

CHAPTER 17

The charge of this chapter is,

- I.** Concerning the purity and perfection of all those animals that were offered in sacrifice (v. 1).
- II.** Concerning the punishment of those that worshipped idols (v. 2-7).
- III.** Concerning appeals from the inferior courts to the great sanhedrim (v. 8-13).
- IV.** Concerning the choice and duty of a king (v. 14, etc.).

DEUTERONOMY 17:1-7

THE PUNISHMENT OF IDOLATRY

Here is,

I. A law for preserving the honour of God's worship, by providing that no creature that had any blemish should be offered in sacrifice to him, v. 1. This caveat we have often met with: *Thou shalt not sacrifice that which has any blemish*, which renders it unsightly, or *any evil matter or thing* (as the following word might better be rendered), any sickness or weakness, though not discernible at first view; it is an abomination to God. God is the best of beings, and therefore whatsoever he is served with ought to be the best in its kind. And the Old-Testament sacrifices in a special manner must be so, because they were types of Christ, who is a *Lamb without blemish or spot* (^{401B}1 Peter 1:19), perfectly pure from all sin and all appearance of it. In the latter times of the Jewish church, when by the captivity in Babylon they were cured of idolatry, yet they were charged with profaneness in the breach of this law, with *offering the blind, and the lame, and the sick for sacrifice*, ^{301B}Malachi 1:8.

II. A law for the punishing of those that worshipped false gods. It was made a capital crime to seduce others to idolatry (Deuteronomy 13), here it is made no less to be seduced. If the *blind thus mislead the blind, both must fall into the ditch*. Thus God would possess them with a dread of that

sin, which they must conclude exceedingly sinful when so many sanguinary laws were made against it, and would deter those from it that would not otherwise be persuaded against it; and yet the law, which works death, proved ineffectual. See here,

1. What the crime was against which this law was levelled, serving or worshipping other gods, v. 3. That which was the most ancient and plausible idolatry is specified, worshipping the sun, moon, and stars; and, if that was so detestable a thing, much more was it so to worship stocks and stones, or the representations of mean and contemptible animals. Of this it is said,

(1.) That it is what God had not commanded. He had again and again forbidden it; but it is thus expressed to intimate that, if there had been no more against it, this had been enough (for in the worship of God his institution and appointment must be our rule and warrant), and that God never commanded his worshippers to debase themselves so far as to do homage to their fellow-creatures: had God commanded them to do it, they might justly have complained of it as a reproach and disparagement to them; yet, when he has forbidden it, they will, from a spirit of contradiction, put this indignity upon themselves.

(2.) That it is *wickedness in the sight of God*, v. 2. Be it ever so industriously concealed, he sees it, and, be it ever so ingeniously palliated, he hates it: it is a sin in itself exceedingly heinous, and the highest affront that can be offered to Almighty God.

(3.) That it is a transgression of the covenant. It was on this condition that God took them to be his peculiar people, that they should serve and worship him only as their God, so that if they gave to any other the honour which was due to him alone that covenant was void, and all the benefit of it forfeited. Other sins were transgressions of the command, but this was a transgression of the covenant. It was spiritual adultery, which breaks their marriage bond.

(4.) That it is abomination in Israel, v. 4. Idolatry was bad enough in any, but it was particularly abominable in Israel, a people so blessed with peculiar discoveries of the will and favour of the only true and living God.

2. How it must be tried. Upon information given of it, or any ground of suspicion that any person whatsoever, man or woman, had served other gods,

(1.) Enquiry must be made, v. 4. Though it appears not certain at first, it may afterwards upon search appear so; and, if it can possibly be discovered, it must not be unpunished; if not, yet the very enquiry concerning it would possess the country with a dread of it.

(2.) Evidence must be given in, v. 6. How heinous and dangerous soever the crime is, yet they must not punish any for it, unless there were good proof against them, by two witnesses at least. They must not, under pretence of honouring God, wrong an innocent man. This law, which requires two witnesses in case of life, we had before, ^{<0650>}Numbers 35:30; it is quoted, ^{<0836>}Matthew 18:16.

3. What sentence must be passed and executed. So great a punishment as death, so great a death as stoning, must be inflicted on the idolater, whether man or woman, for the infirmity of the weaker sex would be no excuse, v. 5. The place of execution must be the gate of the city, that the shame might be the greater to the criminal and the warning the more public to all others. The hands of the witnesses, in this as in other cases, must be first upon him, that is, they must cast the first stone at him, thereby avowing their testimony, and solemnly imprecating the guilt of his blood upon themselves if their evidence were false. This custom might be of use to deter men from false-witness bearing. The witnesses are really, and therefore it was required that they should be actually, the death of the malefactor. But they must be followed, and the execution completed, by the hands of all the people, who were thus to testify their detestation of the crime and to *put the evil away from among them*, as before, ^{<0610>}Deuteronomy 13:9.

^{<0578>}DEUTERONOMY 17:8-13

THE AUTHORITY OF THE JUDGES

Courts of judgment were ordered to be erected in every city (^{<0638>}Deuteronomy 16:18), and they were empowered to hear and determine causes according to law, both those which we call pleas of the crown and

those between party and party; and we may suppose that ordinarily they ended the matters that were brought before them, and their sentence was definitive; but,

1. It is here taken for granted that sometimes a case might come into their court too difficult for those inferior judges to determine, who could not be thought to be so learned in the laws as those that presided in the higher courts; so that (to speak in the language of our law) they must find a special verdict, and take time to advise before the giving of judgment (v. 8): *If there arise a matter too hard for thee in judgment*, which it would be no dishonour to the judges to own the difficulty of, — suppose it between *blood and blood*, the blood of a person which cried and the blood of him that was charged with the murder which was demanded, when it was doubtful upon the evidence whether it was wilful or casual, — or between *plea and plea*, the plea (that is, the bill or declaration) of the plaintiff and the plea of the defendant, — or between *stroke and stroke*, in actions of assault and battery; in these and similar cases, thought the evidence were plain, yet doubts might arise about the sense and meaning of the law and the application of it to the particular case.

2. These difficult cases, which hitherto had been brought to Moses, according to Jethro's advice, were, after his death, to be brought to the supreme power, wherever it was lodged, whether in a judge (when there was such an extraordinary person raised up and qualified for that great service, as Othniel, Deborah, Gideon, etc.) or in the high-priest (when he was by the eminency of his gifts called of God to preside in public affairs, as Eli), or, if no single person were marked by heaven for this honour, then in the priests and Levites (or in the priests, who were Levites of course), who not only attended the sanctuary, but met in council to receive appeals from the inferior courts, who might reasonably be supposed, not only to be best qualified by their learning and experience, but to have the best assistance of the divine Spirit for the deciding of doubts, v. 9, 11, 12. They are not appointed to consult the urim and thummim, for it is supposed that these were to be consulted only in cases relating to the public, either the body of the people or the prince; but in ordinary cases the wisdom and integrity of those that sat at the stern must be relied on, their judgment had not the divine authority of an oracle, yet besides the moral certainty it had, as the judgment of knowing, prudent, and experienced men, it had the advantage of a divine promise, implied in those words (v. 9), *They shall*

show thee the sentence of judgment; it had also the support of a divine institution, by which they were made the supreme judicature of the nation.

3. The definitive sentence given by the judge, priest, or great council, must be obeyed by the parties concerned, upon pain of death: *Thou shalt do according to their sentence* (v. 10); thou shalt observe to do it, thou shalt not *decline from it* (v. 11), *to the right hand nor to the left*. Note, It is for the honour of God and the welfare of a people that the authority of the higher power be supported and the due order of government observed, that those be obeyed who are appointed to rule, and that every soul be subject to them in all those things that fall within their commission. Though the party thought himself injured by the sentence (as every man is apt to be partial in his own cause), yet he must needs be subject, must stand to the award, how displeasing soever, and bear, or lose, or pay, according to it, not only for wrath, but also for conscience' sake. But if an inferior judge contradict the sentence of the higher court and will not execute the orders of it, or a private person refuse to conform to their sentence, the contumacy must be punished with death, though the matter were ever so small in which the opposition was made: *That man shall die, and all the people shall hear and fear*, v. 12, 13. See here,

(1.) The evil of disobedience. Rebellion and stubbornness, from a spirit of contradiction and opposition of God, or those in authority under him, from a principle of contempt and self-willedness, are as witchcraft and idolatry. To differ in opinion from weakness and infirmity may be excused and must be borne with; but to do so presumptuously, in pride and wickedness (as the ancient translations explain it), this is to take up arms against the government, and is an affront to him by whom the powers that be are ordained.

(2.) The design of punishment: that others may hear and fear, and not do the like. Some would be so considerate as to infer the heinousness of the offence from the grievousness of the penalty, and therefore would detest it; and others would so far consult their own safety as to cross their humours by conforming to the sentence rather than to sin against their own heads, and forfeit their lives by going contrary to it. From this law the apostle infers the greatness of the punishment of which those will be thought worthy that trample on the authority of the Son of God,

~~308~~ Hebrews 10:28, 29.

~~1874~~ DEUTERONOMY 17:14-20

THE CHOICE AND DUTY OF A KING

After the laws which concerned subjects fitly followed the laws which concern kings; for those that rule others must themselves remember that they are under command. Here are laws given,

I. To the electors of the empire, what rules they must go by in making their choice, v. 14, 15.

1. It is here supposed that the people would, in process of time, be desirous of a king, whose royal pomp and power would be thought to make their nation look great among their neighbours. Their having a king is neither promised as a mercy nor commanded as a duty (nothing could be better for them than the divine regimen they were under), but it is permitted them if they desired it. If they would but take care to have the ends of government answered, and God's laws duly observed and put in execution, they should not be tied to any one form of government, but should be welcome to have a king. Though something irregular is supposed to be the principle of the desire, that they might be like the nations (whereas God in many ways distinguished them from the nations), yet God would indulge them in it, because he intended to serve his own purposes by it, in making the regal government typical of the kingdom of the Messiah.

2. They are directed in their choice. If they will have a king over them, as God foresaw they would (though it does not appear that ever the motion was made till almost 400 years after), then they must,

(1.) Ask counsel at God's mouth, and make him king whom God shall choose; and happy it was for them that they had an oracle to consult in so weighty an affair, and a God to choose for them who knows infallibly what every man is and will be. Kings are God's vicegerents, and therefore it is fit that he should have the choosing of them: God had himself been in a particular manner Israel's King, and if they set another over them, under him, it was necessary that he should nominate the person. Accordingly, when the people desired a king, they applied to Samuel a prophet of the Lord; and afterwards David, Solomon, Jeroboam, Jehu, and others, were chosen by the prophets; and the people are reprov'd for not observing this

law, ^{<3004>}Hosea 8:4: *They have set up kings but not by me.* In all cases God's choice, if we can but know it, should direct, determine, and overrule ours.

(2.) They must not choose a foreigner under pretence of strengthening their alliances, or of the extraordinary fitness of the person, lest a strange king should introduce strange customs of usages, contrary to those that were established by the divine law; but he must be *one from among thy brethren*, that he may be a type of Christ, who is bone of our bone, ^{<3014>}Hebrews 2:14.

II. Laws are here given to the prince that should be elected for the due administration of the government.

1. He must carefully avoid every thing that would divert him from God and religion. Riches, honours, and pleasures are the three great hindrances of godliness (*the lusts of the flesh, the lusts of the eye, and the pride of life*), especially to those in high stations: against these therefore the king is here warned.

(1.) He must not gratify the love of honour by multiplying horses, v. 16. He that rode upon a horse (a stately creature) in a country where asses and mules were generally used looked very great; and therefore though he might have horses for his own saddle, and chariots, yet he must not set *servants on horseback* (^{<2107>}Ecclesiastes 10:7) nor have many horses for his officers and guards (when God was their King, his judges rode on asses, ^{<3050>}Judges 5:10; 12:14), nor must he multiply horses for war, lest he should trust too much to them, ^{<3107>}Psalms 20:7; 33:17; ^{<3343>}Hosea 14:3. The reason here given against his multiplying horses is because it would produce a greater correspondence with Egypt (which furnished Canaan with horses, ^{<1103>}1 Kings 10:28, 29) than it was fit the Israel of God should have, who were brought thence with such a high hand: *You shall return no more that way*, for fear of being infected with the idolatries of Egypt (^{<3363>}Leviticus 18:3), to which they were very prone. Note, We should take heed of that commerce or conversation by which we are in danger of being drawn into sin. If Israel must not return to Egypt, they must not trade with Egypt; Solomon got no good by it.

(2.) He must not gratify the love of pleasure by multiplying wives (v. 17), as Solomon did to his undoing (^{<1101>}1 Kings 11:1), that his heart, being set upon them, turn not away from business, and every thing that is serious,

and especially from the exercise of piety and devotion, to which nothing is a greater enemy than the indulgence of the flesh.

(3.) He must not gratify the love of riches by greatly multiplying silver and gold. A competent treasure is allowed him, and he is not forbidden to be good husband of it, but,

[1.] He must not greatly multiply money, so as to oppress his people by raising it (as Solomon seems to have done, ^{<1124>}1 Kings 12:4), nor so as to deceive himself, by trusting to it, and setting his heart upon it, ^{<1304>}Psalms 62:10.

[2.] He must not multiply it to himself. David multiplied silver and gold, but it was for the service of God (^{<1304>}1 Chronicles 29:4), not for himself; for his people, not for his own family.

2. He must carefully apply himself to the law of God, and make that his rule. This must be to him better than all riches, honours, and pleasures, than many horses or many wives, better than thousands of gold and silver.

(1.) He must write himself a copy of the law out of the original, which was in the custody of the priests that attended the sanctuary, v. 18. Some think that he was to write only this book of Deuteronomy, which is an abstract of the law, and the precepts of which, being mostly moral and judicial, concerned the king more than the laws in Leviticus and Numbers, which, being ceremonial, concerned chiefly the priests. Others think that he was to transcribe all the five books of Moses, which are called *the law*, and which were preserved together as the foundation of their religion. Now,

[1.] Though the king might be presumed to have very fair copies by him from his ancestors, yet, besides those, he must have one of his own: it might be presumed that theirs were worn with constant use; he must have a fresh one to begin the world with.

[2.] Though he had secretaries about him whom he might employ to write this copy, and who perhaps could write a better hand than he, yet he must do it himself, with his own hand, for the honour of the law, and that he might think no act of religion below him, to inure himself to labour and study, and especially that he might thereby be obliged to take particular notice of every part of the law and by writing it might imprint it in his mind. Note, It is of great use for each of us to write down what we observe as most affecting and edifying to us, out of the scriptures and good books,

and out of the sermons we hear. A prudent pen may go far towards making up the deficiencies of the memory, and the furnishing of the treasures of the good householder with things new and old.

[3.] He must do this even when he sits upon the throne of his kingdom, provided that he had not done it before. When he begins to apply himself to business, he must apply himself to this in the first place. He that sits upon the throne of a kingdom cannot but have his hands full. The affairs of his kingdom both at home and abroad call for a large share of his time and thoughts, and yet he must write himself a copy of the law. Let not those who call themselves men of business think that this will excuse them from making religion their business; nor let great men think it any disparagement to them to write for themselves those *great things of God's law which he hath written to them*, ~~AND~~ Hosea 8:12.

(2.) Having a Bible by him of his own writing, he must not think it enough to keep it in his cabinet, but he must *read therein all the days of his life*, v. 19. It is not enough to have Bibles, but we must use them, use them daily, as the duty and necessity of everyday require: our souls must have their constant meals of that manna; and, if well digested, it will be true nourishment and strength to them. As the body is receiving benefit by its food continually, and not only when it is eating, so is the soul, by the word of God, if it *meditate therein day and night*, ~~AND~~ Psalm 1:2. And we must persevere in the use of the written word of God as long as we live. Christ's scholars never learn above their Bibles, but will have a constant occasion for them till they come to that world where knowledge and love will both be made perfect.

(3.) His writing and reading were all nothing if he did not reduce to practice what he wrote and read, v. 19, 20. The word of God is not designed merely to be an entertaining subject of speculation, but to be a commanding rule of conversation. Let him know,

[1.] What dominion his religion must have over him, and what influence it must have upon him. *First*, It must possess him with a very reverent and awful regard to the divine majesty and authority. He must learn (and thus the most learned must by ever learning) *to fear the Lord his God*; and, as high as he is, he must remember that God is above him, and, whatever fear his subjects owe to him, that, and much more, he owes to God as his King. *Secondly*, It must engage him to a constant observance of the law of God, and a conscientious obedience to it, as the effect of that fear. He must keep

all the words of this law (he is *custos utriusque tabulae* — *the keeper of both tables*), not only take care that others do them, but do them himself as a humble servant to the God of heaven and a good example to his inferiors. *Thirdly*, It must keep him humble. How much soever he is advanced, let him keep his spirit low, and let the *fear of his God prevent the contempt of his brethren*; and let not his heart *be lifted up above them*, so as to carry himself haughtily or disdainfully towards them, and to trample upon them. Let him not conceit himself better than they because he is greater and makes a fairer show; but let him remember that he is the *minister of God to them for good* (*major singulis, but minor universis* — *greater than any one, but less than the whole*). It must prevent his errors, either *on he right hand or on the left* (for there are errors on both hands), and keep him right, in all instances, to his God and to his duty.

[2.] What advantage his religion would be of to him. Those that fear God and keep his commandments will certainly fare the better for it in this world. The greatest monarch in the world may receive more benefit by religion than by all the wealth and power of his monarchy. It will be of advantage, *First*, To his person: *He shall prolong his days in his kingdom*. We find in the history of the kings of Judah that, generally, the best reigns were the longest, except when God shortened them for the punishment of the people, as Josiah's. *Secondly*, To his family: his children shall also prosper. Entail religion upon posterity, and God will entail a blessing upon it.