

# Instructions for Future Rulers (Deuteronomy 17)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Deuteronomy

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## I. Background

- a. The **Book of Deuteronomy** consists of a few speeches that Moses gave to the Israelites near the end of their 40 years of wandering in the Wilderness.
- b. Here we continue in Moses' second address, which provides some interesting instructions for the Jews to follow after Moses dies and they move into Canaan, the Promised Land.
- c. In this lesson, covering **Deuteronomy chapter 17**, we will find:
  - i. A phrase that is quoted in the New Testament, which has practical applications for Christians today.
  - ii. The origin of the name for this book (***Deuteronomy***).
  - iii. Memorable instructions for future rulers.
    - 1. This provides insight into why and how King Solomon, despite his legendary wisdom, fell into serious sin. That in turn lead to the kingdom being torn in two after his death.
    - 2. It also provides great principles for us to follow.
- d. This chapter includes specific instructions under the Law of Moses. While we Christians are no longer bound to follow the Law, hidden in it, we will find *underlying principles* that are still very much applicable to us.

## II. Do Not Offer Defective Animals as Sacrifices to the Lord

- a. Read **Deuteronomy 17:1**.
  - i. Do not offer an animal that has a defect (ill, lame, blind, etc.) as a sacrifice to the Lord.
  - ii. This seems so simple, almost to the point where it may appear to be unnecessary to state!
  - iii. **Question:** Why would someone go to the trouble to offer an animal for sacrifice to the Lord, and then pick a defective animal? Some possible reasons might include:

1. Farmers generally want to save the best animals *for breeding* to reproduce more high-quality animals.
  2. This may reflect having little *or no faith* that if they offered their best to God, He will take care of them.
  3. They may have very little love for or gratitude toward the Lord.
  4. It may be due to selfishness or greed.
- b. Later in Jewish history, this would become a major problem for Israel.
- i. This issue is specifically addressed about 1,000 years after Moses wrote this, after the return from the Babylonian Captivity, in the book of **Malachi**.
  - ii. Read **Malachi 1:6-14**.
    1. The priests were offering blind, lame and sick animals.
    2. These are rejected animals that they would not dare to give to a human king.
    3. The Lord was deeply insulted by this type of treatment, and in **chapter** He says that He will curse them rather than bless them.
- c. **Questions for Us:** *Can you imagine* someone claiming to follow God, but giving their blind, lame and diseased animals as sacrifices to the Lord? Well, we no longer need to make sacrifices to the Lord, so this may seem hard to relate to. Or might this apply to us more than first meets the eye?
- i. As Christians, we are indeed called to offer sacrifices to the Lord. However, it is not the old type of sacrifice that consisted of offering animals.
  - ii. Read **Romans 12:1-21**.
    1. Paul says we are to offer *our bodies* as *living sacrifices*.
    2. He goes on to describe what that looks like. It includes:
      - a. Using our gifts to meet the needs of others and to strengthen the body of Christ.
      - b. It includes pouring ourselves out to encourage and instruct others.
      - c. It includes giving generously of our means to meet the material needs of others.

- d. It is reflected in how we treat others, especially when we feel we are being mistreated by them.
- iii. “Therefore by Him let us continually *offer the sacrifice of praise to God*, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to *do good and to share*, for with *such sacrifices* God is well pleased.” (**Hebrews 13:15–16**, NKJV)
  - 1. The writer of **Hebrews**, in closing that letter, points to our praise and thanksgiving to God, our doing good and sharing with others, as *our sacrifices to God*.
- d. **Question:** Taking this principle to heart, if we are called to be living sacrifices to God, what does it mean for us to be giving lame, blind or diseased sacrifices today?
  - i. **Answer:** Same thing; being religious, but *giving God our leftovers* (time, energy, money, etc.).
  - ii. **Suggestion/Challenge:** It is hard for many of us to be objective on this. Some never think they are doing enough, while others are completely out of touch with the fact that they are indeed giving God their “left-overs” instead of their very best.
    - 1. I am not talking about neglecting your family responsibilities or your work. But clearly putting the Lord and his kingdom first.
    - 2. Take stock of your life on this point. Also, ask someone who knows you well and who will be brutally honest regarding how they view you in this regard.

### III. Dealing with Serious Sins in the Community

- a. Read **Deuteronomy 17:2-7**.
  - i. This addresses the punishment for getting involved in pagan idolatry (worshipping other ‘gods’ or heavenly bodies).
    - 1. The punishment for this sin: death by stoning.
      - a. An eyewitness was to begin the stoning, with everyone else joining in after that.
    - 2. Must have two or three witnesses to impose the death penalty.
  - ii. **Question:** Where is this passage quoted in the New Testament?

1. **Deuteronomy 17:7** says, “you shall put away their evil from among you....” (OSB)
  - a. For the same passage in the NETS translation of the LXX it says, “You shall remove the evil one from yourselves.”
  - b. In Greek, this is essentially identical to **1 Corinthians 5:13**, where Paul instructs the Corinthians to put out of the church a man involved in sexual immorality (incest).
    - i. “...Therefore ‘put away from yourselves the evil person.’” (from **1 Corinthians 5:13**, NKJV)
    - ii. In the Greek, this quote is the *exact same wording* as in **Deuteronomy 17:7** as in the LXX, with the exception that the verb for “put away” or “expel” is in the second person *plural* future tense, as opposed to second person *singular* in the LXX.
      1. So, Paul is saying “all of you” Christians are to expel the wicked person.
2. In **1 Corinthians 5**, Paul uses two passages from the Law of Moses to make the point about church discipline, putting someone out of the church for serious sin. One is the previously discussed passage from **Deuteronomy 17:7**.
  - a. The other one is from **Exodus 12**, where all leaven (representing sin under the typology applied by Paul) must be removed from the community for seven days immediately after the Passover Lamb (representing Jesus) is slain.
  - b. Note that this explanation by Paul illustrates how the Old Testament (specifically the Greek LXX) served as the Bible of the church in the beginning, before the gospels were in circulation.
- b. Read **Deuteronomy 17:8-13**.
  - i. For especially challenging cases to decide, the people shall go to the place where the tabernacle/temple is (which later would be Jerusalem), and get a judgment from the priests there.
    1. Clearly, there was an expectation that the priests, who knew the Law of Moses, would also serve as judges among the people.

2. The people must heed the verdict issued by the priests.
  - a. Those who ignored the verdict given by the priest were to be put to death.
    - i. Again, the principle is given, “Put away the evil person” (**Deuteronomy 7:12**).
  - c. While we don’t stone/kill those in the church who become involved in serious sin, *the principle remains* that we must remove those people from among us, as we saw in **1 Corinthians 5**.
    - i. Note that this extreme measure was only taken in the case of very serious sin. It wasn’t for relatively minor transgressions.
    - ii. However, most churches today (even those whose theology is otherwise largely consistent with the historic faith) do not put this simple principle into practice.
      1. **Question:** Why not, since it is so clear in Scripture?
      2. **Answers (I Have Heard Offered by Others as Excuses) Include:**
        - a. Fear of losing members (and/or losing financial support from contributions to the church).
        - b. Having a distorted view of God’s character. This can lead to an unbalanced focus on God’s mercy and grace, even in the face of unrepentant sin.
        - c. Having an attitude of, “Who am I to judge?”. After all, we are all sinners, and “No one is perfect.” (Church leaders are timid conflict avoiders, who simply do not want to address sin in their congregation directly.)
        - d. Many church leaders are primarily concerned about *how they come across* (desiring to maintain an image of being loving and non-judgmental). Maintaining that image supersedes their concern for the eternal salvation of members of their flock.
        - e. Over-reaction against harsh or unloving applications of church discipline that we may have experienced in the past, or that we see in other groups.
        - f. Sentimentality.

- g. Leaders do not want to deal with sin in their own lives or in the lives of close family members and friends, so they are reluctant to address these things among their members (lest they be subject to the charge of being 'hypocrites').
- h. False doctrine of unconditional eternal security (a/k/a "once saved, always saved").
- i. In many large churches, people are largely unknown to the leaders. They come on Sunday, but no one knows what is going on in their lives. There is no sense of discipleship or accountability.

### 3. **My Reply to Church Leaders Who, for Any Reason, Avoid Practicing Church Discipline:**

- a. The Scriptures say to do this. Even if a church leader feels uncomfortable about this or does not fully grasp why church discipline is important, they should simply do what the word of God says!
- b. Also consider the result of what happens to the church when its leaders neglect to do this. As Paul pointed out:
  - i. "Your glorying is not good. *Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?*" (**1 Corinthians 5:6**, NKJV)
  - ii. Sin will spread like yeast and take over the church, destroying many more people, if we don't deal with it (like a cancer or gangrene).
- c. Read **Deuteronomy 17:12-13**.
  - i. In this passage from the Old Testament, the Lord *gives the reason* why it is critical to expel the wicked person. Doing so will have a positive effect on everyone else in the community!
  - ii. Those who hear what happened to the transgressor will "*hear and fear...and no longer act impiously*". This will put a healthy fear of God into the hearts of those who hear about it, which will keep them from falling into the same sin.
    - 1. Similarly, when Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead for sin in **Acts 5**. It says:

- a. “So *great fear* came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.” (**Acts 5:11**, NKJV)
- 2. This also is similar to what Paul said would happen when church leaders (elders) who were found to be in sin were rebuked before the congregation:
  - a. “Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses. Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, *that the rest also may fear*.” (**1 Timothy 5:19-20**, NKJV)

#### IV. Instructions to Future Rulers

- a. Read **Deuteronomy 17:14-20**.
  - i. This addresses a situation hundreds of years in the future.
    - 1. The people, after entering Canaan, might want to have a ruler over them, similar to the nations of that land.
      - a. It is not a good idea for the Israelites to imitate the practices of the nations around them. Instead, they simply should be following what the Lord established. Even if doing so would be counter-cultural.
      - b. Similar to churches today that copy the ‘successful’ governing structures they see in the world around them: corporations.
        - i. Passive Eldership = Board of Directors
        - ii. Lead minister = CEO or President of the company (to whom the passive eldership/board of directors delegates all day-to-day operating decisions).
        - iii. Roles of women in the organization also are parallel to what has evolved in the corporate world.
        - iv. Compensation packages and benefits = modeled after corporations
        - v. Hierarchical pyramid-type leadership structure

- vi. College or seminary-based training, and advanced degrees expected for those who desire to teach.
- vii. Retirement around age 65
- c. In the book of **Judges**, recall that Gideon refused to rule over the people as their king, starting a hereditary rule. He wisely said, "I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you. The Lord shall rule over you."  
**(Judges 8:22-23)**
- d. Later (over 300 years after Moses gave these instructions), in a time of crisis, the people would ask for a king to rule over them.
  - i. Read **1 Samuel 8:4-7**.
  - ii. God had been ruling over them. Therefore, they didn't need a king!
  - iii. They wanted a king so they could be "like all the rest of the nations".
  - iv. God considered this request to be yet another rejection of Him and His rule over them. Nevertheless, He granted their request and gave them Saul as their first king.
    - 1. Samuel warned them that this would not go well for them.
    - 2. However, God had prepared for their backsliding. In His sovereignty, He worked His will despite their wickedness.
- ii. Requirements for their future rulers.
  - 1. The ruler must be a fellow Israelite, one of their brothers. They must not install a foreigner to rule over them.
  - 2. He must not "multiply cavalry (horses) for himself".
  - 3. He must not cause the people to go back to Egypt.
  - 4. He must not "multiply wives for himself".
    - a. They would corrupt his heart.
  - 5. He must not "multiply silver and gold for himself".



6. He must *write for himself* a copy of “this second law” which he will obtain from one of the priests, in a book. Then he shall keep it and read it all the days of his life.
  - a. In the LXX, the Greek word for “this second law” is ***Deuteronomy!***
    - i. ‘Deutero’ = second, and ‘nomos’ is the Greek word for law.
  - b. Writing out the law in his own hand will teach the king to fear the Lord and keep all His commandments.
  - c. This will keep the king humble, that he will not become proud and think of himself as being better than his brothers.
- iii. Don’t go back to Egypt (**Deuteronomy 17:16**). In my opinion, this may be one of the most important lines for us in the entire Old Testament.
  1. **Question:** Why can’t they go back to Egypt? Why so emphatic?
    - a. After all, there was no prohibition on their going to other pagan nations, such as Syria, Arabia, or Persia.
    - b. What was so special (in a negative sense) about *Egypt*?
  2. For the answer to that question, let us consider **1 Corinthians 10:1-13**, where Paul made the case that the exodus journey of Israel foreshadowed the Christian life for us. The typology is as follows:
    - a. Red Sea crossing = baptism.
    - b. Cloud (pillar of fire by night) that led the people = Holy Spirit.
    - c. 40 years in Wilderness = the Christian life (a time of testing in this life for us).
    - d. “Spiritual food and drink” that sustained them on their journey = the Lord’s Supper.
    - e. Righteous few who made it to the Promised Land (only 2 men from the first generation of adults, out of 600,000+) = those Christians who remain faithful to the end, who will receive the promised reward.

- f. Egypt = life before one's baptism (in slavery, to sin)
  - i. It is the kingdom of darkness, from which God's people must escape.
  - ii. The dark kingdom offers pleasures, but in fact is slavery, ruled by an enemy who is a cruel oppressor.
- g. Pharaoh and his forces = Satan and the wicked, demonic forces against us, who are pursuing us.
  - i. For further development of the typology in this story of the exodus journey, see Gregory of Nyssa (c. 332-395 AD) *Life of Moses*, Classics of Western Spirituality series, Paulist Press, 1978, pp. 82-85.
- h. Therefore, the admonition, "Don't go back to Egypt" = a warning for us.
  - i. We who have been baptized, who are now in our time of testing, must never long to return to the 'old life' we had in the kingdom of darkness.
  - ii. The old life may offer fleshly gratification, but it is the land of slavery. It took the death of the Lamb to liberate us.
  - iii. Recall the Lord's reaction when the Israelites wanted to return to Egypt after the 12 spies returned from their mission with a discouraging report, in **Numbers 13-14**.
    - 1. As a result of their faithlessness, the Lord sentenced them to 40 years of wandering in the Wilderness until that first generation died off.
  - iv. Recall also the Lord's reaction when the Israelites looked back longingly on their time in Egypt, where they had enjoyed eating fish, melons, leeks, onions and garlic, in **Numbers 11:1-9**.
    - 1. The Lord became angry and sent down fire to consume part of the camp.

- iv. Don't "multiply" horses, wives, gold and silver (**Deuteronomy 17:16-17**).
  - 1. **Question:** How many is "*multiply*"?
    - a. Where does one cross the line from merely *adding*, and it is considered to be *multiplying*?
  - 2. Regardless of where one draws that line, clearly Solomon was way over the top!
    - a. Read **1 Kings (3 Kingdoms) 10:29-11:7**.
    - b. Solomon could be considered the 'poster child' for doing everything the king was told *not to do*!
      - i. This despite the fact that in his earlier days he had been devoted to following the Lord and was noted for his legendary, God-given wisdom.
    - c. He *multiplied horses* for his cavalry and had his men *go back to Egypt* to obtain them.
    - d. He *multiplied wives* (seven hundred princesses, plus an additional 300 concubines)!
      - i. They led his heart astray, to the point where he was building altars for their 'gods' and burning incense and making sacrifices to them!
      - ii. This led to the destruction of the kingdom, torn in two after his death.
- v. Devotion to the word of God (**Deuteronomy 17:18-20**).
  - 1. This command highlights the importance of this book (the book of **Deuteronomy**). This was the *one book* each future ruler was required to write down and then read for the rest of his life.
  - 2. The ruler was told to write it in his own hand. Therefore, no excuse could later be made regarding ignorance of God's commands.
    - a. He would be unable to claim later, "...but I didn't know *that*."
  - 3. He must keep it and read it all the days of his life.

4. This would keep fear of God in his heart, and keep him humble (not thinking he was better than his fellow Israelites).

**b. Lessons for Us from These Instructions to Future Rulers**

- i. A reminder of what can happen to the best of us, if we stray from God's commands. Solomon was the wisest man in his youth!
- ii. Curb our desire for wealth and 'blessings' that can lead us astray.
- iii. Note that even an extremely spiritual man like Solomon could be corrupted by giving in to worldly desires of their flesh, and marrying a physically attractive but ungodly spouse.
- iv. Don't go back to Egypt, to the old life, when facing challenges.
- v. Be tirelessly devoted to the Scriptures.
  1. Read them every day.
  2. They will keep us in the fear of God.
  3. They will keep us humble, not thinking we are better than others around us, including those who are not in positions of authority.
  4. We will prosper spiritually, like the blessed man in **Psalm 1**.