

Sermon 3, Palm Sunday, March 24: The King in His City, Deuteronomy 23

Proposition: The Triumphal Entry of Christ into Jerusalem prefigures the permanent entry of our King into the City of the Great King — which in turn demands a certain way of life from us, the citizens of that city.

- I. The Church Is Only for True Worshipers, vv. 1-8
 - A. The Rule: Not Just Anyone can Enter the Lord's Assembly, vv. 1, 2, 3, 8
 - B. Examples
 1. Ruth the Moabite Enters the Assembly, Ruth 1-4
 2. Eunuchs Enter the Assembly, Isaiah 56
 - C. Conclusion
 1. This Law Is Not About Ethnic Background
 2. This Law Is Not About Bodily Integrity
 3. This Law Is About True Worshipers
- II. The Church Militant Must Be Clean, vv. 9-13
 - A. A Place of Ritual Purity, vv. 9-11
 - B. A Place of Physical Purity, vv. 12-13
- III. The Church Must Be a Fit Place for God to Remain, vv. 14-25
 - A. God Walks in Our Midst, v. 14
 1. He Conquers Our Enemies
 2. He Requires Holiness
 - B. What God Wants Our Church to Be, vv. 15-25
 1. A Place of Freedom, vv. 15-16
 2. A Place of Chastity & True Worship, v. 17
 3. A Place of Upright Financial Dealings, vv. 18-20
 - a) God Rejects Whore's Wages, v. 18
 - b) God Rejects Interest (Usury), vv. 19-20
 4. A Place of Oath-Keeping, vv. 21-23
 5. A Place of Sharing Not Stealing, vv. 24-25

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have just read Matthew 21's account of the triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem. That was a coming, a preliminary coming, of the Great King into the City of the Great King. That's what Ps 48 calls Jerusalem, and our Lord Himself used that same title in the Sermon on the Mount. Now, what the gospels highlight is that the cleansing of the temple immediately followed the triumphal entry. The King cleans His house, purging evildoers from the place of His worship. The place where God dwells must be a

clean place; the church must be free of all wickedness. That is something that the triumphal entry highlights.

We have knowledge and we have community, and together those two tools grow us up to maturity. We talked last week about how the Lord wants us to get along with each other according to the community rules He described in Matthew 18. This week we are going to look at more rules and practices of a mature Christian community. Children, lost sheep, and forgiveness are important; so is cleanliness within the church.

Now, Christ left the earthly Jerusalem and ascended up to Heaven, and even now His Father is sending the rod of His strength out of Zion so that He can rule in the midst of His enemies. Aside from the triumphal entry texts and the psalms, this passage in Deuteronomy is the clearest biblical description of how we need to live when God is in the midst of His people. In one sense, yes, Jesus is absent, seated in Heaven. In another, though, He is right here with us and what He wants to see in His presence has not changed. Because we are citizens in the city of the great king, we need to keep the commandments, statutes, rules, and instructions that God describes for those who dwell with Him. Jesus has entered into the heavenly places, He has called us up to sit with Him there, and because of that, He wants us to keep the house rules. Let's look more closely at what they are.

I. The Church Is Only for True Worshipers, vv. 1-8

The first part of our text is filled with what seems to us like a blizzard of rules about Ammonites, Moabites, transgender people, and more. What exactly is going on here?

A. The Rule: Not Just Anyone can Enter the Lord's Assembly, vv. 1, 2, 3, 8

Well, when you look for the repetitions, the answer is very simple. Not just anyone can enter the Lord's Assembly. That's the basic idea here. That is the moral kernel of this law. Now, I know that Moses speaks in terms of missing body parts or ethnic backgrounds. But those things are not the actual meaning of this law. They are part of the teaching aid, the shadow rather than the reality. The point is that some people are excluded from the worshiping community that Moses calls "the assembly of Yahweh" and that the New Testament calls "the church." But it is not people with missing body parts or of certain ethnic backgrounds who are excluded — at least not because of their missing parts and ethnic heritage.

B. Examples

Why do I say this?

1. Ruth the Moabite Enters the Assembly, Ruth 1-4

Well, Moses here bans Moabites from ever entering the assembly of the LORD, but Ruth the Moabite not only enters the assembly of the LORD, but becomes King David's great-grandmother. God is so far from having a problem with Moabites that He makes one of them an ancestor of His Son and gives her an entire book of the Bible all to herself. Quick, name another single individual who basically has a whole Bible book about him. That's right: the prophet Jonah. Ruth is at least as important as Jonah, who saved the whole city of Nineveh from God's wrath.

Anyway, Ruth enters the assembly and no one blinks. They all understood that this law is not about ethnicity, but about something else for which ethnicity is only a proxy. That something else is worship.

2. Eunuchs Enter the Assembly, Isaiah 56

The same thing is stated explicitly with regard to the eunuch in Is 56. Both the eunuchs and the foreigners are welcome in God's house if they keep the sabbath, choose to please God, and keep His covenant.

C. Conclusion: This Law Is About True Worshipers

In short, brothers and sisters, as we celebrate the triumphal entry on this Palm Sunday, let us conclude first of all that our community is to be made up of true worshipers! Before you can welcome little children, before you can go after the lost brother, before you can forgive, you have to be seated with Christ in the heavenly places and worshiping the Father there. If you are a pagan at heart, no matter your ethnic background, you don't belong in the assembly of Yahweh! If you are an unrepentant transsexual who got emasculated and is proud of it, you don't belong in the assembly. If you are clinging to idols rather than to God, you shall not enter the assembly of Yahweh. This rule is not directed at people who one did these things and then repented and now want to follow the LORD wholeheartedly. It is directed to people who are still worshiping idols and living for sin. Those people are not welcome in the church.

II. The Church Militant Must Be Clean, vv. 9-13

Well, Moses continues with this theme of what's appropriate within the church, but this time not with reference to persons but to actions. The church has to be clean. This is especially true in the context of the church militant, the church organized for battle.

To this point, brothers and sisters, we have talked about maturity in the body in the context of growing up in knowledge and community with one another. But there is another side to this as well. Community flourishes not just by those inside loving each other, but also by an honest and sincere effort to exclude certain people and things.

Now, you may have heard the church described as a field hospital where we are patching up those wounded by sin and Satan and the world. That's true. But that image captures only one side of the church's reality. Another side of the church is that we are an army, marching as to war. We are organized to combat the powers of darkness, the lies of the world, and the wickedness of our own hearts. If we are to have a prayer of defeating the world, the flesh, and the Devil, then we must exclude the unrepentant transsexual eunuchs and idolaters that are mentioned in the first section. We must also exclude and get rid of — cover over — every impure thing.

A. A Place of Ritual Purity, vv. 9-11

Notice how vague the text is. When you go out to battle — when we are organized as the church militant, fighting the powers of darkness and our own wicked hearts — then we have to keep ourselves from every evil thing. That's a great translation of the Hebrew. You could even go slightly more general and render it "every bad thing." If it's bad, it doesn't belong in the church. Now, you all knew that. That's obvious. The church is not a home for bad things. But to see it in

black and white on the pages of Scripture is somehow very encouraging. No bad things are allowed in the church! As an example, Moses mentions something that your translation almost certainly overspecifies. The English versions speak of a nocturnal emission of semen, and yes, that is one of the things that the text has in view. But it is far from the only thing. The ASV renders the Hebrew much more literally here: “not clean by reason of that which chanceth him by night” (Deu 23:10). If anything happens in the night to make you unclean, you have to spend the next day outside the camp. Not stated here, but obvious in view of the story of Achan, is that if an unclean person is in the camp it weakens all of Israel, makes the whole nation vulnerable to their enemies.

Israel must be a place of ritual purity. You can read in Leviticus about all of the ways to be ritually impure and how to be ritually purified. These things recur in all cultures and religions, and Paul specifically tells us that they are the “elementary principles of the world” and that they have passed away in Christ. Thus, for us, this principle is a teaching aid. What does it mean for the church today to be ritually pure? It means to be morally pure. We are not defiled by what goes into us; we are defiled by what comes out of our filthy hearts. Nighttime or daytime, the church needs to be pure. That means that you and I need to deal with our sins immediately. Don’t let them get old. Don’t walk in alienation and unforgiveness, trying to hide your sin from yourself and from the Almighty. Thank God that we are no longer ceremonially defiled by semen and blood; that’s good. But those things do teach us that when sin spills out of our hearts the way fluids spill out of our bodies, we have been defiled and we must go and be cleansed by the blood of Christ.

B. A Place of Physical Purity, vv. 12-13

Indeed, Moses goes on to describe the church as a place of physical purity. I’m rather inclined to call this a moral law. The right thing to do is to cover your excrement. The right thing to do is to keep the sewage out of the streets.

In terms of what this means for the church, two things. First, the literal sense here is still 100% valid and applies. It is a privilege to be part of a culture that builds, maintains, and uses sewer systems, and we should gladly pay that sewage fee to the City of Gillette and/or religiously maintain our septic systems. This goes both for our homes and our church buildings. The church needs to be a place where there is no poo in the aisles.

Second, the broader implications are also clear: if you have junk in your life, if you have gotten fouled up in some way, you need to deal with that baggage and not smear it all over the church. We all have issues that we’re dealing with — or at least, we all have issues. Deuteronomy 23:13 is telling us to deal with them outside the church as much as possible. Now, again, we’ve talked about this. “Every man must carry his own load” means that if you can bear the burden, you should. “Bear one another’s burdens” means that if the load is too heavy for you, you need to ask for help. If your load is too big and you can’t deal with it all, then ask for help — and volunteer to help the one who is dealing with such a load. But whatever you do, don’t leave your excrement all over the church! We all know what it looks like to dump our baggage all over everyone, and that is not appropriate. That weakens the church militant.

III. The Church Must Be a Fit Place for God to Remain, vv. 14-25

Why? Because the church is not only a home for all of us; it's a home for God. This is His dwelling place by the Spirit. As bad as it may be to foul your own nest, it's a hundred times worse to foul the Almighty's nest. That's why the church needs to be a place of purity, a place where mutilators of the flesh and idolaters are excluded, a place where we build and maintain sewers both literally and metaphorically to deal with all the sludge and crud of life in this world.

A. God Walks in Our Midst, v. 14

The most important verse in the chapter is this one. God walks in the camp. The king has triumphantly entered into His city. And because He is among us, He has rules about "Ammonites" and "Moabites" and "eunuchs", and also about covering our excrement both literally and metaphorically. That's why we're looking at this text for Palm Sunday. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, He drove the money changers out of the temple. If Jesus is Lord in our church, there is no place here for money changers (we'll get there in a few minutes) or for any other unclean, detestable, or defiling sin. That includes the people committed to practicing those sins.

Yet not only does God tell us that this is His home, His dwelling place, He tells us why.

1. He Conquers Our Enemies

He has condescended to dwell with us in order to defeat our enemies! He led captivity captive that Yahweh God might dwell there (Ps 68, Eph 4). And since He dwells in our midst, He is committed to overcoming the world, the flesh, and the Devil. The darkness cannot overcome the light; the Light of the World is here and He is driving our enemies back. That is at least part of why He chooses to come and dwell with us, according to the passage before us. God conquers all His and our enemies, and He does so by walking in our midst as one of us. Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, is God in the flesh coming to conquer sin.

2. He Requires Holiness

But the coming of God into our camp as our victorious commander also demands something of us. It demands that we be holy. We must be set apart entirely to Him. As we just saw, that means no pagan worship, no pagan mutilating of our bodies. The rest of the chapter spells out five more ways in which the presence of our Great King in the City of the Great King demands something from us. All of these are aspects of holiness, and they are all part of what we need to be as a mature church body.

B. What God Wants Our Church to Be, vv. 15-25

Since Jesus Christ walks in the midst of the church, among the lampstands, let's carefully consider and apply what He wants from us.

1. A Place of Freedom, vv. 15-16

First, He wants His church to be a place of freedom. In Israel, if a runaway slave came to you for asylum, you were not allowed to hand him back to his master. He was free. Now, yes, this law clearly has implications for how we ought to deal with runaway slaves and what our civil law ought to say about such things. As I understand it, our civil law is pretty much in line with this provision. But how do we understand this in the church? To take a physical law like this and give

it a spiritual application is straightforward in this instance. This law tells us as a church to take in refugees who are running from slavery to Satan. Many of those people will be the former Ammonites, Moabites, eunuchs, etc. — but they are welcome in the assembly of the LORD when they flee that old slavery and come to us for refuge. I said a few moments ago that the church is a field hospital; we are also a refugee camp, a place where those who have been rejected by their former community can find a new one, a place of true love and welcome. If someone comes to us trying to get away from the world, flesh, and devil, we welcome that person and do not harm him. Oh that the church were known once more as a place of refuge for every sufferer and sinner!

2. A Place of Chastity & True Worship, v. 17

The next verse tells us that one thing God absolutely rejects is for us to let our sons and daughters be cultic prostitutes. In the ANE, some of the religions seem to have had temple prostitutes who performed sex acts with the worshippers of whatever god or goddess the temple was associated with. The closest thing today would be a sex worker who is also a crusader on behalf of LGBT and feminist ideology. There was a spiritual dimension to these sexual activities — and God hates that. That is pretty much the definition of false worship. The church is not to be a place where that kind of thing is tolerated or supported. We all know this. But Moses is not just talking about the physical act of becoming a prostitute. He is also talking about tolerating and encouraging the kind of false teaching that allows such a thing to be thinkable. Parents, teach your children about biblical, godly sexuality! The church is to be a place where we walk in chastity and true worship. I would warn you that the church can become a place where sacred prostitution thing is tolerated or, as the buzzword has it today, celebrated. I drove by a Unitarian Church recently, and the building sported a banner reading “Be more gay, be more trans, be more you.” There are churches that fly the rainbow flag; I read recently about a mirror-image annunciation where a female divinity student found out she was pregnant and then went to a church building to make the spiritual decision to have an abortion.

Again, I know many of us feel that these topics in Deut 23 are hardly appropriate for Palm Sunday. But Moses feels differently. The coming of Jesus into His city is not a feel-good high that allows all of us to just go away with a warm fuzzy. The Jesus who came into Jerusalem drove out the money changers with whips, cursed the fig tree, and told an extremely confrontational parable about the landowner who slaughters his wicked tenants and lets out the vineyard to others. We as a church, in our culture of deep-rooted sexual corruption, cannot be too diligent about rejecting the notion of spiritually sacred “sexual minorities”, eunuchs, transgenders, whores, catamites, and all the rest of it. These people should neither come into the church (while retaining their faulty beliefs) nor go out of it. And if we won’t talk about these things in the worship of God, where can we talk about them?

3. A Place of Upright Financial Dealings, vv. 18-20

While Moses is goring sacred cows, he attacks another one: the practice of charging interest on money, grain, or any other kind of thing that can be loaned out. Now, again, how does this law relate to us in the church? We are not a lending institution, and certainly should not be one.

Rather, this law relates to us in terms of its general equity. Individuals within the church need to keep this law literally. By extension, the church needs to be a place of upright financial dealings. Obviously we should not be making money around here off prostitution or charging interest on loans. Those things are inappropriate for the gathered community. But these laws also apply to individuals and families within the church.

a) God Rejects Whore's Wages, v. 18

Don't bring blood money into God's house. If you're making money off sin, we don't want your tithe. Please don't bother. Moses is not just talking about sex work here. Obviously we would recognize this in other areas too. If you are a hit man, don't tithe on your earnings from that ungodly line of work. If you are making a living by stealing, don't tithe. Other professions are in more of a gray area. Show business, stock trading, being a defense attorney, and so on — these professions, if not outright ungodly, certainly lend themselves to less-than-Christian ethical standards. The church does not need that money, and you don't either. If you are making money by doing something that's clearly wrong, quit your job and do honest work with your own hands.

b) God Rejects Interest (Usury), vv. 19-20

God also rejects the practice of charging usury. Calvin famously taught that this prohibition is only on personal loans to a poor neighbor and has nothing to do with the complicated financial instruments that have been devised in a sophisticated modern economy. Brothers and sisters, that is nonsense. I respect Calvin's opinions, but here he is simply wrong. Money made by the charging of usury is no more righteous than money made by engaging in prostitution. Hence the immediate juxtaposition of these two things next to each other.

The banning of interest does not mean that all loans must be made for free. Rather, what is banned is the constantly increasing price. Percentage interest and compound interest are in view here. If you loan a hundred thousand dollars and charge a flat rate of \$100/month for the use of that money, you are not charging interest. The price to use that sum of money stays the same and is just like any other rental agreement. What God forbids, both in individual personal loans and in large, complicated financial structures, is percentage and compound interest where the price for using the money is constantly rising. Last year you owed me \$100,000. This year you owe me \$105,000. Next year you will owe me \$110,250. You may say that the difference between this and a flat rental fee for the use of money is slight. Maybe it is, but the difference between right and wrong generally is slight. The two are right next to each other. If I charge a tenant \$550/mo to use my basement apartment, and then raise the price by 5% compounding each year, you may say that I'm greedy. But if I simply add more to the tenant's indebtedness each month, by charging an ever-increasing amount for the use of the same property, I am most certainly greedy.

Is interest so wrong that you must reject it if the bank offers to pay it to you? I don't think so. God forbids charging it, but not receiving it as a gift. But I'mn going to say it clearly: No one in here should be charging interest. Maybe there's someone in this room who would be horrified by his daughter becoming a prostitute but who has no problem charging interest to one of his debtors. That person is not living the church in accordance with the way that God requires.

A big part of the problem with the American church is that we stopped teaching on moral topics and began teaching only on safe topics. But the good news about Jesus means that He is living in our midst and that means that we need to be holy. You might never consider becoming transgender (a fancy modern name for the good old-fashioned term “eunuch”), but if you are willing to indulge greed under the name of “interest” and say “It’s no big deal,” God will not bless you — or His church. And we wonder why the church is in such poor shape nationally.

What about the notion that you can be greedy with a stranger, but not with a brother? I would call that one of the laws that highlights the difference between Israel and the nations. That is, it’s a ceremonial law rather than a moral law. “Don’t be greedy” is a moral law. Charging a price that increases every single day, rain or shine, is the definition of greed. Israel was to be set apart from the nations, and the first step of morality was to not be greedy with a fellow Israelite. The next step, the step to which you and I have been called in Christ, is not to be greedy with anybody. To have a nation where they aren’t greedy with each other is pretty amazing; to have a society called the church where they aren’t greedy with anyone is even more impressive. Because the Lord Jesus walks in the midst of the camp, we may not charge the ever-increasing price that the world dubs “interest.”

4. A Place of Oath-Keeping, vv. 21-23

The church is also to be a place of oath-keeping. Whether you swear to God or to your fellow-man, do what you said. Make honesty your top priority. If you said you’d do it, do it. No one is forcing you to say you’ll do it. That is why God specifically says you don’t have to vow. But if you vow, you must pay. If you vowed to be a wife to your husband, you have to keep that vow. If you vowed to be a member of this church, you have to keep that vow. If you vowed to protect the constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, then you need to keep that oath. Above all, as Jesus says, let your yes be yes and your no, no. If the church would do this, it would go a long way toward making us the holy city in which the Lord can reside.

5. A Place of Sharing Not Stealing, vv. 24-25

Our chapter winds up with this law — one, by the way, that I personally appreciate and appropriate. If you are walking by someone’s orchard or vineyard, you have the right to pluck and eat. But you may not take any away. Sample, don’t steal. Now, I’ve only ever been part of one church with a fruit tree. That was the OPC in Sunnyvale, California. It had a beautiful and incredibly fruitful orange tree out by the back corner of the building. I trust that church made its fruits freely available, but regardless, the application to the church is that in here, we don’t steal, but we do share. If someone is in need, you share. If you have something, give it. But if someone else is producing some food, while you may sample, you may not harvest and carry it away.

Brothers and sisters, the king has come into the city of the great king. We need to worship and serve Him in accordance with all these rules, because Jesus walks in our midst. The king is in, and we need to be totally committed to worshiping and obeying Him. We know that the first time He came to Jerusalem, He cleaned out the temple but then died for our sins. Now that He

has died for your sins, trust and obey Him. Be the people He's calling us to be in true maturity and obedience. Amen.