

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

MORE UNIQUE LAWS Deuteronomy 25

The grouping of unique laws in Deuteronomy 23 tended to convey God's holiness and, therefore, the need for His people to be separated from the sins of ungodly pagans. The grouping of unique laws in Deuteronomy 24 reminded the people that God is merciful. Therefore, when the people carried out those laws, they would be showing mercy to others.

Now we come to Deuteronomy 25 and find more unique laws that had an impact in areas like discipline, maintaining animals, continuing the family line, and other similar issues. In these laws God's justice rises to the surface. All of these laws were intended to keep God's people within the boundaries of justice as they interacted with each other and even with a particular pagan people group.

The truth that God is just, loves justice, and expects His people to demonstrate His traits of justice is well documented in the Bible. His reign as Creator and Master of the universe is established on principles of justice. *But the LORD sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne for justice (Psalm 9:7)*. Therefore, God loves justice. *He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD (Psalm 33:5)*. And because God is just and loves justice, He will obviously enforce that justice in His relationships with people. *The LORD works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed (Psalm 103:6)*. Then it only makes sense that God expects His people to demonstrate that justice. Moses taught the people, *"Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the LORD your God is giving you"* (Deuteronomy 16:20). If we understand this truth, our songs of praise

will be about God's justice. *I will sing of steadfast love and justice; to you, O LORD, I will make music (Psalm 101:1)*.

Deuteronomy 25 records six unique laws, all of which demonstrate the principle of God's justice. These were laws for the society of God's people, the ancient nation of Israel. While we modern Americans are not required to keep these particular laws, the principle on which these laws are built should be found in our laws and should bound our interpersonal relationships.

Corporal Discipline (vv.1-3).

In God's justice the judges were to determine justice. *If there is a dispute between men and they come into court and the judges decide between them, acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty (v.1)*. This law clearly states that there was to be a process of weighing evidence. In a dispute, someone was presumed guilty and someone was assumed innocent. The judges were responsible to weigh the evidence and determine who was guilty. Coming to a sound conclusion about guilt, God required the judges to pronounce the innocent person acquitted, but the guilty person was condemned to some form of punishment.

The verdict was based on principles of God's law and even the judges were appointed according to God's law. God ordained that they would be taken from among the priests, Levites, and elders of the cities. God expected these people to know God's commands and enforce justice according those commands. This book of law began with instruction for the judges. *And I charged your judges at that time, "Hear the cases between your brothers, and judge righteously between a man and his brother or the alien who is with him. You shall not be partial in judgment. You shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God's. And the case that is too hard for you, you shall bring to me, and I will hear it."* *And I commanded you at that time all the things that you should do (Deuteronomy 1:16-18)*.

The guilty person was disciplined because of his sin (vv.2-3). The details of the prescribed punishment are stated in verse two. *Then if the guilty man deserves to be beaten, the judge shall cause him to lie down and be beaten in his presence with a number of stripes in*

proportion to his offense (v.2). The punishment came only after a fair trial proved the party deserved such punishment. Then, upon the judge's sentence, the guilty party was punished in the presence of the judge. Why? There might be three reasons why the punishment was rendered in the judge's presence. To assure that it was rendered appropriately, to assure that it was not extreme (see next verse), and to assure that the judge who passed the sentence had to witness the pain and agony of the punishment and thus be very careful to arrive at the just conclusion.

In verse three we read that there was a limit to the punishment. *Forty stripes may be given him, but not more, lest, if one should go on to beat him with more stripes than these, your brother be degraded in your sight (v.3).* Forty stripes seems to have been a common punishment in that day (cf. the Syrian Law Code of about the same era). Probably the stripes were administered with a stick or rod if the wisdom of Proverbs is any indication. *On the lips of him who has understanding, wisdom is found, but a rod is for the back of him who lacks sense (Proverbs 10:13).* However, it is also pretty clear that by Paul's day the vicious Jews had replaced the rod with a cat of nine tails – a nine-stranded whip with stones attached to the end of strands. Paul confessed to believers in Corinth, *Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one (2 Corinthians 11:24).*

The whole process seems barbaric to us. Our laws of punishment for crimes are far more humane. Yes, but it would also appear that modern crime rates all over our humane world are the highest in history. Maybe God who created people understands the nature of people better than people do.

Maintain Equipment (v.4).

This second law seems fairly sensible to our modern ears. *You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain (v.4).* Does this law mean that God loves animals? Well, Jesus reminded us that our Heavenly Father knows when birds fall from their nests. There are various other Scriptures that inform us of God's concern for animals. Therefore, God requires His people to show the same kind of concern.

God applies laws in this matter of treatment of animals, especially when the animal is necessary for life or survival. Solomon taught that principle when He wrote, *Whoever is righteous has regard for the life of his beast, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel (Proverbs 12:10).*

While it is clear that God is concerned for animals, at the same time we must acknowledge that animals do not have souls. They do seem to have personalities. But animals really do not live somewhere forever. The idea that they have souls and are therefore just like us is a lie used to denigrate humans who God has made in His image. The Bible explanation is that God made us after His own character and placed us to rule over the animal kingdom which is never said to be made in God's image. Nevertheless, abuse to animals was not acceptable in God's nation.

In a very real sense this unique but practical law protected an investment. Animals in ancient times were often equivalent to equipment. Back in that text we read from Proverbs 12:10, the principle spoke of the life of *his* (a man's) beast. The animal was a possession given by God. Especially the ox and donkey were common implements for bearing burdens, plowing the soil, threshing the grain. In modern application, God's justice requires us to be good stewards of what He provides. To that end this law is still in force.

The godly person maintains God's provision. God's law identified justice toward your beast as allowing it to eat some of the grain it was threshing. More than that, God instructed that the family "beast" deserved a day off just like the humans did. Notice how He applied the law of the Sabbath. *But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you (Deuteronomy 5:14).* Justice applies to the animals God gave to His people.

The Levirate Marriage Law (vv.5-10).

This strange rule dealt with a particular issue in marriage (vv.5-7). *If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son,*

the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel (vv.5-6).

“Leverite” has nothing to do with Levites. Leverite is actually the Latin word for “brother-in-law.” This law addressed a brother-in-law’s duty to care for his brother’s widow. In the example given in this law, two brothers were living together. That means they are of the same family and share mutual concern for each other’s welfare. The underlying principle was the need to continue Israelite family lines. In the event of a husband’s death the widow had two choices. She could return to her father’s family and remarry. Or she could require her brother’s brother to raise up seed within the family.

Because this is not an issue in America, we cannot fathom the importance of the law. For example, the Ross family line (my mother’s family) extends all the back to the originators of the family. I have a recorded lineage all the way to Thornstein “the Red” Olafson, born in Dublin Ireland in 858. In my mother’s immediate family there were nine siblings. Three of the siblings were brothers. The eldest son Clifford Ross fathered no children. The youngest son, John Ross, fathered no children. The middle son, Richard Ross, fathered five children, the youngest being a son. However, my cousin Ricky has never married. When he dies, that will end that part of the Ross family line that was rooted in Ireland and Scotland eleven hundred years ago. This kind of thing happens all the time in America and we think nothing of it.

Well, not everyone was in favor of this unique law that enforced justice on the families. What follows is a logical response with practical ramifications. *And if the man does not wish to take his brother's wife, then his brother's wife shall go up to the gate to the elders and say, "My husband's brother refuses to perpetuate his brother's name in Israel; he will not perform the duty of a husband's brother to me" (v.7).*

But what if the brother really didn’t care for his sister-in-law? I have no brothers and so I do not have a sister-in-law in the sense described by this law. However, I do have sisters-in-law through marriage on my wife’s side of the family. I’m sorry, but I would not

be interested in the least in fulfilling this strange law in those cases. I’m not saying that I don’t have any affection for my sisters-in-law. But I would be willing to take the forty lashes minus one rather than to do what this law required.

More than that, there were serious financial repercussions connected with this law. That reality is illustrated in the Ruth and Boaz story. Boaz desired to redeem property that had been owned by his relative Elimilech who had died. A nearer relative to Elimilech had right of first refusal. At first that relative agreed to buy out Elimilech’s property and thus redeem His property and family line. But when the near relative learned that he would also have to acquire Ruth the Moabitess, he balked and said, *“I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it” (Ruth 4:6).* It is easy to understand why a man would not desire to do this. And there was a legal way out.

Verses eight and nine stipulate the resolution for this kind of problem. The case is presented of a brother who refuses to relent to the act of raising his brother’s posterity. *Then the elders of his city shall call him and speak to him, and if he persists, saying, “I do not wish to take her” (v.8).* The older, wiser leaders of the city (who no doubt knew the families involved) would try to convince the man to fulfill his duty. For whatever reasons, the man was determined not to do it. Typically this would be considered a breach of God’s law and justice would require some kind of punishment. However, in this case God allowed for an exception. But it came with a cost.

If the brother-in-law refused to raise up his brother’s seed, the sister-in-law completed the ceremony of humiliation. *Then his brother's wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face. And she shall answer and say, “So shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother's house.” And the name of his house shall be called in Israel, “The house of him who had his sandal pulled off” (vv.9-10).*

This was a public ceremony, carried out at the city gate, the place of justice, in the presence of the elders, the enforcers of justice. Spitting in the stubborn brother-in-law’s face was the act of humiliating him. Taking off the sandal might be a picture of the man being prohibited from setting foot on his brother’s property (land and

wife) henceforth. God's justice was to be stringently applied in cases of continuing the family lines. It was disgrace for a family name to come to an end.

A Law Protecting Progeny (vv.11-12)?

This law presents a very unusual situation. *When men fight with one another and the wife of the one draws near to rescue her husband from the hand of him who is beating him and puts out her hand and seizes him by the private parts (v.11)*. It is not too far-fetched to connect this situation to the previous law. Two men and one woman are involved in a hypothetical situation. The issue is progeny, the continuation of family lines, is at the root of this law and situation.

The law does not question the right or need of defense. It does not prohibit a woman from defending her husband. But the action described here was shameful. The literal meaning of the Hebrew word behind the English "private parts" is shameful. The law existed because this kind of action could lead to sterility and the end of a family line, which was the same issue addressed in the previous verse.

Because the act was so shameful, punishment was severe. The judges were to order, *Then you shall cut off her hand. Your eye shall have no pity (v.12)*. God was very serious about the heritage of His people. Therefore, the punishment actually removed the offending instrument. This was not a figurative sentence. The city rulers were to sentence the offending woman to a literal removal of the hand by which she offended. While the judgment seems extreme, we must take into consideration the loss that would have been incurred by a man made sterile by such an act.

Just Weights and Measures (vv.13-16).

Another law that God requires just measurements. It appears that having two kinds of weights was common. But it was wrong because it implied dishonesty. The law states: *You shall not have in your bag two kinds of weights, a large and a small. You shall not have in your house two kinds of measures, a large and a small (vv.13-14)*. We can assume that the two kinds of weights applied primarily

to businesses. The merchant would have one set of weights (the lighter set) he used to calculate what he owed. He would have a second set of weights (the heavier set) to calculate what the customer should pay. But the problem was so common that the law applied even in the home. The key is honesty. That is what God's justice looks like.

Full and fair is God's standard. *A full and fair weight you shall have, a full and fair measure you shall have (v.15a)*. God's justice is to be applied in every area of life, not just in the business world. Again the importance of this practice of justice is stated in Leviticus where God's law requires, *You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt (Leviticus 19:36)*.

Is there any application of such a rule in our lives? That should be easy. For example, I don't care too much for shopping. But one kind of shopping I despise is car shopping. To me the ideal car shopping experience would be to go to a car lot, find the car I want to buy and then, when I ask for a final or lowest price, the salesman would say, "I bought this car for \$15,000 (and here is the actual invoice). I need to add \$1,000 in order to cover overhead and make a little profit. So I need to sell it for \$16,000." I am not opposed to paying a man's salary for selling a car. But I am opposed to being led to believe something that isn't true.

There were serious consequences of breaking the law. The consequences were built on the fact that God's blessing is contingent on justice. His people must show justice *that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you (v.15b)*. God is in charge of our length of days. A full life is His blessing for obedience in matters of justice.

Breaking God's law in simple matters is an abomination. *For all who do such things, all who act dishonestly, are an abomination to the LORD your God (v.16)*. Cheating is described as an act of dishonesty which the Ten Commands condemn. God calls breaking this command an abomination, something He abhors.

Blot Out the Memory of Amalek (vv.17-19).

A final, and very specific law required God's people to remember Amalek's cowardly attack against their forefathers. *Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way when you were faint and weary, and cut off your tail, those who were lagging behind you, and he did not fear God (vv.17-18).*

A most basic problem was that the Amalekite people group did not fear God. They were pagans who rejected their Creator God and replaced Him with figments of their imagination. They were just like the people in Canaan who God had already marked for destruction. Because they had rejected God, they engaged in evil practices that corrupted the society and tended toward their implosion.

When the Israelites were marching toward the Promised Land, the Amalekites attacked God's people. They waited until they could attack the weak, the weary, the sick who would naturally be at the back of the caravan. Like wolves or hyenas who lurk in the bushes until a straggler wanders from the herd of deer and then they attack.

Now God required His people to trust Him to carry out His will. God would prove faithful to His promise. *Therefore when the LORD your God has given you rest from all your enemies around you, in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess (v.19a).* God was going to give rest from the battle. God would give the land to possess as an inheritance. Would His people trust God to keep His promises? God did this slowly which caused many people to stop trusting Him. God keeps His promises! We trust Him to do what He said.

God's people needed to submit themselves to God. And by submitting to God, *you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget (v.19b).* That was some pretty serious penalty. Yes. God carries out all His promises through the choice people to whom He has given them. Blotting out an entire people group might not have made sense. It doesn't make sense to our peers, or maybe not to you. But it was a clear expression of God's justice.

The right conclusion after reading these laws is that God is just. Regardless of the opinion of mere humans, God will always do what

conforms to His righteousness (which is essentially the same idea). Therefore, we can be confident that His law is just and results in the application of justice when we obey Him. While many of these unique laws do not apply to us or our circumstances, we can be sure that it is still good and right to adhere to His standard of justice.