

Deuteronomy 20:10-20

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In our current section on case laws (Deut 19:1—26:19), we are considering how the nation of ancient Israel was to practice righteous living after they entered the land of Canaan (Deut 16:20), and how righteousness was measured by conformity to God’s laws (Deut 6:24-25). In the previous section, Moses encouraged his people to be strengthened mentally in times of conflict (Deut 20:1). He also gave instructions to the priests to encourage the people with divine viewpoint (Deut 20:2-4), and to the officers to exempt certain men from military service (Deut 20:5-9). In the current pericope, Moses provides instruction concerning war with cities outside Canaan (Deut 20:10-15), and cities inside Canaan (Deut 20:16-20).

In Moses’ opening words, he directed Israel to offer terms of peace when approaching a city outside the land of Canaan, saying, “When you approach a city to fight against it, you shall offer it terms of peace” (Deut 20:10). Deuteronomy 20:15 makes it clear that Moses is referring to cities outside the promised land. This likely refers to cities that God would grant His people if their land was expanded beyond the Canaanite territory (Deut 19:8-9), which territory was originally promised to Abraham and his descendants (Gen 15:18; cf. Num 34:1-15).

If that expansion occurred, then the Israelites were to offer the residents of the city terms of peace (שָׁלוֹם *shalom*). However, terms of peace did not mean nonaggression, but rather, that the residents of the city could choose a vassal status rather than destruction. This is obvious from the following verse in which Moses said, “If it agrees to make peace with you and opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall become your forced labor and shall serve you” (Deut 20:11). Eugene Merrill states:

The formula here, “If you call out to it with respect to peace,” followed by the words “if they reply peace to you” (Deut 20:11), expresses the technical language of making treaty (cf. Judg 21:13). The idea was not that of a simple nonaggression pact in which both parties agreed to live in peace but a demand for capitulation. Only under such terms could the threatened city expect survival. To make peace was therefore tantamount to making a covenant, the kind in which the city under attack placed itself in subservience to the peoples demanding the terms of peace.¹

¹ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 285.

But there was always the possibility that the residents of the city might prefer war to vassal status. Moses addressed this scenario, saying, “However, if it does not make peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it” (Deut 20:12). Ancient cities commonly had fortified walls as well as food and water reserves in case they came under attack. When attacking a city, it was common to besiege it, which meant surrounding the city and cutting off its food and water supplies. In this way, an advancing army could starve the residents of the city into submission.

But such efforts of fortification could prevent God’s people from advancing and gaining victory. Moses said, “When the LORD your God gives it into your hand, you shall strike all the men in it with the edge of the sword” (Deut 20:13). Victory in this context is given by the Lord. He is the One who will give the city and its inhabitants into the hands of His people, Israel; and this because the residents of the city refused the offer of peace. In such a situation, the Israelites, after defeating the city residents in battle, were to execute all the men of the city.

Moses said, “Only the women and the children and the animals and all that is in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as booty for yourself; and you shall use the spoil of your enemies which the LORD your God has given you” (Deut 20:14). Here was discriminate warfare that killed only the hostile and let the women, children, and animals live. The spoils of war from Israel’s enemies were regarded as what “the LORD your God has given you.” Again, their military efforts were to be viewed from the divine perspective. But this did not mean that those taken captive were to be mistreated. Though it was common in the ancient world to rape and murder women who had been taken as captives, God did not permit this. In fact, some of the women could be taken as wives, and if this happened, they were granted legal protections (Deut 21:10-14). For clarity, Moses explains these military practices were to be followed only for cities outside the land of Canaan, saying, “Thus, you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not of the cities of these nations nearby” (Deut 20:15).

Shifting policy, Moses offers a different directive concerning the residents of Canaan, saying, “Only in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, you shall not leave alive anything that breathes” (Deut 20:16). Remember, the land of Canaan belonged to Israel by divine right, for the Owner of the land (Lev 25:23) promised it to them as part of the Abrahamic contract (Gen 12:1-3; 15:18; 17:7-8; 26:3-4; 28:13-14). Therefore, the Canaanites were merely squatters who needed to be removed, and this because they had become grossly immoral and were under divine judgment.

Concerning the Canaanites, Moses said, “But you shall utterly destroy them, the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite and the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, as the LORD your God has commanded you” (Deut 20:17). The words “utterly destroy” translate the Hebrew **חָרַם** *charam*, which is found in a number of passages (Num 21:2-3; Deut 2:34; 3:6; 7:2; 13:15; 20:17; Josh 2:10; 6:21; 8:26; 10:1, 35, 37, 39, 40; 11:11-12, 20-21). Leon Wood states, “Usually *ḥāram* means a ban for utter destruction, the compulsory dedication of something which impedes or resists God’s work, which is considered to be accursed before God.”² God made it very clear that the Canaanites were to be totally destroyed because of their extreme wickedness (Deut 9:4-5).

Remember, the Canaanites were an exceptionally wicked people whom God had marked out for judgment (Lev 18:25; Deut 9:5) after giving them four hundred years of grace (Gen 15:16). Some of the specific sins mentioned among the Canaanites included gross sexual immorality, such as incest (Lev 18:1-20; 20:10-12, 14, 17, 19-21), homosexuality (Lev 18:22; 20:13), and sex with animals (Lev 18:23; 20:15-16). They also engaged in the occult (Lev 20:6), were hostile toward parents (Lev 20:9), and offered their children as sacrifices to Molech (Lev 18:21; 20:1-5; cf. Deut 12:31; 18:10). God told Israel not to do these wicked things, for the Canaanites “did all these things, and therefore I have abhorred them” (Lev 20:23; cf. Lev 18:25).

God gave a second reason why He wanted the Canaanites destroyed, namely, “so that they may not teach you to do according to all their detestable things which they have done for their gods, so that you would sin against the LORD your God” (Deut 20:18; cf. Ex 23:33; Josh 23:12-13). Sadly, we know that Joshua and Israel failed to kill all the Canaanites, but sought to make them forced laborers (Josh 16:10; 17:13; Judg 1:28-35). Furthermore, Israel failed to obey the Lord (see the book of Judges), and the immoral culture of the Canaanites spread among God’s people, who themselves began to practice all the evil things God hates (Deut 12:31), including idolatry and child sacrifice (2 Ki 3:27; 16:3; Psa 106:37-38; Isa 57:5; Jer 7:31; 19:5; 32:35; Ezek 16:20-21). Because Israel eventually became corrupt, God then destroyed and expelled them from the land by means of military defeat from their enemies. This happened when the ten northern tribes of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC and the two southern tribes of Judah fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC.

Moses then addressed matters of ecology in times of war, saying, “When you besiege a city a long time, to make war against it in order to capture it, you shall not destroy its trees by swinging an axe against them; for you may eat from them, and you shall

² Leon J. Wood, “744 **חָרַם**,” ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 324.

not cut them down. For is the tree of the field a man, that it should be besieged by you?” (Deut 20:19). Trees do not commit evil, and should not be cut down indiscriminately like Israel’s enemies. Because Israel would soon possess the land of Canaan, it was to their own interests to preserve the trees surrounding the cities. Moses then differentiated which trees could be cut down, saying, “Only the trees which you know are not fruit trees you shall destroy and cut down, that you may construct siegeworks against the city that is making war with you until it falls” (Deut 20:20). Daniel Block states, “In ancient warfare strategy, the trees of vanquished territories would be cut down for several reasons: (1) as wood for siege structures and fuel for the invaders; (2) as retribution for the enemy’s resistance and defiance; (3) as a tactic in psychological warfare, to hasten submission.”³ However, Israel was to demonstrate wise discrimination. Eugene Merrill states:

The “War Manual” ends with a most curious and, at first blush, irrelevant paragraph about the treatment of trees in a time of siege. It does provide practical information about the preservation of fruit trees for their nutritional value and allows the use of others to build siege works (*māšôr*, lit., “enclosure,” perhaps encircling trenches or staging). The real thrust of the passage, however, is to contrast the tree with humankind (v. 19b). It is only humans, ironically the image of God and the crowning glory of creation, who sin against the Creator in such egregious ways as to call upon themselves divine judgment. The innocent tree, tainted as it is by the fall of humankind, is nevertheless not culpable and should therefore be spared.⁴

Present Application

God’s directive for Israel to destroy the Canaanites was twofold: 1) because the Canaanites were excessively wicked and under God’s judgment (Deut 9:4-5), and 2) so they would not become a corrupting influence on His people (Deut 20:18). Similarly, those we allow into our lives will influence us, either in good or bad ways.

The Bible repeatedly emphasizes the importance of making good choices, especially as it relates to friends. Solomon wrote, “The righteous choose their friends carefully, but the way of the wicked leads them astray” (Prov 12:26 NIV). Elsewhere, Solomon said, “He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm” (Prov 13:20). The word *walk* translates the Hebrew verb *הלך* *halak*,

³ Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy*, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 478–479.

⁴ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, *The New American Commentary*, 287.

which here refers to “a lifestyle, [or] a pattern of conduct.”⁵ Our lifestyle is influenced by our friends, who reinforce our path, either for good or harm. The one who chooses wise friends will gain wisdom and be blessed. A wise person—biblically speaking—is one who fears the Lord (Prov 1:7a), whereas, “fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov 1:7b). The wise person receives “instruction in wise behavior, doing what is right, just, and fair” (Prov 1:3), and this according to the standard of God’s Word. Simply stated, the biblically wise person is the one who learns and lives God’s Word on a regular basis. Jesus said, “everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Matt 7:24).

There is a danger in choosing foolish friends, for the one who befriends a fool will end a fool, and this with injury. Jesus said, “Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand” (Matt 7:26). Dwight Pentecost states, “A fool is not necessarily one who is marked by a low IQ but one who leaves God out of his consciousness...The fool is the man who does not take God into consideration in every area of his life.”⁶ Merrill F. Unger adds, “The ‘fool’ is not so much one lacking in mental powers, as one who misuses them; not one who does not reason, but reasons wrongly. In Scripture the ‘fool’ primarily is the person who casts off the fear of God and thinks and acts as if he could safely disregard the eternal principles of God’s righteousness (Psa 14:1; Prov 14:9; Jer 17:11; etc.).”⁷

As Christians, we choose what paths we follow. Biblically, there is a righteous path and a wicked path, and we must choose the former and avoid the latter. David wrote, “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers!” (Psa 1:1; cf. Prov 4:14-17). David generally made good choices throughout his life, and this meant avoiding wicked people. He said, “I do not sit with deceitful men, nor will I go with pretenders. I hate the assembly of evildoers, and I will not sit with the wicked” (Psa 26:4-5). Elsewhere he said, “He who practices deceit shall not dwell within my house; he who speaks falsehood shall not maintain his position before me” (Psa 101:7).

The psalmist also wrote, “I am a companion of all those who fear You, and of those who keep Your precepts” (Psa 119:63). Allen Ross writes, “The psalmist’s loyalty

⁵ William D. Mounce, *Mounce’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 924.

⁶ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Designed to Be Like Him: Understanding God’s Plan for Fellowship, Conduct, Conflict, and Maturity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2001), 55.

⁷ Merrill Frederick Unger, R. K. Harrison, Howard Frederic Vos et al., “Fool”, *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988).

to the LORD also finds expression in his association with other believers—he is a companion (חֲבֵר) to all who fear the LORD, meaning those who keep his commandments. The tie that binds the devout together is the commitment to keep God’s commands.”⁸ And Charles Spurgeon adds, “We can hardly hope to be right in the future unless we are right now. The holy man spent his nights with God and his days with God’s people. Those who fear God love those who fear him, and they make small choice in their company so long as the men are truly God-fearing.”⁹

In the New Testament we learn about the good choices Christians were making as they “were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). The words *continually devoting themselves* translates the Greek word προσκαρτερέω *proskartereo*, which denotes steadfast commitment and constant devotion. The two things these Christians were constantly devoted to were: 1) the apostle’s teaching, and 2) fellowship with other believers (which included a time of meals and prayer).

Christians are to live righteously, as this is consistent with our identity in Christ. The apostle Paul implores us “to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love” (Eph 4:1-2). Here, our pattern of behavior should mirror our position in Christ. Paul uses similar language when he writes, “You were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light; for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth, trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord” (Eph 5:6-10). Since we are called to such a high standard of living, it’s very important that we choose our friends carefully, to make sure there is mutual interest in walking with God and living as He directs.

For this reason, Paul directed the Christians at Corinth not to associate with people who are committed to live by worldly values. Of the unbeliever, Paul wrote, “Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?” (2 Cor 6:14). Of the worldly Christian, Paul wrote, “not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church?” (1 Cor 5:11-12; cf., Jam 4:4). The general reasoning behind these directives is that “bad associations corrupt good morals” (1 Cor 15:33).

⁸ Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms (90–150): Commentary*, vol. 3, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2016), 519.

⁹ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David: Psalms 111-119*, vol. 5 (London; Edinburgh; New York: Marshall Brothers, n.d.), 257.

Close relationships should be developed over time, only as we get to know others, hearing their words and watching their ways, and feeling confident they are among the faithful righteous. Some of the characteristics of a righteous person include:

1. A commitment to learning God's Word (Psa 1:1-2; Acts 2:42; Rom 6:17).
2. Submitting to God's will (Rom 12:1-2; Jam 1:22).
3. Confessing sin to God daily (1 John 1:9).
4. Displaying Christian love (John 13:34; Rom 13:8; 1 Th 4:9; 1 Cor 13:4-8a).
5. Seeking to glorify God (1 Cor 10:31).
6. Living by faith in order to please the Lord (Heb 10:38; 11:6; 2 Cor 5:9).
7. Speaking biblical truth in love (Eph 4:15, 25).
8. Modeling humility, gentleness, patience, tolerance and peace (Eph 4:1-3).
9. Being forgiving (Matt 18:21-22).
10. Doing good (Gal 6:10).
11. Encouraging other believers to do good (Heb 10:24).
12. Desiring fellowship with growing believers (Heb 10:25).
13. Praying for others (1 Th 5:17; 2 Th 1:11; Jam 5:16).
14. Building others up in the Lord (1 Th 5:11).
15. Being devoted to fellow believers (Rom 12:10).