

## Deuteronomy 23:9-18

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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 this section, Moses addresses maintaining purity in military camps (Deut 23:9-14), providing refuge for runaway foreign slaves (Deut 23:15-16), and a prohibition against men and women serving as pagan cult prostitutes (Deut 23:17-18).

### **Purity in Military Camps**

Moses opens this section, saying, “When you go out as an army against your enemies, you shall keep yourself from every evil thing” (Deut 23:9). Here, the military represented a specific group within the nation of Israel, and they were called to maintain purity in their military camp. The word *evil* translates the Hebrew adjective *רָע* *ra*, which commonly denotes “bad, evil, wicked, [or] no good.”<sup>1</sup> The word often refers to what is morally reprehensible to God; however, in the following verses (Deut 23:10-14), it refers to what is physically impure among God’s people. Being the source of absolute holiness, God determines and declares what is good or evil.

Moses continued, saying, “If there is among you any man who is unclean because of a nocturnal emission, then he must go outside the camp; he may not reenter the camp. But it shall be when evening approaches, he shall bathe himself with water, and at sundown he may reenter the camp” (Deut 23:10-11). The nocturnal emission is not identified. It could refer to an accidental nighttime seminal discharge, which a man might experience when away from his wife for a period of time. Moses had previously mentioned such a discharge (cf., Lev 15:16-17), which rendered a man ceremonially unclean, not morally unclean. However, the context implies that the nighttime emission more likely refers to one who urinated in his bed. Peter Craigie states:

The first example relates to a man who is unclean because of what happens at night. On the analogy of Leviticus 15:16, these words are often interpreted as signifying the nocturnal, involuntary emission of semen; the Hebrew in this passage, however, is different and less specific than that of Leviticus 15:16, and it is possible that something else is intended. The references may simply be to urinating in the camp at night, either involuntarily or else because a man was too lazy (or tired) to get up

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<sup>1</sup> James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

and go outside his camp. This interpretation seems to provide a more natural parallel to the legislation contained in Deuteronomy 23:13-15, and it would thus refer to a more typical and common occurrence in any military camp. A man who had behaved in this manner was to remain outside the camp the following day; toward evening he would wash himself, again for hygienic and ritual reasons, and he would be permitted to reenter the camp after sunset.<sup>2</sup>

This law was to go into effect after Israel had entered the land of Canaan; at which time, they would find themselves facing an enemy. Moses continued his instruction, saying, “You shall also have a place outside the camp and go out there,<sup>13</sup> and you shall have a spade among your tools, and it shall be when you sit down outside, you shall dig with it and shall turn to cover up your excrement” (Deut 23:12-13). Some pagan cultures, such as the Egyptians, used animal feces as part of their medical practices. Fawver and Overstreet write:

Much of the information found in the Egyptian medical texts was medically hazardous. For example, donkey feces were used for the treatment of splinters, which probably increased the incidence of tetanus because of tetanus spores present in feces. Crocodile feces were used for birth control. In contrast Moses wrote that God instructed the Israelites to cover their excrement because it was “unclean” (Deut 23:12–13). At no time did Moses resort to adding the popular medical techniques of his day, though he was “educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7:22), which certainly included their medical wisdom.<sup>3</sup>

Moses concludes, saying, “Since the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp to deliver you and to defeat your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy; and He must not see anything indecent among you or He will turn away from you” (Deut 23:14). Here is the primary rationale for maintaining purity in the camp. When going out to battle, the Israelites must constantly be aware that God is among them, walking in their midst, inspecting the camp for cleanliness. God is holy and He expects His people to be holy (c.f., Lev 19:1-2). In these verses, cleanliness was an act of holiness in God’s sight. Warren Wiersbe states:

This section applied to Israel’s soldiers when they were encamped away from home. The basic principle was that they treat the camp as they would their land at home, for the Lord was with them even on the battlefield, walking in their midst. The idol-worshipping nations believed that they left their gods behind when they

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<sup>2</sup> Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 299.

<sup>3</sup> Jay D. Fawver and R. Larry Overstreet, “Moses and Preventive Medicine,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147 (1990): 275.

went to another country, but Israel's God was always with them, for He is the God of all the earth. If a soldier had become unclean at home, he would have to leave the community, wash, and return the next day; and that same rule applied in the camp. The men were also to have a place outside the camp for disposing of their excrement. This would not only keep them from being defiled, but it would also promote hygiene.<sup>4</sup>

### **Protecting Runaway Slaves**

Concerning runaway slaves from a foreign country, Moses wrote, "You shall not hand over to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you. <sup>16</sup> He shall live with you in your midst, in the place which he shall choose in one of your towns where it pleases him; you shall not mistreat him" (Deut 23:15-16). The passage considers slaves who ran away from their foreign master to seek refuge in Israel. Such a scenario might be tied to the previous section pertaining to going out to war. It's possible a foreign slave might be near Israel because he/she was brought there by a commander or soldier. Being in proximity might have afforded the slave the opportunity to run away and seek refuge within the Israelite community. If this happened, God's people were to allow such a one to live in their midst for protection and freedom, to reside in whatever town they wanted, and not to take advantage of them or mistreat them. A modified form of slavery was permitted in ancient Israel, in which a person who owed a debt could obligate himself to his debtor to pay off a debt. This contract arrangement was voluntary for both parties and had a divinely set term limit of six years, after which, the slave must be set free (Deut 15:12). Furthermore, the slave was to be set free with a liberal severance package adequate to jumpstart his own economic wellbeing (Deut 15:13-15). Such actions were predicated on the fact that Israel, as a nation, had been enslaved in Egypt, and they were to regard willful Israelite slaves with compassion and fairness. However, if an Israelite served his six-year contract and came to love his master because he was treated very well, he could voluntarily enter into a lifetime agreement of service (Deut 15:16-18).

### **Prohibition Against Cultic Prostitution**

Moses continued, saying, "None of the daughters of Israel shall be a cult prostitute, nor shall any of the sons of Israel be a cult prostitute" (Deut 23:17). Here was a prohibition against young Israelite women or men from being a cult prostitute in a pagan temple. Canaanite parents were known to give their sons and daughters to serve as prostitutes in their worship of pagan idols. In such situations, the children were exploited by the parents

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<sup>4</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Equipped*, "Be" Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Pub., 1999), 158–159.

for sinful purposes.<sup>5</sup> Israel was not to be like the pagan cultures around them. They were to be holy. For a young woman or man to engage in such activity would imply some residual Canaanite influence in the land. Jack Deere writes, “The prohibition here was probably intended to prevent a foreign religion being practiced by Israelites, and to keep the worship of the Lord from being contaminated by temple prostitution.”<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, this command to prohibit Israelites from serving as temple prostitutes was not followed by later generations (see 1 Ki 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Ki 23:7). Eugene Merrill writes:

So-called cultic prostitution was widespread among the fertility cults of the ancient Near Eastern world that saw in its employment a means of achieving productivity of plant, animal, and even human life. Whole guilds of male and female temple personnel participated in grossly sexual rituals designed to induce the various gods and goddesses to release their procreative powers on the earth. Nowhere was this more commonly practiced than among the peoples of Syria and Canaan, hence the special need to warn Israel against it.<sup>7</sup>

Moses further states, “You shall not bring the hire of a harlot or the wages of a dog into the house of the LORD your God for any votive offering, for both of these are an abomination to the LORD your God” (Deut 23:18). The male prostitute is called a *dog* because his brutish behavior is like that of a dog, which indiscriminately mounts another canine for sexual gratification. Whether a female or male prostitute, their wages were regarded as dirty money that was not acceptable to the Lord. Giving to the Lord’ work is a valid act, but what is given must be derived from honest work done in an honest way.

## **Present Application**

Through our study of Deuteronomy, we learn that God is concerned about just laws and moral behavior among His people. God’s laws through Moses were just laws, because they derived from a righteous God. As a theocracy, God was their Judge, Lawgiver, and King (Isa 33:22). Though the church is not under the Mosaic Law as the rule for life, we still have directives to follow, and these are always for our good and the good of others. As Christians, we are not called to form a nation like Israel, but are to go out to many

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<sup>5</sup> The sinful exploitation of children continues today. I knew a girl in Las Vegas who, when she was 11, her mother used to prostitute her out to men in order to maintain the mother’s cocaine habit. This went on for several years. That a parent would do such a thing to a young child reveals the depravity of the human heart. The past few decades have seen a global rise in kidnapping and child exploitation as part of the sex-trade. Sin and evil still exist.

<sup>6</sup> Jack S. Deere, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 304.

<sup>7</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 313.

nations (Matt 28:19-20), and this to preach the gospel and God's Word to all who will listen. As Christians living in a fallen world, we realize that a just and moral nation is the product of a just and moral people. As Christians, we desire morality and justice in our society. However, such morality never occurs through social or political force. We have failed as Christians as soon as we seek to politicize our message and control others through legislative means. We realize true and lasting transformation must occur from the inside out, as people are regenerated through faith in Christ and advance to spiritual maturity through learning and living God's Word, not by a forced morality imposed through the halls of congress. Where Christianity prevails in a society, social evils will decline, and freedom will be maintained by a moral and just people. John Adams knew this very well and said, "Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."

As Christians, we are called to share the gospel that people might receive new life and be liberated from Satan's slave-market. If a person rejects Jesus as Savior, then that person chooses to continue as a slave to Satan and his world-system. It's unfortunate, but it's their choice, and it must be respected. God is a perfect Gentleman and He does not bully anyone to accept His offer of salvation, nor to live according to His directives. If people turn away from Him and suppress His truth in unrighteousness, then He will let them go their own way. Concerning those who "suppress God's truth in unrighteousness" (Rom 1:18), three times it is written that He "gave them over" to "the lusts of their hearts" (Rom 1:24), and "to degrading passions" (Rom 1:26), and "to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper" (Rom 1:28). Once God permits a person to operate by his/her sinful passions, they are given a measure of freedom to live as they want. These are described as "being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, and unmerciful" (Rom 1:29-31).

Such people live according to laws of their own making, with no greater source of morality than that which can be derived from their own fallen hearts. However, because they have rejected God, they have no basis for moral absolutes by which to declare anything ethically right or wrong. There is only subjective opinion, which fluctuates from person to person and group to group. If God and His Word are rejected, we're left with no moral absolutes, and then what is, is right, and the conversation is over. Morality then becomes a matter of what the majority wants, or what an elite, or tyrant, can impose on others. Francis Schaeffer wrote:

If there is no absolute moral standard, then one cannot say in a final sense that anything is right or wrong. By absolute we mean that which always applies, that which provides a final or ultimate standard. There must be an absolute if there are

to be morals, and there must be an absolute if there are to be real values. If there is no absolute beyond man's ideas, then there is no final appeal to judge between individuals and groups whose moral judgments conflict. We are merely left with conflicting opinions.<sup>8</sup>

As biblically minded Christians, we realize that without God, there is no final basis for ethics or laws other than finite and flawed people. If there is no God, then right and wrong are reduced to opinion, and cries for justice become nothing more than psychology reports from dissatisfied people. It's interesting that people cry out for personal and social justice because they're naturally wired that way. But for the atheist, such inclinations are either a learned behavior based on arbitrary social norms, or a biological quirk that developed from accidental evolutionary processes.

As believers, we know God exists, that He is there, and He is not silent. God reveals Himself in the human heart (Rom 1:19), through nature (Psa 19:1-2; Rom 1:20), through His Son (Heb 1:1-2), and through His written Word (Psa 119:160; John 17:17; 2 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Pet 1:20-21). Furthermore, God has placed within each person a conscience, and this operates according to a morality God has infused within each person. Paul wrote, "For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them" (Rom 2:14-15). Human conscience, when operating properly, serves as God's moral compass placed within each person. People intuitively know that God exists (Rom 1:18-20), and that certain laws are right (Rom 2:14-15). We don't have to persuade anyone. People intuitively know God exists, that He is just, and that actions such as murder, abortion, lying, stealing, and adultery are wrong.

For those who have positive volition, they will hear the Christian message and turn to Christ as Savior, believing Jesus "died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3-4). Once saved, they can then begin the process of renewing their minds according to God's Word (Rom 12:1-2), advance to spiritual maturity (Eph 4:11-13; 1 Pet 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18), live by faith (Heb 10:38; 11:6), operate in the power of the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18; Gal 5:16), walk in a manner consistent with their new identity in Christ (Eph 4:1), and manifest the fruit of the Holy Spirit in their daily lives (Gal 5:22-23). Such Christians will become the moral backbone of any society, which will be richer because of their walk with the Lord.

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<sup>8</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?: The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture*, 50th L'Abri Anniversary Edition. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 145.