

## Sermon – 21/05/2006 pm

### Good Neighbours

Study Text: Deuteronomy 23:15-25

God's people living in God's land, holy people living in the holy land. This is what the book of Deuteronomy is about. In this book Moses explains the law God gave to his people, commandments governing their relationship to God, to one another and to the rest of creation. Failure to keep this covenant law would lead to a breakdown in society and ultimately the judgment of God as revealed in the subsequent history of Israel.

In the analysis we are following (that of Allan Harman), this passage begins a new section explaining the eighth commandment – *you shall not steal*. As stated before, this analysis is not always clearly evident, but it does serve to remind us that Moses is still explaining the law to the people as they were poised to enter the Promised Land.

Five matters are addressed in this passage before us. Three relate to the poor and needy and the others to purity and honesty in worship and life. We may not be confronted with the practice of ritual prostitution, but prostitution in general is snaking its way through the suburbs of our city. The other issues of refugees, of interest rates, and of hunger and poverty are often headline news. Let us think about these issues as we examine the teaching of Moses and of the Lord Jesus as found in the Scriptures.

### Concern for the Needy

#### *Refugee slaves*

Because of the military setting of the preceding passage it is thought that the slave referred to here is a foreign refugee. Slaves were regarded as valuable property in many contemporary societies. Under the ancient law code of Hammurabi, a runaway slave was returned to his master. Anyone who harboured a runaway slave was to be put to death. Through Moses, God commanded otherwise.

Slaves were human beings towards whom God extended mercy. God's people were therefore to show mercy towards the refugee. Indeed these people themselves were once slaves in Egypt. The refugee was to be allowed to stay in Israel, in the city or place of his choosing (23:16). He was not to be oppressed by the people of God but treated with mercy and kindness.

In the New Testament we find the little book titled 'Philemon'. This was the name of the master/owner of a runaway slave called Onesimus. This slave came to Paul and became a Christian under his ministry. According to this Law of Moses, Paul did not have to return Onesimus – although under Roman law this runaway slave could be put to death. Paul chose to send him back with the exhortation and expectation that as two believers, master and slave would be reconciled as brothers in Christ.

Today there are many refuges in this world, people fleeing religious, ethnic or political oppression. Apart from such genuine refugees there are of course many opportunistic ones also. It has been the practice of predominantly Christian nations like ours to show mercy towards genuine refugees according to this command in Scripture. Certainly it has not been our practice to be

governed by the laws of other nations. *You shall not give back to his master the slave who has escaped from his master to you (23:15).*

### ***Interest***

When they entered the land of Canaan all the tribes of Israel, except the Levites, were to be given a region in which to settle. All families were allocated land on which to grow food. This was an agrarian society. He who worked his land had food for himself and his family – except when his crops failed due to some disaster.

*If one of your brethren becomes poor and falls into poverty among you, you shall help him... take no usury or interest from him but fear God that your brother may live with you (Leviticus 25:35, 36).* This was the command of the Lord that Moses was reminding them of. ‘Help your brother in his poverty and do not charge him interest’. In fact that debt was also to be released every Sabbath year. With a foreigner it was different – they were allowed to charge him interest (23:20).

As we consider this command today many will say that society has changed, and will question just who we call our brother. But let us remember the principle behind this command. This command was based upon the fear of God; it was based upon the blessings of the Lord. Is not all that you have from the hand of the Lord? It is not a matter of profit making or exploitation but of mercy and thankfulness to the Lord for his blessings. Besides, you do not know when you may be the one to fall into poverty. It is encouraging to know that in the PCEA there is a fund which lends money without interest to needy congregations.

### ***Gleaning***

As a boy I sometimes went on a trip up the north coast of NSW with my family. After driving through forest and barren looking farms we would suddenly come to the cane fields along the Clarence River. These farms did not have fences like we had on the dairy farm, so the cane was planted close to the road. The long juicy stalks of sugar cane leaning out towards the road were so inviting! If I had been hungry or thirsty and these cane fields had been in Israel I could have stopped and taken a stalk or two of cane and sucked on it without the slightest guilt.

Moses told the people – *when you come near your neighbour’s vineyard you may eat your fill of grapes at your pleasure, but you shall not put any in your container (23:24).* The rule was the same for a field of grain and presumably for sugarcane. Jesus and his disciples availed themselves of the provisions of this command. When they were hungry they helped themselves to some grain from someone’s field (Matthew 12:1). The lawyers did not accuse them of stealing but of breaking the Sabbath.

This command, like that of gleaning, was given by the Lord out of concern for the poor. *Let there be no poor among you* said Moses (15:4). Do not deny the hungry food. Yet we see tons of food thrown out from shops and restaurants in our city everyday. Little is collected and given to the hungry. And what about millions around the world who go to bed hungry every night?

Let us not wash our hands of this poverty but open our hands and give to those in need. Let us share the blessings the Lord has given to us. Let us not as individuals, or as a church, hoard our wealth. Will the Lord be impressed when he returns to find a church sitting on vast sums of money while his people have been crying out to him for help?

## Concern for Purity

Religious prostitution was a feature of Canaanite religion. It was all part of their fertility rites. Such practices were common in other contemporary religions, and still are in some religions and sects today. Priests and gurus in Eastern religions often convince their female (or male) followers that sleeping with them is a holy exercise. Immoral and perverted acts can be portrayed as holy acts in man made religions but not in the house of the true God.

In Israel temple prostitution was completely banned. *There shall be no ritual harlot of the daughters of Israel, or a perverted one of the sons of Israel (23:17)*. When succeeding generations neglected the Scriptures, when they stopped reading the word of God and followed the desires of their own hearts, this abominable practice raised its ugly head in Israel (I Kings 14:24, II Kings 23:7). They started offering sacrifices with a ritual harlot and came under divine condemnation (Hosea 4:14).

The wages of a female prostitute or a male prostitute (dog) were not to be brought into the house of the Lord. He will not accept the wages of sin. He accepts only 'clean money'. 'The way we earn our money is important. Believers must ensure that their wages are not obtained by employment that is either degrading to themselves, damaging to others or dishonouring to God. In the early Christian period certain occupations were considered unsuitable for Christians and, in the late second century Tertullian took the trouble to mention some of them. It is important in our own times to ensure that we are not earning our money at other peoples moral or emotional expense'.

## Concern for Honesty

Finally Moses commanded complete honesty in relation to what was spoken. In particular he cautioned them *when you make a vow to the Lord your God you shall not delay to pay it (23:21)*. It was not a sin if they refrained from making a vow, but having done so it was a sin if they failed to keep a vow. *The Lord your God will surely require it of you*.

Jesus taught the same thing. *Let you 'yes' be 'yes', and your 'no', 'no'. For whatever is more than these is from the evil one (Matthew 5:37)*. And in James (5:12) we read *do not swear by either heaven or earth...lest you fall into judgment*. Yet we still hear people swearing by all manner of things as they vow that they are speaking the truth. Remember the Pharisees who would release people from their vow if it was sworn by the temple but not if it was sworn by the gold of the temple (Matthew 23:16). The Lord makes no such release.

Sometimes of course we are required to make a vow. When doing so we must make it with utter sincerity and truth, and keep that vow with all seriousness and solemnity, as unto the Lord.

What about when we speak without making a vow – are we not bound by what we say? By no means! *Let you 'yes' be 'yes'* said Jesus. He did not say let your 'yes' be 'no'. Vow or no vow you must speak the truth God does not lie and neither should you. Do not make rash promises you cannot keep, do not speak words designed to flatter or deceive. Remember, speak the truth in love, that *we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is Christ (Ephesians 4:15)*.

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