

Cities of Refuge – Deuteronomy 19:1-21

Introduction – We come to the treatment of the sixth commandment: You shall not murder. This commandment exists because of God's high value on the life of mankind, created in His image (Gen 9:5-7) and so included in this commandment is the requirement to justly protect the life of others. The people of God who were moving into the Promised Land were to be a community of life.

Providing Refuge (vv1-13) – Cities of refuge were to be provided throughout the land. They were to be easily accessible, the roads well cared for in order to get to them (v3), and as the LORD blessed Israel with more land, more cities of refuge were to be added (vv8-9). The purpose was to provide easy access for an accused murderer to go and receive a fair trial. If a man was guilty of manslaughter, but not premeditated murder, he would be able to live in the city of refuge in safety from “the avenger of blood” (v6).

The Dignity and Value of Life – Life is a gift from God and human life is particularly to be treated with a kind of dignity for man was created in the image of God. This does not mean that human life is sacred, for there are times when, if someone is killed by accident, there is no charge of murder. There are also times when a community is to put someone to death who actually is found guilty of murder (vv11-13). This is why abortion is murder and yet capital punishment is not.

Civil Protection – The law is to be carried out by the civil authority in order to protect its people from violence. But the accused are to be protected until due diligence can be rendered, which also protects a society from a life of personal/tribal/clan violence and vengeance-taking. God does not teach that vengeance is wrong, but that vengeance is His (Rom 12:19) and that He has appointed the civil rulers to be His instrument of wrath in such times (Rom 13:1-7) – to protect the innocent and to protect the accused, while bringing justice and wrath upon the guilty.

Borders (v14) – Tampering with borders was tantamount to tampering with another's livelihood and was treated as a serious offense (Job 24:2-4, Prov 23:10-11). Border disputes often lead to bloodshed, hence the inclusion in this commandment of a sin which obviously covers others as well (8th, 9th, 10th).

Cities of Refuge in a Land of Truth (vv15-21) – Cities of refuge were not safe havens for the guilty, they were safe havens for truth. In a land of sinners, accusations need to be confirmed with a plurality of witnesses (two or three – v15), establishing the concept of innocent until proven guilty, and where the burden of proof must rest. Lying in court is, and necessarily so, a serious offense; “*you shall do to him as he thought to have done to his brother*” (v18), even to “*life for life*” (v21) in a capital trial. It's important to note that God says this has a deterrent value (v20). This law (known as the law of retaliation, or *lex talionis*) was not established for personal vendettas (Jesus taught against just that in Matt 5:38-42) but rather to discipline the courts and the land to pursue truth with great soberness.

The Gospel City of Refuge and Truth – God's law reveals His character and we can see His love for life, justice, and truth here. Of course, the establishment of God's kingdom in Jesus Christ must reflect the same.

City of Refuge – There is a part of the gospel revealed in the establishment of these cities. The one who took refuge in such a city remained there until the death of the high priest (Num 35:25) and then was free to go. We stand accused (and Satan is the great Accuser) but we are free to go because we have fled to our City of Refuge and our High Priest has died for us. Not only did He die, He was murdered after a trial filled with liars found Him guilty. Jerusalem lied about Jesus, put Him to death, and God brought *lex talionis* upon Israel for her capital offense. “*Vengeance is mine, says the Lord.*”

Land of Truth – If we are to be a people who love life, we must be a people who love the truth. Blood on the tongue comes long before blood on the hands. James warns us of the powerful work of the tongue (James 3), and John warns us that hatred of your brother is tantamount to murder (1 John 3:14-18). Lies and murder go together (John 8:44) and liars and murderers will end up in the same place (Rev 21:8). (Children: do not play with lies). If we have a community that values God's law, then we will have a community that has a strong temptation to lie. We must hold to the truth, but we must proclaim to all sinners that there is a City of Refuge in Jesus Christ for all who would flee to Him. Only there will your sin be covered and only there will the Avenger of all sin be turned from His wrath.