

BIBLE BRIEFING

“City Slickers”

DEUTERONOMY 19-20

Introduction

City life is something many of us try to avoid, living out in the ‘country.’

The Jews were headed into city life, out of the wilderness. As in all cities, there would be criminals and crime; so they needed laws to govern them. Their cities were still part of a nation; as a nation, they would war with other nations, city-by-city; so they needed instruction on warfare.

Chapter Nineteen – The Cities of Refuge

There was a court system in Israel, but no police force. The innocent person had to be protected before the family of a victim attempted to take vengeance.

In the case of manslaughter, there were six cities of refuge where a person could flee for protection until the case could be heard to determine the circumstances of the death.

Deuteronomy 19:1 “When the Lord your God has cut off the nations whose land the Lord your God is giving you, and you dispossess them and dwell in their cities and in their houses,

Deuteronomy 19:2 you shall separate three cities for yourself in the midst of your land which the Lord your God is giving you to possess.

Deuteronomy 19:3 You shall prepare roads for yourself, and divide into three parts the territory of your land which the Lord your God is giving you to inherit, that any manslayer may flee there.

The cities of refuge were for the protection of the person who killed another accidentally or in self-defense. In ancient Israel, when one was killed, it was the responsibility of the **avenger of blood** to make certain the murder was punished. The **avenger of blood** was an appointed member of the family, designated to protect the honor and lives of the family. His interest would not be in gathering evidence,

but it avenging the honor of the family - so, in the case of an accidental killing, the manslayer would need protection from the avenger of blood.

Deuteronomy 19:4 “And this *is* the case of the manslayer who flees there, that he may live: Whoever kills his neighbor unintentionally, not having hated him in time past -

Deuteronomy 19:5 as when *a man* goes to the woods with his neighbor to cut timber, and his hand swings a stroke with the ax to cut down the tree, and the head slips from the handle and strikes his neighbor so that he dies—he shall flee to one of these cities and live;

Deuteronomy 19:6 lest the avenger of blood, while his anger is hot, pursue the manslayer and overtake him, because the way is long, and kill him, though he *was* not deserving of death, since he had not hated the victim in time past.

Deuteronomy 19:7 Therefore I command you, saying, ‘You shall separate three cities for yourself.’

If a city of refuge was too far to be readily reached by the manslayer, it did him no good - the avenger of blood would overtake him before he could reach the city of refuge.

Deuteronomy 19:8 “Now if the Lord your God enlarges your territory, as He swore to your fathers, and gives you the land which He promised to give to your fathers,

Deuteronomy 19:9 and if you keep all these commandments and do them, which I command you today, to love the Lord your God and to walk always in His ways, then you shall add three more cities for yourself besides these three,

Deuteronomy 19:10 lest innocent blood be shed in the midst of your land which the Lord your God is giving you *as* an inheritance, and *thus* guilt of bloodshed be upon you.

There were actually six cities of refuge; three were already established on one side of the Jordan River, and three more would need to be established once they entered and conquered the land.

What did you do with the guilty who seeks protection in the city of refuge?

Deuteronomy 19:11 “But if anyone hates his neighbor, lies in wait for him, rises against him and strikes him mortally, so that he dies, and he flees to one of these cities,

Deuteronomy 19:12 then the elders of his city shall send and bring him from there, and deliver him over to the hand of the avenger of blood, that he may die.

Deuteronomy 19:13 Your eye shall not pity him, but you shall put away *the guilt of innocent blood* from Israel, that it may go well with you.

If it was determined at this trial that the man was really guilty of murder, then he would be delivered to the hand of the *avenger of blood*, that he may die. There was no protection of the guilty within the walls of a city of refuge!

The Bible applies this picture of the city of refuge to the believer finding refuge in God on more than one occasion:

1. Psalm 46:1, *God is our refuge and strength, A very present help in trouble*. More than 15 other times, the Psalms speak of God as being our refuge.
 2. Hebrews 6:18: *That by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us*.
- Both Jesus and the cities of refuge are *within easy reach* of the needy person; they were of no use unless someone could get to the place of refuge.
 - Both Jesus and the cities of refuge are *open to all*, not just the Israelite; no one needs to fear that they would be turned away from their place of refuge in their time of need (Numbers 35:15).
 - Both Jesus and the cities of refuge became a place where the one in need would *live*; you didn't come to a city of refuge in time of need just to look around (Numbers 35:25).
 - Both Jesus and the cities of refuge are the *only alternative* for the one in need; without this specific protection, they will be destroyed.
 - Both Jesus and the cities of refuge provide protection *only within their boundaries*; to go outside meant death (Numbers 35:26-28).
 - With both Jesus and the cities of refuge, full freedom comes with the *death of the High Priest* (Numbers 35:25).

A crucial distinction: The cities of refuge only helped the *innocent*; the *guilty* can come to Jesus and find refuge! He took upon Himself our punishment.

There were other criminals to be dealt with. First, the **thief**:

Deuteronomy 19:14 “You shall not remove your neighbor’s landmark, which the men of old have set, in your inheritance which you will inherit in the land that the Lord your God is giving you to possess.

After Israel conquered the land of Canaan, each tribe was assigned its territory and their borders accurately described. Joshua, Eleazar the high priest, and the heads of the twelve tribes cast lots and made the assignments. Within the tribes, each family and clan would make its own claim and mark it out with boundary stones. In that day, officials didn’t draw detailed real estate maps, what we today call “plats.” Everybody was expected to honor the landmarks (boundary stones), because to move the stones meant to steal land from your neighbors and their descendants.

This goes beyond land to cover all personal property. The laws we’re reading are also principles, to be applied beyond the specific cases.

The **liar**:

Deuteronomy 19:15 “One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established.

Deuteronomy 19:16 If a false witness rises against any man to testify against him of wrongdoing,

Deuteronomy 19:17 then both men in the controversy shall stand before the Lord, before the priests and the judges who serve in those days.

Deuteronomy 19:18 And the judges shall make careful inquiry, and indeed, *if* the witness *is* a false witness, who has testified falsely against his brother,

Deuteronomy 19:19 then you shall do to him as he thought to have done to his brother; so you shall put away the evil from among you.

Deuteronomy 19:20 And those who remain shall hear and fear, and hereafter they shall not again commit such evil among you.

One witness was never enough to establish a fact in a Biblical court of law. One needed two or three witness to establish a matter. This isn’t just because it is possible for one witness to lie without having his story corroborated. It is because one witness can be confused, or mistaken in his testimony. It is a basic measure of reliability that it must be more than a simple case of “my word against theirs.”

False witness was discovered by careful examination and was punished by giving the false witness the same penalty which would have gone to the man he falsely accused.

Criminals would be among them; but they would also be surrounded by enemies. Chapter Twenty addresses warfare.

Deuteronomy 19:21 Your eye shall not pity: life *shall be* for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

Retribution was always limited by the *eye for eye* principle. This law was meant to be a check to our desire to revenge, not a license for revenge. Our tendency is to want to do *more* to the offending party than what they have done to us. But we cannot punish from a motive of revenge, only from a motive of justice.

“Far from encouraging vengeance it limits vengeance and stands as a guide for a judge as he fixes a penalty suited to the crime. The principle was thus not license or vengeance, but a guarantee of justice.” (Thompson)

In Matthew 5:38-39, Jesus quotes this passage in His teaching on the true interpretation of the law. He does not say that the *eye for eye* principle is wrong; rather, He simply condemns the use of it to make it an *obligation* to exact revenge against someone who has *personally* offended me.

Rabbis in Jesus' day taught that the *eye for eye* law meant you were obligated to avenge yourself of a personal insult or attack brought against you. Jesus rightly disallows the application of this law in our personal relationships; it was a law intended to guide the judges in the law courts of Israel, not to guide our personal relationships.

Chapter Twenty – Conquering Cities

The Jews weren't entering Canaan as *sightseers* but as *soldiers* prepared for battle and expecting God to give them victory. It's important to note that God gave the nation two different military approaches, one for the cities in the land of Canaan (v1-9 & 16-18) and the other for cities *outside* Canaan (v10-15).

Deuteronomy 20:1 “When you go out to battle against your enemies, and see horses and chariots *and* people more numerous than you, do not be afraid of them; for the Lord your God *is* with you, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.

Moses didn't minimize either the size or the strength of the enemy, for He knew that the nations living in Canaan had horses, chariots, large armies, and fortified cities. The spies who had investigated the land thirty-eight years before had seen all these obstacles and dangers but had failed to see how small these matters were when compared to the greatness of their God. Moses reminded the people that the Lord had successfully brought them from the land of Egypt to the plains of Moab and defeated every enemy that had attacked them. In fact, the territory Israel now inhabited belonged to the Jews and not to the enemy, because the Lord had given His people great victory over the nations east of the Jordan. Just as the Lord had defeated Pharaoh and his army in Egypt, so He would defeat the nations in Canaan.

In the early days of the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt said in his Inaugural Address, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” There is a fear that mobilizes a person, as when you hear the fire alarm go off; but there is also a fear that paralyzes a person, and that's the fear that Moses was addressing. When we fear the Lord and trust Him, we need not fear the enemy. Israel had nothing to fear, for the God who drowned the army of Egypt would defeat the armies of Canaan.

Deuteronomy 20:2 So it shall be, when you are on the verge of battle, that the priest shall approach and speak to the people.

Deuteronomy 20:3 And he shall say to them, ‘Hear, O Israel: Today you are on the verge of battle with your enemies. Do not let your heart faint, do not be afraid, and do not tremble or be terrified because of them;

Deuteronomy 20:4 for the Lord your God *is* He who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.’

The Jews were God's people, fighting God's battles, and it was fitting that they hear from God's servant, a priest. Their battles involved physical enemies; but they were won with spiritual weapons. The same is true of us.

The Lord's, **Fear not** is what every believer needs to hear when confronting the enemies of the faith.

Deuteronomy 20:5 "Then the officers shall speak to the people, saying: 'What man *is there* who has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man dedicate it.

Deuteronomy 20:6 Also what man *is there* who has planted a vineyard and has not eaten of it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man eat of it.

Deuteronomy 20:7 And what man *is there* who is betrothed to a woman and has not married her? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man marry her.'

The priest encouraged the soldiers to face the enemy without fear, but the officers told them to go back home if they had any unfinished business. No officer wants to lead distracted soldiers whose minds and hearts are elsewhere, for **a double minded man is unstable in all his ways**. Paul may have had this scene in mind when he wrote Second Timothy 2:4, **No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier**.

The officers announced three different occasions for granting temporary deferment:

1. The first was to allow the soldier to dedicate a new house to the Lord and start living in it. The word translated **dedicate** also means *to initiate*, that is, to start living in the house with his family and enjoying it. The family needed the man much more than the battlefield did, so he was deferred for a year.
2. The second occasion was to harvest a new vineyard whose fruit the soldier hadn't yet tasted.
3. The third occasion was perhaps the most important, and that was to permit the engaged soldier to go home and get married. He was deferred a year.

These three exceptions suggest to us that God is more interested in our enjoying the common blessings of life - homes, harvests, and honeymoons - than devoting ourselves only to the battles of life. He didn't want any of the Jewish men to use their military responsibilities as an excuse to neglect their families, their vineyards, and their

fiancées. Certainly military service was important, but the Lord was more concerned that the men have the right priorities in life. What good was accomplished for the Jewish people if their army defeated the enemy on the field but things were falling apart back home?

Deuteronomy 20:8 “The officers shall speak further to the people, and say, ‘What man *is there who is* fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house, lest the heart of his brethren faint like his heart.’

Deuteronomy 20:9 And so it shall be, when the officers have finished speaking to the people, that they shall make captains of the armies to lead the people.

This law was applied to Gideon’s army. You may remember that Gideon started out with quite an army - 32,000 men who rallied to him to free their nation from the oppression of the Midianites who had actually impoverished them. Then the Lord told him he had too many soldiers, and that whoever was fearful and afraid could go home! When that word went out, 22,000 men picked up their gear and went home! Then God told Gideon that he still had too many men. How were they separated? They came to a stream and some of the men got down on all fours to drink. There were others who lapped up the water like a dog and were all set to go. They were eager to get to the enemy and get the job done. They wanted to free and save their nation. So they were the ones who went to battle, and the others were sent home.

Now Moses deals with the battles they will fight outside the land. The Lord wanted to enlarge Israel’s borders and this would involve military engagements away from the Promised Land.

Deuteronomy 20:10 “When you go near a city to fight against it, then proclaim an offer of peace to it.

Deuteronomy 20:11 And it shall be that if they accept your offer of peace, and open to you, then all the people *who are* found in it shall be placed under tribute to you, and serve you.

Deuteronomy 20:12 Now if *the city* will not make peace with you, but war against you, then you shall besiege it.

Deuteronomy 20:13 And when the Lord your God delivers it into your hands, you shall strike every male in it with the edge of the sword.

Deuteronomy 20:14 But the women, the little ones, the livestock, and all that is in the city, all its spoil, you shall plunder for yourself; and you shall eat the enemies’ plunder which the Lord your God gives you.

Deuteronomy 20:15 Thus you shall do to all the cities *which are* very far from you, which *are* not of the cities of these nations.

God commanded Israel many times to destroy the people in the Canaanite cities and show them no mercy. During their invasion of Canaan, not only were the Jews to slay all the citizens, but they were also to destroy everything connected with the wicked Canaanite religious system, including temples, idols, and altars. This policy would help remove dangerous temptations from the Jewish people who were always prone to follow idols.

Foreign cities were offered peace, and required to pay tribute, or be destroyed.

Deuteronomy 20:16 "But of the cities of these peoples which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance, you shall let nothing that breathes remain alive, Deuteronomy 20:17 but you shall utterly destroy them: the Hittite and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite, just as the Lord your God has commanded you, Deuteronomy 20:18 lest they teach you to do according to all their abominations which they have done for their gods, and you sin against the Lord your God. The culture of the Canaanites was so corrupt - socially, morally, and spiritually - that God considered it irredeemable, and ripe for judgment. The armies of Israel were to bring that judgment upon the Canaanites.

Even so: **Individual Canaanites could be, and were, saved.** Rahab and her household were spared; others could have been. Never forget Jonah's message to Nineveh, *Forty days and you perish*. Yet they did not perish; but came to repentance.

Back to warfare outside the land for another quick instruction:

Deuteronomy 20:19 "When you besiege a city for a long time, while making war against it to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them; if you can eat of them, do not cut them down to use in the siege, for the tree of the field *is man's food*.

Deuteronomy 20:20 Only the trees which you know *are* not trees for food you may destroy and cut down, to build siegeworks against the city that makes war with you, until it is subdued.

Seems obvious, but it was a reminder to take a long-term view of things. The conquests of the Israelites were not a complete destruction, Sherman's march to the sea, sort of warfare.

Conclusion

Nations will always have to deal with “man’s inhumanity to man,” because the heart of every problem is still **the problem of the heart**. Laws are necessary to bring order to society, to restrain evil, and to help control behavior, but laws can never change the human heart. Only the grace of God can do that.

If this section of Scripture emphasizes anything, it’s that God holds human life precious and wants us to treat people fairly, for they are made in the image of God. God’s desire for all nations is, [Let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream](#) (Amos 5:24). His standard for us individually is Micah 6:8, [He has shown you, O man, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?](#)