

In Times of War – Deuteronomy 20:1-20

Introduction – Moses continues to address subjects related to the sixth commandment, “*you shall not murder.*” He is giving these sermons as the people of Israel are about to go in and conquer a land and establish it as their own. In addition, there will be times that they will need to defend their land against enemies. It is therefore important to understand when and how war is sanctioned for the followers of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, and the Author of Life.

Be Strong and Courageous (vv1-4) – This section rings with the call given later to Joshua (Deut 31:6-8, Josh 1:6-8). It’s important to learn here what makes a man arrogant is the same thing that makes a man fearful – and that is idolatrous trust in himself and in his stuff. When it came time to go into battle (and such times would come), Israel was to trust in “*Yahweh your God who is with you*” (v1), and He was the One who toppled the great military might of Egypt. God uses means, but He does not value those means the way carnal man does when he does not trust in the Lord.

A priest was anointed, like a chaplain, in times of war, to declare the legitimacy of going into battle. This assumes that Israel heard from God first before going into battle and therefore knew their cause was just and that God would fight for them. If God is with you, you need not fear. If God is not with you, you should be terrified. If you don’t know, you should turn and seek the Lord.

Life-Extending Exemptions (vv5-9) – The sixth commandment requires that the people of God seek to provide and promote a way of life under the blessing of God, and this should not be forgotten as men are called to arms. There are three honorable exemptions generously extended. A man who had not moved into a home he was finishing was to stay until it was dedicated (v5). A man who had planted a vineyard but had not yet eaten from it was to stay through that process (v6, up to five years – Lev 19:23-25). A man who was betrothed was free to stay and marry (v7, and a newlywed was also exempted – 24:5). What these all have in common is that they were foundational activities for cultivating a land of peace under God’s blessing – which was what a nation was to defend when it went to war.

Dishonorable Exemption (v8) – Cowards were also sent home and not conscripted; cowardice is contagious. Gideon followed this command (Judges 7:3). Samuel warned against wanting a king that would, among other things, force conscription (1 Sam 8).

Holy War (vv10-18) – Two types of cities are addressed. For those outside the Promised Land, if war is necessary, first of all an offer of peace is to be made (v10), and if accepted, they are to be placed under tribute to Israel (v11). If they refuse, every male is to be killed (v13) and the remainder shall be spoil for Israel (v14). But those within Canaan are to be utterly destroyed (vv16-17), “*lest they teach you to do according to all their abominations*” (v18). We have to remember that God had delayed this just wrath for years (Gen 15:16-21). The abominations of the Canaanites had reached the tipping point, and Israel was God’s incarnate judgment. When disaster befalls a city, the LORD has done it (Amos 3:6). And when this ruffles our sentimental feathers we have to remember that this is justice and what we all deserve (Rom 3:23). It is only when we fully grasp the holiness of God and our depravity that we will begin to grasp the nature and depth of God’s grace and mercy. Our questions should be, “why is God so merciful towards us for so long?”

Preserving Fruitfulness (vv19-20) – In a long siege, Israel was to remember that she was battling fruitlessness and not fruitfulness, and leaving the fruit-bearing trees alone was part of waging warfare in a distinctively Christian way. Literally, “*...for man is a tree of the field...*” points to the typology that God may have in mind as well.

Applying the Sixth Commandment – The commandment requires that we consider life and death, God’s exhaustive sovereignty over both, and man’s requirement to be a faithful instrument of God in ministering both. There are many civil applications here, but the church must first bow the knee before she may address the civil authorities.

Men and War – It is expected that men will rise up when necessary to go to war. But a nation that must force its men to go is a nation not worth defending.

Dealing Apologetically with the Wrath of God – No apology is necessary. God is holy, righteous, and good – and that is not negotiable. If we were to bring God up on charges, what court would we use? He is the definition of justice, righteousness, holiness, and loveliness – and all of these include this passage. In the end we will see how all unrighteousness, lawlessness, idolatry and unbelief will have been dealt with judicially in Christ’s death or by Christ in His reign over the nations.

Fruitfulness and Fruitlessness – We are to be known as trees planted by the streams of living water, bearing fruit, the healing leaves for the nations. Do you bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit? Does your home? Do not be the kind of people who gain the whole world and lose their soul, who build bigger barns but are not ready to give an account to their Maker. Fruitfulness that lasts begins in the heart and works itself out to the limbs of your life. Are you fruitful from your heart out?