

Deuteronomy 13:12-18
Dr. Steven R. Cook

“If you hear in one of your cities, which the LORD your God is giving you to live in [as a reward for faithfulness], *anyone* saying *that* ¹³ some worthless men [organized crime group] have gone out from among you [as community organizers] and have seduced the inhabitants of their city [i.e., persuaded them through rhetoric], saying, ‘Let us go and serve other gods’ (whom you have not known), [counseled rebellion against the Lord] ¹⁴ then you shall investigate and search out and inquire thoroughly [to objectively determine the facts]. If it is true *and* the matter established [by witnesses] that this abomination has been done among you [and the whole city is guilty of treason], ¹⁵ you shall surely strike the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword [killing all the rebels], utterly destroying it and all that is in it and its cattle with the edge of the sword. ¹⁶ “Then you shall gather all its booty into the middle of its open square and burn the city and all its booty with fire [so that no one is tempted to lay a false charge against a city in order to claim its wealth] as a whole burnt offering to the LORD your God; and it shall be a ruin forever. It shall never be rebuilt. ¹⁷ “Nothing from that which is put under the ban shall cling to your hand [shall release it to destruction], in order that the LORD may turn from His burning anger and show mercy to you [who have humbly followed His will], and have compassion on you and make you increase [blesses them for their faithful obedience], just as He has sworn to your fathers [at Mount Sinai], ¹⁸ if [blessing was conditional] you will listen to the voice of the LORD your God, keeping all His commandments which I am commanding you today, and doing what is right in the sight of the LORD your God.

Observations:

Moses continues his sermon directing God’s people to maintain loyalty to the Lord. In the beginning of this chapter, Moses spoke of the false prophet who would arise among God’s people—even performing signs and wonders—and seek to lead them away from the Lord and into idolatry (Deut 13:1-5). In the second pericope, Moses spoke of the close family or friend who might secretly entice a believer to break allegiance with God and worship idols (Deut 13:11-12). In this third pericope, Israel’s spiritual leader addresses the possibility that certain worthless men might lead a whole city into idolatry (Deut 13:13-18). In all three examples, God prescribed the death penalty for those who promoted treason within the nation (Deut 13:5, 9, 15). These tests would arise throughout the nation’s history, and each Israelite would choose blessing if he/she kept allegiance with God, and cursing if they did not (Deut 11:26-28).

Moses opens this section, saying, “If you hear in one of your cities, which the LORD your God is giving you to live in, anyone saying that some worthless men have gone out from among you and have seduced the inhabitants of their city, saying, ‘Let us go and serve other gods’ (whom you have not known), then you shall investigate and search out and inquire thoroughly” (Deut 13:12-14a). In contrast to the direct speech one would hear from a false prophet who spoke publicly (Deut 13:1-2), or the words that came directly from a close relative or friend (Deut 13:6), it might happen that one would hear from secondary or tertiary sources about a city in Israel that had broken loyalty to God. To add to the egregiousness of the offense, Moses describes the city as one “which the LORD your God is giving you to live in” (Deut 13:12b). If the account of rebellion was true, it meant the residents of the city had taken God’s blessing and used it for sinful purposes. The offense was, “some worthless men have gone out from among you and have seduced the inhabitants of their city, saying, ‘Let us go and serve other gods’ (whom you have not known)” (Deut 13:13).

The term *worthless men* is a translation of the Hebrew בְּלִיַּעַל *belial*, which occurs 27 times in Scripture (a few references include Deut 13:13; Judg 19:22; 20:13; 1 Sam 25:17; 1 Ki 21:9-13; Pro 6:12-14; 16:27; 19:28; Nah 1:11). The word means “Uselessness, wickedness...good for nothing.”¹ These were people whom God designated as *worthless* because they continually resisted His will and disrupted the activities of His people. Over time, the term *Belial* became a name for Satan (2 Cor 6:15), who embodies wickedness, worthlessness and trouble, always resisting God and seeking to harm those who walk with Him (1 Pet 5:8). Solomon wrote, “A worthless person [בְּלִיַּעַל *belial*], a wicked man, is the one who walks with a perverse mouth, who winks with his eyes, who signals with his feet, who points with his fingers; who with perversity in his heart continually devises evil, who spreads strife” (Pro 6:12-14). Elsewhere, Scripture describes the *worthless* person as one who “digs up evil” (Pro 16:27), “makes a mockery of justice” (Pro 19:28), and “plots evil against the LORD” (Nah 1:11). He leads others away from God (Deut 13:13), is given to lewd behavior (Judg 19:22), hides from justice (Judg 20:13), is unreasonable (1 Sam 25:17), defies authority (2 Sam 20:1), is willing to lie against the innocent and promote injustice (1 Ki 21:9-13), and seeks to overpower the timid leader (2 Ch 13:7). It should be noted that *worthless* persons can be born into good families, for “the sons of Eli were worthless men; they did not know the LORD” (1 Sam 2:12). And, they can attach themselves to a godly leader and cause trouble, such

¹ Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 134.

as “the wicked and worthless men among those who went with David” (1 Sam 30:22).

In Deuteronomy chapter thirteen, the worthless men engage in organized criminal activity, working as community organizers to seduce the leadership and inhabitants of their city. The enticement was to worship idols (and there was one for everyone), which permitted easy sinful behavior and made no demands for holiness. But in God’s kingdom, idolatry was treason against their good King who had liberated them from slavery and blessed them as His chosen people.

However, rather than operate on hearsay, Moses instructed them, saying, “then you shall investigate and search out and inquire thoroughly” (Deut 13:14a). This meant that some of Israel’s leaders were to send a team of investigators to the city and make a thorough inquiry in the matter to determine the facts. Moses states, “If it is true and the matter established that this abomination has been done among you, you shall surely strike the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword, utterly destroying it and all that is in it and its cattle with the edge of the sword” (Deut 13:14b-15). Action, or inaction, was to follow only after the facts were obtained. If the matter was proven true and all the residents of the city had broken the first commandment and turned to idolatry (Deut 5:7), then the death penalty was prescribed. All the guilty inhabitants of the city were to be killed and their property was to be utterly destroyed (Heb. חָרַם *charam*) along with them. If Israelites turned from the Lord and acted like the Canaanites, then they would be judged and treated like the Canaanites. This shows God’s actions of judgment were a response to the unethical behavior of His people who had turned away from Him in violation of the covenant.

Moses said, “Then you shall gather all its booty into the middle of its open square and burn the city and all its booty with fire as a whole burnt offering to the LORD your God; and it shall be a ruin forever. It shall never be rebuilt” (Deut 13:16). The action of judging the city included gathering everything to its center and offering it as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. Furthermore, the city was not permitted to be rebuilt. Rather, it was to serve as a ruined memorial to others, that they might not follow worthless men and engage in such evil practices. The destruction of all the city’s property would also impede some who might be tempted to spread falsehood about a city, hoping to claim its wealth after the residents were killed.

Moses said, “Nothing from that which is put under the ban shall cling to your hand, in order that the LORD may turn from His burning anger and show mercy to you, and have compassion on you and make you increase, just as He has sworn to your fathers” (Deut 13:17). If God’s directives were followed, and the guilty city

destroyed, this would turn God from His anger for their violation of the covenant. In turn, the Lord would be merciful and compassionate because they humbly obeyed, and He would bless them with increase to make up for the lost members of the community who were killed. But this was conditioned on their obedience, as Moses said, “if you will listen to the voice of the LORD your God, keeping all His commandments which I am commanding you today, and doing what is right in the sight of the LORD your God” (Deut 13:18). Keeping God’s directives was the key to success and prosperity in the covenant community (see Deut 11:26-28).

As Christians, we live in a fallen world that is spiritually and morally sick. God has a prescription, but the majority of those in the world reject Him, so the disease goes untreated. As those who have turned to Christ as Savior and been restored to God (forgiven and given new life), we now have the responsibility to grow into spiritual adulthood and live effectively for God and others (i.e., the demanding life of a disciple). This will only happen as we consistently make good choices that are rooted in God’s Word. We grow spiritually when we study the Bible (2 Tim 2:15; 3:16-17), and live by faith, following God’s directives (Matt 7:24; John 13:17; Jam 1:22). We learn God’s Word in order to live God’s will. The Lord says, “My righteous one shall live by faith” (Heb 10:38), for “without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him” (Heb 11:6). The believer whose mind is saturated with God’s Word, correctly understood and applied, “will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers” (Psa 1:3). But there are dangers and distractions to the Christian life. We must be careful who we choose as friends, for they will influence us, either for good or evil. We do well to choose good teachers who help us know Scripture, and good friends who encourage us to pursue God’s will. And we must not bow to moments of sinful pressure, nor go with the flow of our declining culture. God is at work in the world, but so is Satan and his demonic forces. We’re constantly confronted with value systems that are harmful and may lead us into destructive paths. Society is never neutral, and there are pressures that pull us to go with the flow. Sometimes that’s alright, but other times not. We realize any dead fish can float downstream, but it takes someone who is alive and strong to swim against it. We should strive to be that person who daily walks with God and who helps and encourages others to do the same. God has granted us the privilege of being a godly influence in the lives of others, whether with family, coworkers, or in the community. We should take these privileges seriously, knowing that our loving and godly behavior may lead others to Christ for salvation, and may encourage other Christians to know the Lord better and to walk closely with Him.