

Deuteronomy 22:1-12

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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), how righteousness was measured by conformity to God’s laws (Deut 6:24-25), and obedience would result in the Lord’s blessings (Deut 11:26-28). In the current section, Moses give directives concerning: 1) responsible care for a neighbor’s lost property (Deut 22:1-3), 2) helping a neighbor (Deut 22:4), 3) prohibition against transvestism (Deut 22:5), 4) conservation of birds as a food source (Deut 22:6-7), 5) maintaining structurally safe homes (Deut 22:8), 6) symbolic separation of seeds, animals, and fabrics (Deut 22:9-11), and 7) wearing clothing that reminds Israel of their holy relationship with God (Deut 22:12). Moses begins these sundry laws, saying:

You shall not see your countryman’s ox or his sheep straying away, and pay no attention to them [אלם *alam* – to conceal or hide oneself]; you shall certainly bring them back to your countryman. ² If your countryman is not near you, or if you do not know him, then you shall bring it home to your house, and it shall remain with you until your countryman looks for it; then you shall restore it to him. ³ Thus you shall do with his donkey, and you shall do the same with his garment, and you shall do likewise with anything lost by your countryman, which he has lost and you have found. You are not allowed to neglect them [אלם *alam* – to conceal or hide oneself]. (Deut 22:1-3)

Of the 613 commands in the Mosaic Laws, 365 were negative and 248 were positive. The commands related largely to Israel’s relationship with God and others. Previously, Moses commanded that an Israelite return the lost animal of his enemy (Ex 23:4). The *enemy* in Exodus 23:4 likely refers to a fellow Israelite who was a legal adversary. In Deuteronomy 22:1-3, the application pertained to caring for anything lost that belonged to a fellow Israelite (ox, sheep, donkey, garment, etc.), until it could be restored. If an Israelite found his neighbor’s property, whatever it might be, he was not permitted to “pay no attention to them”, or “not allowed to neglect them”, which phrases translates the Hebrew אלם *alam*, and means *to conceal or hide oneself*. Other translations read, “You must not ignore it” (CSB), and “you must not refuse to get involved” (NET). That is, an Israelite was not free to hide himself from his communal responsibility of caring for his neighbor’s property. Earl Radmacher states, “Every individual in the community bore a responsibility to uphold justice within that community (compare Gal 6:2).”¹

¹ Earl D. Radmacher, Ronald Barclay Allen, and H. Wayne House, *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Commentary* (Nashville: T. Nelson Publishers, 1999), 256.

Moses provides another example of corporate responsibility, saying, “You shall not see your countryman’s donkey or his ox fallen down on the way, and pay no attention to them; you shall certainly help him to raise them up” (Deut 22:4). Whereas the previous command related to returning lost property to its rightful owner, this directive pertained to helping an animal that had fallen and could not get up. We’re not told why the animal fell, although it could have been because its owner had placed too heavy a load on it. Whatever the reason, the owner could not help the animal by his own efforts and needed assistance to help raise it to its feet. In Exodus 23:5, Moses had set forth similar instruction that pertained to an enemy Israelite, saying, “If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying helpless under its load, you shall refrain from leaving it to him, you shall surely release it with him” (Ex 23:5). Again, this was likely a fellow Israelite who was a legal adversary. Whatever the relationship with a fellow Israelite (friend or foe), everyone bore a corporate responsibility to help the helpless, even animals.

In the next command, Moses said, “A woman shall not wear man’s clothing, nor shall a man put on a woman’s clothing; for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD your God” (Deut 22:5). God created two genders, male and female (Gen 1:27), and these should be distinguishable in the sight of others. Whatever clothing a man or woman wears, it should not confuse their gender identity. In ancient Israel, men wore white robes, whereas women wore colored garments (Fruchtenbaum). Whatever the cultural practice—pants, dresses, tights, etc.—each person’s gender should be identifiable when observed by others. In Canaanite culture, transvestism was associated with homosexuality as well as certain cult practices pertaining to idol worship. Both idolatry (Deut 5:7-9) and homosexuality (Lev 18:22; 20:13) were regarded as an abomination to the Lord. Earl Radmacher adds, “Cross-dressing was forbidden by God in ancient Israel. In the ancient Middle East, dressing in the clothing of the opposite sex was a magical practice intended to bring harm to people. For example, a transvestite male would predict that the soldiers of another army would be as weak as females.”²

In the next command, Moses states, “If you happen to come upon a bird’s nest along the way, in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs, and the mother sitting on the young or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young; ⁷ you shall certainly let the mother go, but the young you may take for yourself, in order that it may be well with you and that you may prolong your days” (Deut 22:6-7). Here was an example of responsible ecological conservation. The rationale was that if an Israelite found a bird’s nest and ate the mother along with her eggs or young, he would have destroyed an ongoing viable food source. Originally, God created Adam and Eve as theocratic administrators to “rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all

² Ibid., 256–257.

the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” (Gen 1:26). After the Noahic flood, God permitted the eating of animals, saying, “Every moving thing that is alive shall be food for you; I give all to you, as I gave the green plant” (Gen 9:3). Responsible dominion means caring for the environment and animals and not driving them to extinction. This not only protects the animals, but also preserves the lives of people, as it secures future food sources. The benefit of compliance would help God’s people, “in order that it may be well with you and that you may prolong your days” (Deut 22:7b). Victor Matthews states, “One might compare this with the prohibition against cutting down fruit trees in Deuteronomy 20:19–20. In both instances, future sources of food are preserved while an alternative is suggested for immediate needs.”³ And Daniel Block adds:

While people who discover the nest of a wild bird have several options, Moses offers simple counsel: Israelites may take the eggs/fledglings, but they must spare the mother. Reining in the temptation to cruelty, verse 7 reiterates that if a mother bird is found with its young, the mother is not to be taken. The wisdom of this counsel is obvious: Taking the mother but sparing the young would have meant the death of all, for unhatched eggs and fledgling birds depend on the mother. Israelites are not to kill for killing’s sake, nor to exploit natural resources without concern for the survival of the species.⁴

Next, Moses states, “When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, so that you will not bring bloodguilt on your house if anyone falls from it” (Deut 22:8). Since Moses’ audience had been living in tents in the wilderness for the previous 40 years, such property concerns would have been new to them. Rooftops in ancient Israel were flat and places where people gathered for fellowship (1 Sam 9:25; 2 Sam 11:2), as well as places to sleep on hot summer nights, as they would benefit from cooler winds that came from the Mediterranean Sea to the west. Daniel Block states:

Houses were often two-story constructions, with the lower floor housing animals and storing food stuffs, and the upper floor serving as the living quarters. Cooled by the breezes, flat roofs provided a third living space that residents could use for a variety of purposes. Without a barrier around the perimeter, people could step off the roof and fall to their deaths. The final clause of verse 8 holds the head of the household responsible for the life of anyone whose death is the result of negligence.⁵

³ Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Dt 22:6–7.

⁴ Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy*, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 513.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 514.

Israelites were to assume reasonable responsibility for those who visited their home, making sure their home environment was safe. Again, we see a sense of corporate responsibility within the Israelite community as it pertains to structurally safe homes.

The next three laws prohibit mixing certain things together; namely, seeds in a field (Deut 22:9), animals for labor (Deut 22:10), and types of fabric for everyday use (Deut 22:11).

In the first prohibition, Moses said, “You shall not sow your vineyard with two kinds of seed, or all the produce of the seed which you have sown and the increase of the vineyard will become defiled” (Deut 22:9). The production of crops was not only intended for personal consumption, but for sacred use at the tabernacle/temple. Such a mixed crop was viewed by the Lord as *defiled*, which connotes its being ceremonially unfit for use by the priests. Warren Wiersbe states, “Keeping the various seeds separated when sowing the fields was also recognition of the principle of separation. It’s possible that the pagan nations mingled their seed as a part of their fertility rites in connection with their gods.”⁶

In the second example of keeping things separate, Moses said, “You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together” (Deut 22:10). Naturally, an ox and a donkey had different strengths, and it would be cruel for the lesser animal to be paired with a stronger animal and be required to pull a load greater than its ability. Daniel Block adds, “This practice creates a fundamentally incongruous image: the animals’ anatomies require different types of harness and a drastically modified yoke to link the two; their unequal strength and stamina could cause the more vigorous to exhaust the weaker.”⁷

Moses’ third prohibition against mixing things was, “You shall not wear a material mixed of wool and linen together” (Deut 22:11). The meaning of this taboo is not given. Some scholars suggest this taboo was intended to separate the average Israelite from the Levitical priests, who were permitted to wear mixed fabrics. Daniel Block states, “Moses does not justify this taboo, even though it contradicts the prescriptions for the fabric of the tabernacle and the high priest’s garments. While forbidden for laypersons, wearing garments of mixed fabrics was reserved for those who served in Yahweh’s presence.”⁸

The last directive in this pericope states, “You shall make yourself tassels on the four corners of your garment with which you cover yourself” (Deut 22:12). This positive command reflects the command in Numbers 15:38-40 in which Moses intended the tassels

⁶ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Equipped*, “Be” Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Pub., 1999), 154.

⁷ Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy*, 515.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 515.

to serve as a mnemonic device to help them remain conscious of their relationship with God and His commands.

For Israelites, there was a triangular relationship between God, them, and the world around them. Their relationship with God impacted their personal choices (i.e., clothing), as well as their relationship with others (both friends and enemies), the earth (caring for their environment), and even animals, both domestic and wild. If their relationship with God was prioritized, it would result in the natural function and care of others as well as their environment. In this way, God’s directives resulted in righteousness as it touched all aspects of life (Deut 16:20).

Present Application

As Christians, we are saved by God’s grace when we trust in Christ as our Savior (John 3:16; Rom 4:1-5; 1 Cor 15:3-4; Gal 2:16; Eph 2:8-9; Tit 3:5). Additionally, God selected us to “be holy and blameless before Him” (Eph 1:4). Elsewhere, Paul wrote to Christians, saying, “I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom 12:1-2a). And the apostle Peter wrote, “like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; ¹⁶ because it is written, ‘you shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet 1:15-16).

But how are we—as born-again Christians—made holy in conduct? Living distinguished from the world occurs as we learn to walk with God and advance to spiritual maturity. The following steps are helpful. **First**, we must be in submission to God. Scripture tells us to “Submit to God” (Jam 4:7), and “present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship” (Rom 12:1). Being in submission to God means we desire the Lord’s will above all else. When this happens, God’s Word opens up to us (John 7:17). **Second**, we must replace a lifetime of human viewpoint thinking with God’s Word. Paul said, “do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2). Other Scriptures support this idea (Psa 1:2-3; 2 Tim 2:15; 3:16-17; 1 Pet 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18). As Christians, we cannot live what we do not know, and learning God’s Word necessarily precedes living His will. A biblical worldview enables us to see our spiritual identity as children of God (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:1-5; Eph 1:3-6; 1 Pet 2:9-10), as saints (Acts 9:13; Rom 1:7; 8:27; 1 Cor 1:2; 6:1-2), and ambassadors of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:20) who have meaningful and eternal purposes in God. More so, biblically trained minds empower us to properly interpret the world in order to see it from the divine perspective. Cultural conformity is effectively resisted by believers who are “destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up

against the knowledge of God, and taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor 10:5). This means Scripture saturates our minds (Prov 3:5-6; Isa 26:3; Col 3:1), and we are not allowing our thoughts to be bogged down with the cares of this world (Matt 6:25-34). Mental discipline is necessary, for our psychological stability is often predicated on the biblical content and continuity of our thinking. **Third**, we must learn to be filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18), and to walk in dependence on the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:16, 25). Being filled with the Holy Spirit means being controlled by Him. It means we follow where He guides, and His guidance is always according to Scripture. Being filled with the Spirit does not mean we have more of the Spirit, but that Spirit has more of us, as we submit to His leading. It means the Spirit is fulfilling in us all He desires. **Fourth**, we must learn to live by faith in God and His Word. Learning God’s Word becomes effective when mixed with our faith as we apply it to all aspects of our lives. Our faith is effective when God’s Word is more real than our experiences, feelings, or circumstances. The writer to the Hebrews states, “But my righteous one shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him” (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). **Fifth**, we must accept God’s trials that help us grow. God uses trials to strengthen our faith and develop us spiritually. Often, we don’t like hardship, but we must learn to accept it as necessary. For the Lord uses it to burn away the dross of our weak character and to refine those golden qualities consistent with His character. The growing believer learns to praise God for the trials, knowing He uses them to advance us spiritually (Psa 119:71; Rom 5:3-5; 2 Cor 12:7-10; Heb 12:11; Jam 1:2-4; 1 Pet 4:12-13). **Sixth**, we must restore fellowship with God through confession of personal sin. As Christians, when we sin, we break fellowship with God and grieve and/or quench the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:30; 1 Th 5:19). Fellowship is restored when we simply confess our sin to God and trust that He forgives us as He promises (1 John 1:5-9). **Seventh**, we must maintain fellowship with other believers. Scripture teaches, “let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near” (Heb 10:24-25). Spiritual growth does not happen in isolation, as God expects us to exercise our spiritual gifts for the benefit of others (Acts 2:42; Rom 12:10-13; 14:19; Eph 4:32; Phil 2:3-4; 1 Th 5:11-15). **Eighth**, we must serve others. We are part of the body of Christ and God calls us to love and serve each other. Peter states, “As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Pet 4:10). **Ninth**, pray to God. Prayer is essential to spiritual growth as we need to have upward communication with God to express ourselves to Him. Prayer is the means by which we make requests to God, believing He has certain answers ready for us, and that we just need to ask (Jam 4:2). Scripture directs us to “pray without ceasing” (1 Th 5:17), and “pray at all times in the Spirit” (Eph 6:18; cf. Jude 1:20). To pray in the Spirit means we pray in the power of the Holy Spirit as He directs and energizes our prayer life. **Tenth**, worship and give thanks to

the Lord. The writer to the Hebrews stated, “let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name” (Heb 13:15). And Paul wrote to the Christians at Thessalonica, saying, “in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Th 5:18). To give thanks (εὐχαριστέω *eucharisteo*) is to have a daily attitude of gratitude toward God for His goodness and mercy toward us. Part of this attitude comes from knowing God is working all things “together for good” (Rom 8:28), because “God is for us” (Rom 8:31). **Lastly**, we must be wise stewards of the time and opportunities God provides us to advance spiritually. Paul writes, “Be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil” (Eph 5:15-16). The believer does not reach spiritual maturity overnight, and since we have only a measure of time allotted to us by God (Psa 139:16), we must make sure our days are not wasted on meaningless pursuits, but on learning God’s Word and living His will. (Eph 5:15-17; cf. Heb 5:12; 1 Pet 1:17; 4:1-2).