in history. Are we aware of this? What do we do

to counteract it? If a girl who is enslaved in sex trafficking (and there are many of them in Greenville) came to you for help, how would you respond?

The next law is almost as difficult for us to swallow as it involves harlotry (vv.17-18). No Israelite could be connected with immoral cults. *None of the daughters of Israel shall be a cult prostitute, and none of the sons of Israel shall be a cult prostitute (v.17)*. Immorality was commonly connected with false worship throughout most of the ancient ages. It was common in Old Testament times. It was common in the Roman empire (1 Corinthians 10). It was so common that an Israelite family in a financial crisis might be tempted to consider it as a part-time job. God said, “Never, not once!” This might be one of the most obvious breaches of the purity God required of His people.

A law connected with the prohibition against harlotry prohibited any offerings to the Lord that were in any way associated with evil. *You shall not bring the fee of a prostitute or the wages of a dog into the house of the LORD your God in payment for any vow, for both of these are an abomination to the LORD your God (v.18)*. No fee connected with harlotry was an acceptable offering to God. Neither was the wage of a dog acceptable. What in the world is that talking about? Dogs were considered to be among the most unclean of vermin. The context forces us to see that this is a reference to males who worked in the temples of ill repute. “Dog” being the most fitting term to describe them. Nothing that was an abomination to God should be offered to God. The application of the purity principle is obvious.

Then there were laws about charging interest on loans (vv.19-20). Notice there are two rules listed here that appear to establish a double standard. On one hand, God’s people were not allowed to charge interest to fellow Israelites. *You shall not charge interest on loans to your brother, interest on money, interest on food, interest on anything that is lent for interest (v.19)*. On the other hand, God clearly instructs His people to charge interest to foreigners. *You may charge a foreigner interest (v.20a)*. What is the difference?

The reason for the different rules is *that the LORD your God may bless you in all that you undertake in the land that you are entering to take possession of it (v.20b)*. God expected Israelites to

care for Israelites as they lived in the Promised Land. Sometimes fellow Israelites were in need and a friend or neighbor could give a loan of money or food or oil. But they could not charge interest. Foreigners did not enjoy the same relationship with God's people, so they would have to pay interest on a loan. It was okay to make a distinction just like it is expected for us to recognize and even maintain distinctions between members of the body of Christ and outsiders.

Then there are laws about vows (vv.21-23). God requires His people to fulfill their vows. *If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin (v.21).* Vows might involve something as serious as the Nazarite vow which altered a lifestyle. Or a vow might be an agreement with a neighbor, but invoked God's name as witness. It was not a sin to make a vow, but it was a sin not to pay it.

Therefore, God explained that it is better not to vow. There is no sin in **not** vowing. *But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin (v.22).* However, it is best to live so consistently that your "yes" is "yes" and your "no" is "no." *You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God what you have promised with your mouth (v.23).* Is that not the same rule that James gives to us New Testament believers? *But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation (James 5:12).*

Finally there were practical laws about sharing the Lord's provision (vv.24-25). *If you go into your neighbor's vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes, as many as you wish, but you shall not put any in your bag. If you go into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain (vv.24-25).* The rule was that a person could eat his fill of grain, fruit, or vegetables while passing through your field. It was like providing lunch for the person passing along the pathways that bordered the fields. This is the law Jesus and His disciples practiced on the Sabbath day.

However, no one was allowed to drive their combine into the neighbor's crops and harvest them. The balance is necessary because somewhere there would be a person who would dishonestly try to take advantage of the first rule. Laws are generally responses to the weakness of human nature.

All of these laws are easy enough to understand. Not all of them lend themselves to easy application in our circumstances. We should be satisfied to conclude that God's intent was for His people to demonstrate His purity. Keeping laws like these would be a fair demonstration of God's character to the pagan neighbors who were watching.