

CHAPTER 23

The laws of this chapter provide,

- I.** For the preserving of the purity and honour of the families of Israel, by excluding such as would be a disgrace to them (v. 1-8).
- II.** For the preserving of the purity and honour of the camp of Israel when it was abroad (v. 9-14).
- III.** For the encouraging and entertaining of slaves who fled to them (v. 15, 16).
- IV.** Against whoredom (v. 17, 18).
- V.** Against usury (v. 19, 20).
- IV.** Against the breach of vows (v. 21-23).
- VII.** What liberty a man might take in his neighbour's field and vineyard, and what not (v. 23, 25).

~~REV~~ DEUTERONOMY 23:1-8

LAWS OF SEPARATION

Interpreters are not agreed what is here meant by *entering into the congregation of the Lord*, which is here forbidden to eunuchs and to bastards, Ammonites and Moabites, for ever, but to Edomites and Egyptians only till the third generation.

1. Some think they are hereby excluded from communicating with the people of God in their religious services. Though eunuchs and bastards were owned as members of the church, and the Ammonites and Moabites might be circumcised and proselyted to the Jewish religion, yet they and their families must lie for some time under marks of disgrace, remembering the rock whence they were hewn, and must not come so near the sanctuary as others might, nor have so free a communion with Israelites.

2. Others think they are hereby excluded from bearing office in the congregation: none of these must be elders or judges, lest the honour of the magistracy should thereby be stained.

3. Others think they are excluded only from marrying with Israelites. Thus the learned bishop Patrick inclines to understand it; yet we find that when this law was put in execution after the captivity they separated from Israel, not only the strange wives, but all the mixed multitude, see ^{<463>}Nehemiah 13:1, 2. With the daughters of these nations (though out of the nations of Canaan), it should seem, the men of Israel might marry, if they were completely proselyted to the Jewish religion; but with the men of these nations the daughters of Israel might not marry, nor could the men be naturalized otherwise than as here provided.

It is plain, in general, that disgrace is here put,

I. Upon bastards and eunuchs, v. 1, 2. By bastards here the Jewish writers understand, not all that were born of fornication, or out of marriage, but all the issue of those incestuous mixtures which are forbidden, Leviticus 18. And, though it was not the fault of the issue, yet, to deter people from those unlawful marriages and unlawful lusts, it was very convenient that their posterity should thus be made infamous. By this rule Jephthah, though the son of a harlot, a strange woman (^{<411>}Judges 11:1, 2), yet was not a bastard in the sense of this law. And as for the eunuchs, though by this law they seemed to be cast out of the vineyard as dry trees, which they complain of (^{<286>}Isaiah 56:3), yet it is here promised (v. 5) that if they took care of their duty to God, as far as they were admitted, by keeping his sabbaths and choosing the things that pleased him, the want of this privilege should be made up to them with such spiritual blessings as would entitle them to an everlasting name.

II. Upon Ammonites and Moabites, the posterity of Lot, who, for his outward convenience, had separated himself from Abraham, ^{<131>}Genesis 13:11. And we do not find that he or his ever joined themselves again to the children of the covenant. They are here cut off *to the tenth generation*, that is, (as some think it is explained), for ever. Compare ^{<431>}Nehemiah 13:1. The reason of this quarrel which Israel must have with them, so as not to *seek their peace* (v. 6), is because of the unkindness they had now lately done to the camp of Israel, notwithstanding the orders God had given not to distress or vex them, ^{<439>}Deuteronomy 2:9, 19.

1. It was bad enough that they did not *meet them with bread and water in the way* (v. 4), that they did not as allies, or at least as neutral states, bring victuals into their camp, which they should have been duly paid for. It was well that God's Israel did not need their kindness, God himself following them with bread and water. However this omission of the Ammonites should be remembered against their nation in future ages. Note, God will certainly reckon, not only with those that oppose his people, but with those that do not help and further them, when it is in the power of their hand to do it. The charge at the great day is for an omission: *I was hungry, and you gave me no meat.*

2. The Moabites had done worse, they hired Balaam to curse Israel, v. 4. It is true *God turned the curse into a blessing* (v. 5), not only changing the word in Balaam's mouth, but making that really turn to the honour and advantage of Israel which was designed for their ruin. But though the design was defeated, and overruled for good, the Moabites' wickedness was not the less provoking. God will deal with sinners, but according to their endeavours, ~~ERR~~ Psalm 28:4.

III. The Edomites and Egyptians had not so deep a mark of displeasure put upon them as the Moabites and Ammonites had. If an Edomite or Egyptian turned proselyte, his grand-children should be looked upon as members of the congregation of the Lord to all intents and purposes, v. 7, 8. We should think that the Edomites had been more injurious to the Israelites than the Ammonites, and deserved as little favour from them (~~ERR~~ Numbers 20:20), and yet "*Thou shalt not abhor an Edomite, as thou must an Ammonite, for he is thy brother.*" Note, The unkindness of near relations, though by many worst taken, yet should with us, for that reason, because of the relation, be first forgiven. And then, as to the Egyptians, here is a strange reason given why they must not be abhorred: "*Thou wast a stranger in their land, and therefore, though hardly used there, be civil to them, for old acquaintance' sake.*" They must not remember their bondage in Egypt for the keeping up of any ill will to the Egyptians, but only for the magnifying of Gods power and goodness in their deliverance.

~~(839)~~ DEUTERONOMY 23:9-14

MORAL AND CEREMONIAL PURITY ENJOINED

Israel was now encamped, and this vast army was just entering upon action, which was likely to keep them together for a long time, and therefore it was fit to give them particular directions for the good ordering of their camp. And the charge is in one word to be *clean*. They must take care to keep their camp pure from moral, ceremonial, and natural pollution.

I. From moral pollution (v. 9): *When the host goes forth against thy enemy then look upon thyself as in a special manner engaged to keep thyself from every evil thing.*

1. The soldiers themselves must take heed of sin, for sin takes off the edge of valour; guilt makes men cowards. Those that put their lives in their hands are concerned to make and keep their peace with God, and preserve a conscience void of offence; then may they look death in the face without terror. Soldiers, in executing their commission, must keep themselves from gratifying the lusts of malice, covetousness, or uncleanness, for these are wicked things — must keep themselves from the idols, or accursed things, they found in the camps they plundered.

2. Even those that tarried at home, the body of the people, and every particular person, must at that time especially keep from every wicked thing, lest by sin they provoke God to withdraw his presence from the host, and give victory to the enemy for the correcting of his own people. Times of war should be times of reformation, else how can we expect God should hear and answer our prayers for success? ~~(838)~~ Psalm 66:18. See ~~(807)~~ 1 Samuel 7:3.

II. From ceremonial pollution, which might befall a person when unconscious of it, for which he was bound to wash his flesh in water, and look upon himself as *unclean until the evening*, ~~(8516)~~ Leviticus 15:16. A soldier, notwithstanding the constant service and duty he had to do in the camp, must be so far from looking upon himself as discharged from the observance of this ceremony that more was required from him than at another time; had he been at his own house, he needed only to wash his flesh, but, being in the army, he must go abroad out of the camp, as one

concerned to keep it pure and ashamed of his own impurity, and not return till after sunset, v. 10, 11. By this trouble and reproach, which even involuntary pollutions exposed men to, they were taught to keep up a very great dread of all fleshly lusts. It were well if military men would consider this.

III. From natural pollution; the camp of the Lord must have nothing offensive in it, v. 12-14. It is strange that the divine law, or at least the solemn order and direction of Moses, should extend to a thing of this nature; but the design of it was to teach them, 1. Modesty and decorum; nature itself teaches them thus to distinguish themselves from beasts that know no shame.

2. Cleanliness, and, though not niceness, yet neatness, even in their camp. Filthiness is offensive to the senses God has endued us with, prejudicial to the health, a wrong to the comfort of human life, and an evidence of a careless slothful temper of mind.

3. Purity from the pollutions of sin; if there must be this care taken to preserve the body clean and sweet, much more should we be solicitous to keep the mind so.

4. A reverence of the divine majesty. This is the reason here given: *For the Lord thy God walketh by his ark, the special token of his presence, in the midst of thy camp;* with respect to that external symbol this external purity is required, which (though not insisted on in the letter when that reason ceases) teaches us to preserve inward purity of soul, in consideration of the eye of God, which is always upon us. By this expression of respect to the presence of God among them, they were taught both to fortify themselves against sin and to encourage themselves against their enemies with the consideration of that presence.

5. A regard one to another. The filthiness of one is noisome to many; this law of cleanliness therefore teaches us not to do that which will be justly offensive to our brethren and grieve them. It is a law against nuisances.

~~6295~~ DEUTERONOMY 23:15-25

PROTECTION OF FUGITIVES

Orders are here given about five several things which have no relation one to another: —

I. The land of Israel is here made a sanctuary, or city of refuge, for servants that were wronged and abused by their masters, and fled thither for shelter from the neighbouring countries, v. 15, 16. We cannot suppose that they were hereby obliged to give entertainment to all the unprincipled men that ran from service; Israel needed not (as Rome at first did) to be thus peopled. But,

1. They must not deliver up the trembling servant to his enraged master, till upon trial it appeared that the servant has wronged his master and was justly liable to punishment. Note, It is an honourable thing to shelter and protect the weak, provided they be not wicked. God allows his people to patronise the oppressed. The angel bid Hagar return to her mistress, and Paul sent Onesimus back to his master Philemon, because they had neither of them any cause to go away, nor was either of them exposed to any danger in returning. But the servant here is supposed to escape, that is, to run for his life, to the people of Israel, of whom he had heard (as Benhadad of the kings of Israel, ~~1028~~ 1 Kings 20:31) that they were a merciful people, to save himself from the fury of a tyrant; and in that case to deliver him up is to throw a lamb into the mouth of a lion.

2. If it appeared that the servant was abused, they must not only protect him, but, supposing him willing to embrace their religion, they must give him all the encouragement that might be to settle among them. Care is taken both that he should not be imposed upon in the place of his settlement — let it be *that which he shall choose* and *where it liketh him best*, and that he should not exchange one hard master for many — *thou shalt not oppress him*. Thus would he soon find a comfortable difference between the land of Israel and other lands, and would choose it to be his rest for ever. Note, Proselytes and converts to the truth should be treated with particular tenderness, that they may have no temptation to return.

II. The land of Israel must be no shelter for the unclean; no whore, no Sodomite, must be suffered to live among them (v. 17, 18), neither a

whore nor a whoremonger. No houses of uncleanness must be kept either by men or women. Here is,

1. A good reason intimated why there should be no such wickedness tolerated among them: they were Israelites. This seems to have an emphasis laid upon it. For a daughter of Israel to be a whore, or a son of Israel a whoremaster, is to reproach the stock they are come of, the people they belong to, and the God they worship. It is bad in any, but worst in Israelites, a holy nation, ^{<162>}2 Samuel 13:12.

2. A just mark of displeasure put upon this wickedness, that the hire of a whore, that is, the money she gets by her whoring, and the price of a dog, that is, of the Sodomite, pimp, or whoremaster (so I incline to understand it, for such are called *dogs*, ^{<625>}Revelation 22:15), the money he gets by his lewd and villainous practices, no part of it shall be *brought into the house of the Lord* (as the hire of prostitutes among the Gentiles was into their temples) *for any vow*. This intimates,

(1.) That God would not accept of any offering at all from such wicked people; they had nothing to bring an offering of but what they got by their wickedness, and therefore their sacrifice could not but be *an abomination to the Lord*, ^{<168>}Proverbs 15:8.

(2.) That they should not think, by making and paying vows, and bringing offerings to the Lord, to obtain leave to go on in this sin, as (it should seem) some that followed that trade suggested to themselves, when their offerings were admitted. ^{<174>}Proverbs 7:14, 15, *This day have I paid my vows, therefore came I forth to meet thee*. Nothing should be accepted in commutation of penance.

(3.) That we cannot honour God with our substance unless it be honestly and honourably come by. It must not only be considered what we give, but how we got it; God hates robbery for burnt-offerings, and uncleanness too.

III. The matter of usury is here settled, v. 19, 20.

(1.) They must not lend upon usury to an Israelite. They had and held their estates immediately from and under God, who, while he distinguished them from all other people, might have ordered, had he so pleased, that they should have all things in common among themselves; but instead of that, and in token of their joint interest in the good land he had given them, he only appointed them, as there was occasion, to lend to one another

without interest, which among them would be little or no loss to the lender, because their land was so divided, their estates were so settled, and there was so little of merchandise among them, that it was seldom or never that they had occasion to borrow any great sums, only what was necessary for the subsistence of their families when the fruits of their ground had met with any disaster, or the like; and, in such a case, for a small matter to insist upon usury would have been very barbarous. Where the borrower gets, or hopes to get, it is just that the lender should share in the gain; but to him that borrows for his necessary food pity must be shown, and we must lend, hoping for nothing again, if we have wherewithal to do it, ~~¶~~ Luke 6:35.

(2.) They might lend upon usury to a stranger, who was supposed to live by trade, and (as we say) by turning the penny, and therefore got by what he borrowed, and came among them in hopes to do so. By this it appears that usury is not in itself oppressive; for they must not oppress a stranger, and yet might exact usury from him.

IV. The performance of the vows wherewith we have bound our souls is here required; and it is a branch of the law of nature, v. 21-23.

(1.) We are here left at our liberty whether we will make vows or no: *If thou shalt forbear to vow* (some particular sacrifice and offering, more than was commanded by the law), *it shall be no sin to thee*. God had already signified his readiness to accept a free-will offering thus vowed, though it were but a little fine flour (~~¶~~ Leviticus 2:4, etc.), which was encouragement enough to those who were so inclined. But lest the priests, who had the largest share of those vows and voluntary offerings, should sponge upon the people, by pressing it upon them as their duty to make such vows, beyond their ability and inclination, they are here expressly told that it should not be reckoned a sin in them if they did not make any such vows, as it would be if they omitted any of the sacrifices that God had particularly required. For (as bishop Patrick well expresses it) God would have men to be easy in his service, and all their offerings to be free and cheerful.

(2.) We are here laid under the highest obligations, when we have made a vow, to perform it, and to perform it speedily: *“Thou shalt not be slack to pay it*, lest if it be delayed beyond the first opportunity the zeal abate, the vow be forgotten, or something happen to disable thee for the performance

of it. *That which has gone out of thy lips* as a solemn and deliberate vow must not be recalled, but *thou shalt keep and perform it*, punctually and fully.” The rule of the gospel goes somewhat further than this. ~~ONE~~ 2
Corinthians 9:7, *Every one, according as he purposeth in his heart*, though it have not gone out of his lips, *so let him give*. Here is a good reason why we should pay our vows, that if we do not *God will require it of us*, will surely and severely reckon with us, not only for lying, but for going about to mock him, who cannot be mocked. See ~~TWO~~ Ecclesiastes 5:4.

V. Allowance is here given, when they passed through a cornfield or vineyard, to pluck and eat of the corn or grapes that grew by the road-side, whether it was done for necessity or delight, only they must carry none away with them, v. 24, 25. Therefore the disciples were not censured for plucking the ears of corn (it was well enough known that the law allowed it), but for doing it on the sabbath day, which the tradition of the elders had forbidden. Now,

- 1.** This law intimated to them what great plenty of corn and wine they should have in Canaan, so much that a little would not be missed out of their fruits: they should have enough for themselves and all their friends.
- 2.** It provided for the support of poor travellers, to relieve the fatigue of their journey, and teaches us to be kind to such. The Jews say, “This law was chiefly intended in favour of labourers, who were employed in gathering in their harvest and vintage; their mouths must not be muzzled any more than that of the ox when he treads out the corn.”
- 3.** It teaches us not to insist upon property in a small matter, of which it is easy to say, *What is that between me and thee?* It was true the grapes which the passenger ate were none of his own, nor did the proprietor give them to him; but the thing was of so small value that he had reason to think were he present, he would not deny them to him, anymore than he himself would grudge the like courtesy, and therefore it was no theft to take them.
- 4.** It used them to hospitality, and teaches us to be ready to distribute, willing to communicate, and not to think every thing lost that is given away. Yet,
- 5.** It forbids us to abuse the kindness of our friends, and to take the advantage of fair concessions to make unreasonable encroachments: we

must not draw an ell from those that give but an inch. They may eat of their neighbour's grapes; but it does not therefore follow that they may carry away.