

Abiding Principles

Deuteronomy 24:1 - 25:4

For the past few weeks I have been emphasizing general principles of the Old Testament civil law with an attempt to explain how those principles would still apply today. That isn't always an easy answer since the civil law of the nation of Israel expired when that nation was destroyed, and the nation did cease to exist after the destruction brought about by the Roman army in AD 70. In the words of our Westminster Confession of Faith, those various sundry judicial laws "expired together with the State of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require."

That is a really important point. These Old Testament civil laws have expired. But something in them is still required of us, what the confession calls the general equity. The general principles embodied in those laws abide. Perhaps as the most comprehensive biblical summary of what that "general equity" of the Old Testament law is all about, we read in,

Micah 6:8 "He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?"

So with that in mind, with a view toward those general principles, let's focus this morning on the whole concept of what I am calling abiding principles. And the first one has to do with,

I. PRINCIPLES OF MARRIAGE.

v.1-4

Now, this passage does not come to us in a vacuum. And so you have to understand the overall context of the goodness of marriage.

A. The glory of marriage.

The original description of that glory is, of course, from, Gen. 2:18 And the LORD God said, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him."... 21 And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. 22 Then the rib which the LORD God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man. 23 And Adam said: "This is now bone of my bones And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man." 24 Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. 25 And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed."

What a delight! What glory. "Bone of my bones And flesh of my flesh." The Apostle Paul goes so far as to say about marriage and the marital relationship that,

Eph. 5:32 "This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church."

Such glory indeed, as a relationship that reflects the one Jesus has with his church, such we, the church, are the bride, he the bridegroom.

The writer of Hebrews adds this,

Heb. 13:4 "Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled."

And Jesus then adds his instructions with reference to our text in Deuteronomy 24,

Mat. 19:3 "The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?" 4 And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning made them

male and female,' 5 and said, For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? 6 So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." 7 They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?" 8 He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so."

So that's the overall context. The glory of marriage is its beauty and its permanence. The two become one flesh. The problem is that sin often creates a breach in that relationship. And divorce becomes a reality, a reality to be regulated simply because of the glory of the marriage relationship. That's Deuteronomy 24. Notice, of course, how the Pharisees misapplied the words of Deuteronomy 24.

Mat. 19:3 "The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?"

No, says Jesus. God designed marriage from the beginning to be permanent. "Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." So the regulation is necessary, for Moses and for Jesus. When sin breaches the relationship, divorce becomes permitted. But notice the emphasis of Deuteronomy 24, which requires,

B. Understanding God's provision for the protection of a woman.

That's what this regulation is all about. The basic idea is that a man who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce. Moses is not commanding divorce, but he is commanding a man who divorces his to grant her her freedom, to grant her the legal standing of a divorce. She is not his property that he can discard

at will. He must do so, if he divorces her, in such as a way to give her the protection of that certificate of divorce.

And he therefore loses claim of marriage over her. He cannot take her back at the whim of his own desires. She is, indeed, free. Verse 4, "her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife."

That was a very patriarchal society in which women had little or few rights, virtually no legal protection. And the instructions of both Moses and Jesus give her the protection of those rights. A man just can't do whatever he wants with his wife, putting her out, taking her back, depending upon his own will and desire. In verse 5, Moses calls that disregard for the protection of a woman to be "an abomination before the LORD." He continues, "and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance."

One further thought about the glory of marriage, this one much more positive. Look at,
v.5

There is marriage as it ought to be! There is the calling of a new husband, not to find his pleasure and delight in his wife, but to seek to bring happiness to her! What a wonderful perspective to have! The New Testament, of course, tells a husband just how to do that.

Eph. 5:25 "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her."

All of that is what is needed in,

C. Understanding the priorities of marriage.

A man was given the freedom from both military service and

even business for a year, because his first priority was to bring happiness to his wife.

Let's move on then to what might rather generally be called the,

II. PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE.

Now, those are pretty common buzzwords for our day, social justice. And I am not making reference to any political movements our day, no specific reference even to the typical issues today that would be placed under that title of social justice. Rather, I want to focus on one particular motive of the heart, and look at the variety of examples that are given here in Deuteronomy. These examples are not given as a prescription for us, a legalistic prescription for laws to be enacted exactly as these. In fact, the primary emphasis is not upon civil legislation or political priorities at all. The focus is upon the human heart.

I defined that emphasis earlier from,

Micah 6:6 "With what shall I come before the LORD, And bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, With calves a year old? 7 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, Ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? 8 He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?"

I want to focus upon mercy this morning.

A. Showing mercy.

At its root, mercy means giving help and assistance to someone because of their need. Mercy sees someone in need, it identifies someone who is suffering or afflicted in some way. And

what does God require of you? To love mercy. Let's see what that looks like with the examples of Deuteronomy 24.

v.6

The lower and upper millstones were the two stones in the grinding of grain, such that without them a man would lose his ability to grind, he would lose his ability to provide food for his family. So if you take a pledge, a guarantee that a loan would be repaid, you cannot do so in such a way as to cause harm and danger to a man's whole life and livelihood. Instead, you are to love mercy.

Verse 7 refers to the mercy shown to the victim of kidnapping. Verses 8-9 are a warning about the dangers that might come to those who rebel against God, namely the dreaded disease of leprosy.

Verses 10-13 are an obvious expression of mercy, describing the effect of the good motive of your heart with which you are careful not to cause anyone undue harm. That is an abiding principle, that you show mercy on those in need, seeking to avoid harming them further. Specifically,

v.10-13

Verses 14-15 are pretty obvious too. The call for mercy! The obligation not to be oppressive to others.

v.14-15

Verses 16 and 17 emphasize again that call to merciful dealings with those in need, especially widows and orphans. James goes so far as to say this about true religion,

James 1:27 "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world."

Indeed, we are to love mercy, to love showing compassion to those most in need because of their need, rather than to take advantage of them or abuse them just because you can. That idea continues in,

v.19-21

Again, my emphasis upon the abiding principles. The general equity of those laws. As God's people, we are called to be merciful. As Jesus puts in in the sermon on the mount,

Mat. 5:7 "Blessed are the merciful, For they shall obtain mercy."

Micah 6:8 "He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?"

Look ahead just a bit into chapter 25,

v.1-4

Those words are pretty similar to what we have just read, with a particular civil application, a reference to civil punishments as would have been required by the nation of Israel. There is expressed there in general terms what you could rightly call,

B. Civil justice.

Civil laws, laws of justice, enacting punishment upon evil doers as they justly deserve. But still there is mercy. Still there is the sense of the pursuit of true justice, true righteousness. There is to be punishment, but no undue punishment. Look especially at,

v.3

That's justice, justice which is not separated from mercy. Justice that is tied to righteousness, to the appropriate

punishment for crime. But still, without the neglect of mercy. The goal isn't humiliation, as verse 3 says. The goal is not a pound of flesh, as we would put it today. There is nothing vindictive here, and certainly nothing mean-spirited or abusive. The broad and general principle of social justice requires this consistent practice of mercy, a genuine, caring, compassionate interest in the well-being of others.

Micah 6:6 "With what shall I come before the LORD, And bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, With calves a year old? 7 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, Ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? 8 He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?"

Blessed are the merciful!

Please understand, I am not advocating any particular political cause with these words. Rather, I am proclaiming God's word to God's people. And we ought not to read over the words of this chapter and dismiss them carelessly because they are just a description of a bunch of Old Testament civil laws. There is so much more than that here in terms of abiding principles, and so much more to be applied to your hearts. Beloved, God calls you to love mercy.

As a third point this morning, let me identify two more things that are really much bigger than this text itself. Things I am calling

III. TRANSCENDENT PRINCIPLES.

Principles that transcend or go beyond the mere surface of things. The first is just a small and rather insignificant verse about mercy shown even to the animal, but it becomes a verse

that Paul uses to make a rather significant point in the New Testament. So here is an example of the general equity of an Old Testament law applied in a way that I would certainly never have dared to apply it. But Paul does.

A. A specific example becomes a general principle.

It is worth studying because of the prominence it takes in the New Testament. And what is the specific example?

25:4

The point is, in the context of Deuteronomy, that an animal ought not to be mistreated. And even a beast of burden ought to be free to eat even while he treads out the grain. To muzzle an ox in that situation would be cruel. Unkind. And lack mercy. Good principle.

But look how Paul applies that principle. He has to defend himself before the people of Corinth, particularly that he has the right to receive their financial support.

1 Cor. 9:3 “My defense to those who examine me is this: 4 Do we have no right to eat and drink? 5 Do we have no right to take along a believing wife, as do also the other apostles, the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas? 6 Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working? 7 Who ever goes to war at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk of the flock? 8 Do I say these things as a mere man? Or does not the law say the same also? 9 For it is written in the law of Moses, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain.” Is it oxen God is concerned about? 10 Or does He say it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written, that he who plows should plow in hope, and he who threshes in hope should be partaker of his hope. 11 If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it a great thing if we reap your material things? 12 If others

are partakers of this right over you, are we not even more? Nevertheless we have not used this right, but endure all things lest we hinder the gospel of Christ. 13 Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat of the things of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of the offerings of the altar? 14 Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel.”

I use this example as an illustration, of what broadly sometimes these general principles might be. So here is mercy shown to an ox. And when that principle is applied in the New Testament, it is the foundation for the reason why you as a church pay me a certain amount of money each month. I’m not sure I like the analogy to an ox, but there it is. “You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain.” “Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel.”

Similarly,

1 Tim. 5:17 “Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. 18 For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer is worthy of his wages.”

That’s how the principle of this Old Testament law is made relevant and valid for today. And as I have stressed all morning, that is how mercy is to be expressed. And as I just read in 1 Timothy, that is how honor is given. Double honor, Paul says. All from that simple little verse, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain.”

One more transcendent principle. One more thing that goes beyond the mere technical details of this passage with all its

stipulations and regulations. To put it as clearly as I can,

B. The evidence of the gospel is pervasive.

So here, in the midst of these regulations, the gospel is not only present, but pervasive. Especially in this sense, this reminder, that God, through Moses, is speaking to his own special people. He is speaking to believers, to the redeemed, those whom he has saved by rescuing them out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

Look at,
24:18

Don't miss that verse, or others like it in other places in the Old Testament, or the new. Moses is not defining a method of salvation. He is not presenting the law as the means by which God's people would be redeemed. Rather, he is speaking to a people whom God has already redeemed. In the language of our day, he is speaking to Christians. With that healthy and necessary reminder,

v.18 "...remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this thing."

Remember who you are. Remember what I have done for you. Remember that you have been saved by grace through faith. Always, always remember that. It shapes everything else in your life. And it shapes how you understand and respond to God's word, especially his law.

These regulations were not given to the people of Israel in order to give them a means by which they could earn their acceptance before God. They were given to the people whom God had already redeemed by the outworking of his grace, by his

own sovereign will and purpose. Therefore, Moses says, "I command you to do this thing."

That is the gospel, and its application in our lives. Remember what I have done for you. That's the gospel. Therefore, on that basis, here is how I want you to live. That's the application of the gospel. And that is what we have in Deuteronomy 24. That is what we have in the New Testament as well.

For we read,

Eph. 2:8 "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."

And then we read,

Eph. 4:1 "I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love."

The key word is therefore. Here is the gospel. Remember the gospel. Receive and believe its great promise. Therefore, this is how you should live.

Same idea in,
24:22

Dear friends, you who are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, never forget the slavery from which God has delivered you. The slavery and bondage of your sin, is dominion over your life, and the guilt and condemnation which it earns for you. If you believe in Jesus, God has delivered you from that slavery, just as he delivered the people of Israel from Egypt.

Therefore, "...beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called."

Remember that great work of God to save you, by the precious blood of the lamb. Therefore,

Micah 6: 8 "He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?"

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy."