

Sermon – 09/04/2006 pm

Community Obligations

Study Text: Deuteronomy 21-22:8

In this passage we find a number of interesting pieces of Mosaic legislation. It is not easy to find a common theme running through them but we shall try. Keep in mind always that these were the chosen people of the Holy God, a holy people going to live in the holy land. These laws were given to prevent defilement of the land.

Allan Harman sees this passage as further explanation of the sixth commandment, ‘you shall not murder’, though he acknowledges that such a division is far from clear. Matters dealt with here certainly come under this commandment as it is summarised in the command to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’.

Guilt of Bloodshed

Legislation regarding punishment for manslaughter and murder was given in Deuteronomy chapter 19. But what if the killer could not be found? Could this shedding of innocent blood simply be overlooked in the holy land? No. Remember the words of the Lord to Cain – ‘your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground’.

Innocent blood must not be *shed in the midst of your land which the Lord your God is giving you, and thus guilt of bloodshed be upon you* (19:10). The guilt of innocent blood had to be atoned for. That guilt in fact fell upon the whole community. It became corporate guilt.

Corporate guilt is not necessarily a foreign concept to us. Not so long ago Britain and America as nations had to accept the guilt of slavery. As a people they had condoned this evil in their midst. The Japanese people are being told to accept responsibility for wartime atrocities and make recompense. We are guilty as a people of allowing the shedding of innocent blood in our midst – the blood of the unborn child. We as a people will be held responsible.

If the killer could not be found, Moses commanded that elders and judges determine which city was closest to the body of the slain man. The elders and priests of that city were then to perform what seems like a symbolic act of judicial killing – it was not like the usual sacrifice. A young cow that had never worked was taken to an unpolluted area with a flowing stream. There its neck was broken and the elders then washed their hands over the heifer declaring *our hands have not shed this blood nor have our eyes seen it...And atonement shall be provided on their behalf for the blood* (21:7, 8).

Judicial Killing

Under Mosaic Law some 17 crimes attracted the death penalty. We have come across a couple of these in this book already – false prophecy (13:5, 18:20) and murder (19:12). In this passage we have the case of the rebellious and incorrigible son.

Keep in mind a number of things before reacting adversely to this law. The family unit was fundamental to life and worship in the holy land. Parents were responsible to train their children and teach them the law of God (6:7). Children were to obey their parents in the Lord (Ephesians 6:1). Anything that undermined the integrity and operation of the family was serious sin.

The son who strikes his father or mother or curses them was to be put to death (Exodus 21:15, 17); likewise the delinquent son who will not listen to his parents. The disobedience and drunken behaviour of a son was not to be ignored. He was not taken for counselling but was taken to the elders of the city. Both parents must take him, for the law required two or more witnesses. Parents would not of course do this lightly. The elders would hear the case and sentence the young man to death. *All the men of the city would stone him to death with stones; so you shall put away the evil from among you and all Israel shall hear and fear* (21:21).

Judicial killing was carefully regulated under Mosaic Law. Generally it was by stoning, but there was also this practice of impaling on a tree after execution (Joshua 10:26, II Samuel 4:12). It demonstrated the curse of God upon the guilty, and served as a warning the general public. Surrounding nations did the same thing and we still see it in some nations today.

But whereas other nations might well leave the body hanging for days, in Israel they had to be taken down that same day. The holy land would have been defiled if bodies were left to decay in the open – especially if left hanging on a tree.

While crucifixion was a Roman not a Jewish custom, verse 23 is quoted by the apostle Paul with reference to Jesus being accursed of God as he hung on the Cross (Galatians 3:13). He was mocked and cursed by those who passed – *for he was numbered with the transgressors* (Mark 15:28). But it was the curse of God that was significant, for Jesus became a curse for us. He has redeemed us from the curse of the law. We look to Jesus not as a warning, but with a deep sense of gratitude for taking our place, for taking the penalty due to us for our sin – that is death.

Community Responsibility

While the remaining pieces of legislation in this passage do not deal with killing as such, they are linked by the broader theme of ‘loving your neighbour’ and of individual rights and responsibilities in the community.

God hates partiality and favouritism. It was bad enough for a man who had two wives to love one more than the other, but to deny his firstborn son his inheritance rights because of this was not permitted. His firstborn son was the beginning of his strength (21:17), the first sign of his ability to sire sons. As such the firstborn was not to be denied his birthright, a double portion of the inheritance.

A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment, for all who do so are an abomination to the Lord your God (22:5). The latter words of this verse suggest that transvestites played a part in Canaanite culture and religion, as they still do in some societies today. As we watched a dance in India recently we were whispering to one another ‘I think that dancer is a man dressed as a woman’.

A community has the right to know which members are men and which are women. I heard of a young man who started going out with this girl, who was actually a man dressed like a woman and calling himself a woman. He was planning to have 'the operation' when he could afford it! What an abomination to the Lord our God!

To love your neighbour means to help him in time of need. When you see a man lying on the side of the road half dead, do not pass by on the other side. Jesus told a parable along these lines, did He not? Similarly when you see your brother's cattle or sheep, wandering off, you inform him. If he is away you should take his animals in and care for them until he returns.

I remember helping my father more than once rescue our neighbour's cattle from off the busy highway. We would put them in one of our own paddocks and call the neighbour to come and get them. What does this command mean for city dwellers? I guess you should rescue your neighbour's pet dog if it is wandering on the road.

Is it because of urbanisation or is it because of a changing social ethic that we see much less of this community responsibility today. We see more priests and Levites than Good Samaritans these days. If we are told to care for our neighbours cattle surely we should care for our neighbour himself and not let him or her die, and not be noticed for a week or so. As we depart from the teaching of the Bible and adopt the teaching of evolution, as we depart from the law of God and adopt the laws of men, such things will occur increasingly. The Lord teaches us to 'love your neighbour as yourself'. The world teaches us to 'love yourself' full stop.

Ecological Responsibility

Finally there is a call for responsibility towards the creation in general. The so called 'Greenies' of today do not have a monopoly on caring for the environment. They were not around when Moses gave these laws to the people of God. Trees were not to be cut down indiscriminately the fighting men were told (20:19). Nor was wildlife to be indiscriminately destroyed. If you want to eat the birds eggs okay, but let the mother bird go free said Moses (22:6, 7).

Conclusion

Have you examined your heart in the light of these commands we have examined today? Remember you are a holy people, a people belonging to God. You are called to live a holy life in obedience to the commands of the Lord. You are called to love God and to love your neighbour.

And you are called to proclaim the praises of God (I Peter 2:9); you are called to tell those around you in this fallen world, to tell your elected leaders what the Lord has said in regard to living responsibly in community and before God.

Let us pray and work to rectify wrongs that have entered our society. Let us pray for justice and for the preservation of families. Let us pray that our land will not be defiled by innocent blood but that the Lord might be glorified among us and in all the earth.

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