

By the Mouth of Two or Three Witnesses

Deuteronomy 19

Expository Lessons from the Book of Deuteronomy

I. Background and Introduction

- 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 the prior two lessons we addressed one of the most significant prophecies in all of the Old Testament, from Deuteronomy **18:15-19**, where Moses recounted how the Lord said that in the future He would "raise up a prophet like Moses".
- d. The next several chapters (**Deuteronomy 19-25** or so) contain various laws and directives for the people to follow after they enter Canaan. While many Christians tend to ignore or skip over these chapters, there are some gems hidden in almost every one of them.
 - i. I see my role in teaching this expository series on the Book of Deuteronomy as analogous to a tour guide on a bus through a large wildlife preserve in Africa.
 1. My job as the tour guide is to point out things that I think will be of interest to those on the bus (those hearing this), and to share background information to help you better appreciate what you are seeing.
 2. Some on the bus will be paying closer attention than others to the things that are in view. They are the ones who will get the most out of the experience.
 3. The speed of the bus will vary depending on what is in view. There are places where we need to slow down, and places where we can speed up to get to the next interesting spot.
 4. There are some places, like watering holes in Africa, where there is *so much in view* that we need to stop the bus altogether to take it all in (for example, the famous **Deuteronomy 18:15-19** prophecy).
 - ii. One of the things we saw in the prophecy we just covered was for the promised future prophet to be "*like Moses*", He would need to be

bringing in new laws. Eusebius made that point (in *Proof of the Gospel*, volume 1) since that was the distinctive attribute of Moses. That made him different from all the prophets who came after him.

1. Therefore, the Law of Moses would not be the 'last word' from the Lord regarding laws for His people to follow. There would be more to come, to be brought by one other prophet whom the Lord would "raise up".
2. Moses would take the people much of the way to the goal, but Jesus would finish the job.
 - a. This is similar to American football, where one person (Moses) plays the role of the quarterback, leading the team all the way down to the 'red zone' (within 20 yards of the goal line). Then another man (Jesus) *finishes the job* and brings the team across the goal line.
 - b. This is essentially what happened on the Exodus journey through the Wilderness. Moses led the people all the way from the Red Sea and Mount Sinai to within sight of Canaan. Then Joshua, whose original name 'Hoshea' was changed to 'Jesus' (see LXX Greek in **Numbers 13:16**; compare with **Acts 7:45** and **Hebrews 3:8** in a Greek New Testament), is the one destined to finish the journey. He takes over where Moses left off.
3. Jesus *completed what Moses began*. That is why, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus introduces His new teachings using the format: "*You have heard that it was said...* [then quoting from the Law of Moses]. *But I tell you...* [proceeding with His new teachings]".
 - a. **Question:** Why the two-step process?
 - i. Why didn't the Lord just give the Sermon on the Mount address when He gave the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Law of Moses?
 - ii. Why did He wait 1400 years to provide the kingdom laws He had always intended, on things like divorce/remarriage, unrighteous anger, lust, retaliation, nonresistance, etc.?
 - b. **My Answer:** Consider the answer that Jesus gave the Pharisees when He was asked about His new teachings

on divorce and remarriage (which went beyond what Moses had handed down in **Deuteronomy 24:1-4**).

- i. “[Jesus said] ...‘what God has joined together, let not man separate.’ They [*the Pharisees*] said to Him, ‘Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?’ He said to them, ‘Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives...’” (from **Matthew 19:6-8**, NKJV)
 - ii. This provision in the Law of Moses, a part-way step to the ultimate plan of God, was allowed by God for a time, because of the *hardness of their hearts*.
 - iii. The idea here is that the Lord was aware of what these hard-hearted people would have done if He told them that marriage is limited to one person (no polygamy) and dissolved only by death.
 1. Presumably, an unhappy husband would be tempted to kill his spouse to get out of an undesirable marriage, if death were the only way out of that bond!
- e. What we should be looking for through the next six chapters (**Deuteronomy 19-25**):
- i. Here we find teachings and laws that take the people *part of the way* from their old pagan/Egyptian practices, toward the kingdom teachings of Jesus (which would be revealed later, in the gospels).
 1. These teachings will be an enormous step up from the pagan practices of the other nations.
 2. They will put limits on the cruelty that the people are allowed to maintain in their lives.
 3. This will start the process of getting the people ready for the next major step, the new laws of the kingdom that the new prophet, Jesus, would bring.
 - ii. We will also find principles contained in some of these teachings in the Law of Moses, which will underpin some of the new teachings to be revealed by Jesus and the apostles.

1. While the specific rules may no longer apply to Christians, in many cases, *the underlying principles still do apply*. Be on the lookout for these, and for phrases or concepts appearing here that will show up again in the New Testament.
- iii. **Spoiler Alert:** Notice in particular any laws that strike you as odd (for example, seeming to address fairly unimportant details, or things that just strike you as common-sense things not worthy of being included God's laws). There might be more there than meets the eye!
 1. For example:
 - a. Don't plow with an ox and donkey together.
(**Deuteronomy 22:10**)
 - b. Don't muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain.
(**Deuteronomy 25:4**)
 - c. When you besiege an enemy city, don't make battering rams from fruit trees (use other types of trees for that).
(**Deuteronomy 20:19-20**)
 2. Paul said that all the things in the Old Testament were written for our learning. They were put there to teach the Christians!
 - a. "For whatever things were written before were written *for our learning*, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope." (**Romans 15:4**, NKJV)
 - b. In some cases, the application may not be immediately obvious.
 - i. That is one reason we need to meditate on the Scriptures: to work with them to 'crack the case'.
 - ii. This can be similar to working to break the hard shell of a chestnut to get access to the valuable food contained within.
- f. **Challenge:** As we read through these detailed laws in the Law of Moses, look for the spiritual gems hidden within the text, put there to help us!
 - i. As it says in **Psalms 1:1-3**, let us be like "the tree planted by streams of water, that bears its fruit in season".
 - ii. Let us be among those who meditate on the word of God, day and night. This is similar to how a cow eats grass and then chews the cud,

ruminating on it throughout the day to extract all the nourishment contained therein.

II. Cities of Refuge Where the Manslayer May Go

- a. Read **Deuteronomy 19:1-7** and **19:11-13**.
 - i. Here, we see that not all killings are to be treated the same.
 - ii. If was not premeditated with malice in advance of the act (similar to our legal term “manslaughter”) it is not treated the same as premeditated murder (our “first degree murder”).
 1. A manslayer here is defined as “whoever strikes his neighbor involuntarily, not having hated him hitherto up until now” (**Deuteronomy 19:4-5**).
 2. The manslayer can flee to one of the three designated “cities of refuge”, where he will be kept safe from anyone trying to avenge the death of the one who had been killed.
 - a. However, the manslayer had to remain in that city thereafter in order to stay protected.
- b. **Question:** Are there any things we can *learn about God and His sense of justice* from this passage?
 - i. The action as well as the motive behind it (what was in the person’s heart) are *both* considered in judgment.
 - ii. Premeditated murder is a more severe sin than manslaughter (which could be the result of carelessness).
 - iii. Not all sins are treated the same. Some are worse than others and will merit a more severe punishment.
- c. **Question:** In the New Testament, according to Jesus and the apostles, do we find these same principles? Or do they teach that all sins are the same in the eyes of God?
 - i. Jesus, addressing those who are religious (who know what God expects) but refuse to do those things:
 1. “And that servant who knew his master’s will and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be *beaten with many stripes*. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be *beaten with few*. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to

whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more.” (**Luke 12:47–48**, NKJV)

2. “Then, in the hearing of all the people, He said to His disciples, ‘Beware of the scribes, who desire to go around in long robes, love greetings in the marketplaces, the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts, who devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. These will receive *greater condemnation*.’” (**Luke 20:45–47**, NKJV)
 3. “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive *greater condemnation*.” (**Matthew 23:13–14**, NKJV)
 - a. Religious hypocrites are considered to be worthy of greater condemnation, because *their sins are even worse* than those who sin without hypocrisy.
- ii. New Testament passages indicate that not all sin is the same. Some sins are indeed worse than others.
1. [*In the interaction between Pilate and Jesus, prior to the crucifixion*] “Then Pilate said to Him, ‘Are You not speaking to me? Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?’ Jesus answered, ‘You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you *has the greater sin*.’” (**John 19:10–11**, NKJV)
 - a. Regardless of whether Jesus here was referring to Judas or to the high priest, the one who delivered Him to Pilate was guilty of a greater sin than Pilate was guilty of.
 2. “If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is *sin leading to death*. I do not say that he should pray about that. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is *sin not leading to death*.” (**1 John 5:16–17**, NKJV)

- a. We all sin after baptism. However, here, John says that while all unrighteousness is sin, there are some sins that *lead to death*, while other sins *do not lead to death*!
 - b. To me, this implies that there are (at least) two levels of sins. Committing certain of these can be so grievous that it risks disqualifying us from eternal life.
 - i. Identifying which sins fall into this more extreme category is beyond the scope of this lesson. However, one might start with the sins listed in **1 Corinthians 5:11** (sins for which one could be put out of the church) or **1 Corinthians 10:1-13** (sins committed by Israelites in the Wilderness that disqualified them from entering the Promised Land).
 - ii. For early Christian views on this subject, see *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, article on 'Sin: Classes of Sin'.
3. "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? Certainly not! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a harlot is one body with her? For 'the two,' He says, 'shall become one flesh.' (**Genesis 2:24**) But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him. Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality *sins against his own body*. Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's." (**1 Corinthians 6:15-20**, NKJV)
- a. Sinning against the body is even worse than (just) sinning with your mind or heart. Committing fornication or adultery *physically* is even worse than sinning "*in your heart*" by lusting.
 - b. There are certain sins that Paul said were so serious that they should lead to an unrepentant person being put out of the church (see **1 Corinthians 5:1-13**).
4. **Question:** What about what Paul says in **Romans 3:23**? Doesn't he say that "there is *no difference*"?

- a. "...For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," (**Romans 3:22–23**, NKJV)
- b. However, in context here, Paul is speaking about two groups of people: the Jews and the Gentiles. There is no difference in that both groups (whether having the Law of Moses or not) were sinners.

III. Don't Mess with the Boundaries that Will Be Set Up

- a. Read **Deuteronomy 19:14**.
 - i. In the future, when they enter Canaan, the people will inherit land. It will have set boundaries. They are not to move those boundaries, ever.
- b. **Question:** What is the big deal about changing the boundaries in the future? Doesn't everyone do that? After all, new situations come up, and often it is more expedient to change boundary lines.
 - i. For example, in the U.S., the boundaries of the nation, states and cities have been changing throughout our history, and there are ongoing discussions about more possible changes.
 - 1. The boundaries of our nation have been revised repeatedly throughout our history. For example: the Louisiana Purchase, adding Texas, annexing parts of Mexico, purchasing Alaska, and adding the Panama Canal Zone and other territories.
 - a. In the future, maybe the country will add Greenland or some portion of Canada (maybe Alberta) as the 51st State?
 - 2. The boundaries of the various states also have changed. For example, Maine was originally part of Massachusetts, West Virginia split off from Virginia, and the states that formed the Confederacy tried to secede from the rest of the nation around 1860.
 - a. In the future, we may see California split into two separate states, or 'Greater Idaho' formed by absorbing disaffected portions of western Oregon.
 - 3. The boundaries of some of our cities also have changed significantly. Consider the histories of Boston and New York City.

4. Property lines are constantly changing with purchases, subdivisions, etc.
 5. There are constantly changing conditions, and it is often expedient to change boundaries.
- c. **Question:** Might this unusual law be there to teach *us* something important?
- i. Here is my opinion of how this might be relevant to us. God wants us to hold to what He handed down a long time ago. *We are not to change what He handed down to us*, even though we might be tempted to do so when it would seem to be expedient.
 - ii. For example, from the apostles:
 1. “Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to *contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.*” (**Jude 3**, NKJV)
 2. “I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But *even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.* As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.” (**Galatians 1:6–9**, NKJV)
 3. “O Timothy! *Guard what was committed to your trust*, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge—by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith. Grace be with you. Amen.” (**1 Timothy 6:20–21**, NKJV)
 - iii. From the Old Testament, as well.
 1. The example of men like Josiah and Ezra who called people back to what the Lord had handed down, after they had drifted.
 2. Read **Jeremiah 6:16**.
 - a. “Ask about the eternal pathways (or ancient paths, in some translations)... and walk in it.”

- iv. Christians have faced an ongoing internal struggle: either to innovate and use expediency to 'improve' the faith to make it more palatable, or to maintain the ancient boundaries. For example:
 - 1. Nonresistance, in the aftermath of the conversion of the emperor of the Roman Empire, Constantine.
 - 2. Serving two masters, trying to please both the Lord and the governments of this world.
 - 3. Trying to Jesus' challenging teaching *more palatable* to the worldly people streaming into the church in the 6th and 7th centuries (or the 20th and 21st centuries, for that matter. In the case of New Testament teaching on divorce and remarriage: show 'more compassion' than Jesus did.
 - a. Rather than holding to Jesus' counter-cultural teaching regarding the permanence of marriage, soften it to something more like 'Three strikes and you're out' (by allowing a second or even a third marriage after divorce).
 - 4. Bending New Testament teaching to conform to the winds of modern popular sentiment regarding teachings on feminism, gender confusion, marriage and family.
 - 5. Looking the other way, not imposing Biblical discipline in the church, even in the face of very serious, soul-destroying sin.
 - 6. Taking the phrase "become all things to all men" (1 **Corinthians 9:22**) way beyond what Paul would have permitted.
 - 7. Another common problem is adding to God's law with man-made rules, expanding the boundaries to include (or prohibit) things that God never addressed. Doing so creates division in the church.
- d. **Lesson for Us:** Hold to the unchanging original faith. Restore the ancient boundaries and maintain them. Do not change what was handed down by Jesus and His apostles in the face of popular pressure, or for expedience!

IV. By the Mouth of Two or Three Witnesses

- a. Read **Deuteronomy 19:15-21**.
 - i. Serious matters of justice require two or three witnesses.
 - ii. False witnesses will be judged, with the same penalty imposed on them that they had intended for the one they slandered.

- iii. These two measures clearly were intended to reduce false accusations and unjust verdicts. The Lord was concerned about justice being done among His people.
- b. **Question:** Three phrases found in this passage are repeated in the New Testament. What are they, and where in the New Testament do they appear?
 - i. Jesus repeated the phrase “By the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established” (from **Deuteronomy 19:15**) in **Matthew 18:16**.
 - ii. “You shall put away the evil from among you” (from **Deuteronomy 19:19**) in **1 Corinthians 5:13**.
 - iii. “Eye for eye and tooth for tooth” (from **Deuteronomy 19:21**, as well as in **Exodus** and **Leviticus**) in **Matthew 5:38**, from Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount.
- c. Classic case of “two witnesses” requirement bringing about justice is in the story of Susanna.
 - i. That story is found in the first chapter of **Daniel** in the LXX version (but is absent in Bibles where the Old Testament is based on the Masoretic Text).
 - ii. In the story, two corrupt elders falsely accuse a righteous married woman, Susanna, of committing adultery with a young man (after she refused to have sex with them).
 - iii. A young Daniel wisely has the two false witnesses questioned separately. When it becomes clear they are lying (providing contradictory testimony), they are put to death.
 - iv. Read **Daniel 0:50-62**.
 - 1. They followed what the Law of Moses said regarding false witnesses!
 - 2. One early Christian writing pointed specifically to this story of Susanna and the two elders to illustrate the importance of having *two independent witnesses* in important matters. (See *Apostolic Constitutions*, book 2, chapter 49; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 7, p. 418.)
- d. Jesus applied this principle to us, that important judicial matters must be established “by the mouth of two or three witnesses”.
 - i. Read **Matthew 18:15-20**.

- ii. Jesus quoted this passage from **Deuteronomy 19** to back up His teaching on church discipline.
 - 1. The procedure for addressing sin within the church is laid out in three steps:
 - a. Go to your brother (you and he alone) to address the sin.
 - b. If you can't win your brother over, then proceed to the next step and bring in one or two others.
 - c. If your brother refuses to listen to them, bring the matter before the church.
 - 2. One key to a healthy church: address problems and sins quickly and fairly when they arise, and do that 'by the Book'. This will help prevent sin and division from spreading and destroying the church.
 - 3. This "two or three witnesses" principle also applies to accusations against elders.
 - 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)
- iii. In **Matthew 18:19-20**, Jesus also expands on the "two or three" principle by tying it to a promise regarding *prayer*.
 - 1. He offers a promise that *when two or three agree and ask for something*, the Lord will hear their request.
 - 2. Where two or three are gathered together, in His name, He is in their midst!
- e. There is another possible application of this "two or three witnesses" principle, found in the gospels.
 - i. In **John 5:31-46**, Jesus speaks about needing *more than* just a single (His own) witness. He provides additional witnesses by pointing to John the Baptist, His Father, the works He (Jesus) did, and the Scriptures (specifically, the witness of Moses).
 - ii. Early Christian writer Tertullian discussed several examples where there were two or three witnesses to important events, such as the Mountain of Transfiguration, the resurrection witnesses at the tomb,

and the trinity at the baptism of Jesus (See Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, pp. 384, 422 and 672.)