

## SO THAT INNOCENT BLOOD WILL NOT BE SHED

Deuteronomy 19:1-22:8

Key Verse: 19:10

*Do this so that innocent blood will not be shed in your land, which the Lord your God is giving you as your inheritance, and so that you will not be guilty of bloodshed.*

Today's passage is mainly about the sanctity of human life. The sixth commandment of the Ten Commandments says: "Do not murder." It teaches us that human life is valuable in itself. The sanctity of life comes from the fact that God created life in his own image.

Recently, we have seen many police shootings of unarmed men as well as brutal attacks on the police force. There is a "Black Lives Matter" movement. People also scream that all lives matter. But street demonstrations and shouting matches won't solve the problem of the sinful humanity attaching a pragmatic value to human life. May God help us to know that life is valuable because it is a gift from God!

### I. CITIES OF REFUGE (19:1-21)

Look at 19:1-2. *When the Lord your God has destroyed the nations whose land he is giving you, and when you have driven them out and settled in their towns and houses, then set aside for yourselves three cities in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess.* Moses had already set aside three cities of refuge in the east of Jordan (4:41-43). Now he told his people to designate three more cities in the west of Jordan (They did so by setting apart Kedesh in Galilee, Shechem and Hebron (Jos 20:7)). Anyone who killed someone accidentally could flee to these cities to escape vengeful killing by the avenger of blood prior to standing trial.

As God's people entered the Promised Land, it was important for them to establish a justice system that provided for mercy and wisdom to protect the innocent. In times of personal tragedy, people tend to become emotional and act in vengeance. God told them to set apart three cities of refuge for those who commit involuntary manslaughter for protection until their innocence could be proven. If someone kills a person by accident, he should not be punished for murder. For instance, a man may go into the forest with his neighbor to cut wood, and as he swings his ax to fell a tree, the head may fly off and hit his neighbor and kill him. This is not a premeditated murder. Still, the dead man's family or relative may try to seek revenge. That man may flee to one of these cities and save his life (5). He does not deserve a vengeful killing by the "avenger of blood" (that is, a relative of the person who was killed (Nu 35:19-28)).

Look at verse 10 again. *Do this so that innocent blood will not be shed in your land, which the Lord your God is giving you as your inheritance, and so that you will not be guilty of bloodshed.* Accidents happen. Those who kill someone by accident should not be killed. The cities of refuge remind us of our own refuge in Christ. We have

sinned before God; we deserve to die. But Jesus paid the price of our sins with his life by dying on the cross in our place. We have a second chance in life because of his sacrifice. Jesus is our city of refuge.

Look at verses 11-13. *But if out of hate someone lies in wait, assaults and kills a neighbor, and then flees to one of these cities, the killer shall be sent for by the town elders, be brought back from the city, and be handed over to the avenger of blood to die. Show no pity. You must purge from Israel the guilt of shedding innocent blood, so that it may go well with you.* Criminals always attempt to circumvent the law. To prevent real murderers from taking advantage of the cities of refuge, God told his people to bring justice to those who commit murder and then escape to the cities. Verse 13 says: “Show no pity. You must purge from Israel the guilt of shedding innocent blood, so that it may go well with you.”

In 2016, many cities in the U.S. have been experiencing a rising trend in murder. In Chicago, 141 people were killed in the first quarter alone, compared with 83 in 2015. God gave us the commandment, “Do not murder.” This commandment and the cities of refuge show how God views our life. Our life is sacred. Our life is a gift from God. Our life is valuable because it is from God. We should not take others’ lives or our own lives, thinking they are ours.

Sometimes a person is “murdered” not physically, but emotionally or economically. Look at verse 14. *Do not move your neighbor’s boundary stone set up by your predecessors in the inheritance you receive in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess.* The Israelites were about to move into a new land where there were no fences set up between properties and no deeds were established. Only there were stones set up by their predecessors. So there was a possibility that a powerful man would grab another person’s land by moving the boundary stones, which would amount to stealing (Job 24:1-2). This would happen to the powerless such as widows. God wanted his people to protect the rights of the weak.

Look at verse 15. *One witness is not enough to convict anyone accused of any crime or offense they may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.* Have you heard the term “character assassination”? This is another kind of murder. I read a story of an army captain who was accused of betraying his country by committing espionage. The false accusation was made by one of his colleagues. The investigation took several years and he was eventually exonerated by the court. Meanwhile, however, his career was on hold. His wife divorced him. His life was ruined beyond repair. God saw that this kind of terrible thing could happen to his people. He said in verses 18-21: *The judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against a fellow Israelite, then do to the false witness as that witness intended to do to the other party. You must purge the evil from among you. The rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid, and never again will such an evil thing be done among you. Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.*

False witnessing is a serious sin as it destroys relationships and damages trust in a community. Still, “life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot” seems extreme. People sometimes misquote this to imply that God has no mercy. We must know that God wanted his people to have a justice system where criminals are punished with punishment that fit their crime--no more, no less. God is just and merciful. He sent his one and only Son Jesus to die for us when we were unable to do anything for our sins that brought judgment on us. Jesus recognized the “eye for eye and tooth for tooth” principle, but he went beyond this. He said: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also” (Mt 5:38-39). Thank God for his justice and mercy. He sent Jesus to be our city of refuge. May God help us to be fair, wise, and just in our judgment and protect the innocent!

## II. GOING TO WAR (20:1-20)

Look at verse 20:1. *When you go to war against your enemies and see horses and chariots and an army greater than yours, do not be afraid of them, because the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt, will be with you.* The land of Canaan was not a virgin land. It was already occupied by powerful nations. To conquer the land, the Israelites had to fight many enemies. They did not have highly developed weaponry and well-trained armies. In order to fight the more advanced enemy forces, they had to be prepared mentally and spiritually. They should guard their hearts and minds so as not to be fearful or panic. Before going into battle, the priest shall address the army, saying, *“Hear, Israel: Today you are going into battle against your enemies. Do not be fainthearted or afraid; do not panic or be terrified by them. For the Lord your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory”* (3-4). They should believe God’s promise that he would fight for them and give them victory. It was not the sophisticated weaponry that would decide the outcome of the war, but their trust in God. Likewise, we must have faith in God and experience his power by humbly trusting in him. Spiritually speaking, we must fight war on a daily basis, against our own sinful desires, and in school and work places against the godless culture and peer pleasure. Our enemies are formidable. It is easy for us to be fainthearted. But we should never forget that God is with us. He gives us victory over our enemies. All we have to do is to trust in him humbly.

Morale in the army is very important. If some soldiers were preoccupied with their own civilian affairs, they would have a negative influence on other fighters. So Moses told the military leaders to send home some soldiers, including those who just built a new house, those who planted a new vineyard, and those who just got married. The officers also said, “Is anyone afraid or fainthearted? Let him go home so that his fellow soldiers will not become disheartened too” (8). In our spiritual battle, we must get rid of any negative influence that weakens the spirit of the community by repenting unbelief and fear.

What were the guidelines for attacking their enemies that were at a distance from them? Moses told them in verse 10. *When you march up to attack a city, make its*

*people an offer of peace.* They should first seek a peaceful surrender. War would be inevitable to conquer the land of Canaan, but the bloodshed should be minimized. If they accept a peace offer and open their gates, all the people shall be subject to forced labor. No one has to die. However, if a distant nation refuses a truce, they should destroy all their fighting men and plunder the women, children, and flocks, which God would give to them. If a warring nation lives in the land of Canaan that God promised to them as an inheritance and the people there refuse terms of peace, then the Israelites were to destroy them completely. Why should they destroy anything that breathes? God clarified this in verse 18: “Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God.”

Destroying everyone completely (including women and children) was very hard thing to obey. The Israelites failed to do this and they had to pay enormous price for it. We should know that when God tells us to do something, we must do it (even when it sounds unethical or immoral), because God knows us better and he loves us. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The land of Canaan was occupied by people who were utterly corrupt. They worshiped all kinds of idols. For example, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because there were not even 10 righteous people there. As the Israelites moved into the land, there was a great danger for them to be seduced by the corrupt culture. God wanted them to destroy them for their own sake.

Look at verse 19. *When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its trees by putting an ax to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees people, that you should besiege them?* In destroying the enemy, they would be wise not to destroy the fruit trees. They would need them later. Unlike the corrupt people there, the trees would not tempt them to worship idols. We easily become proud and carried away in the midst of victory. We need to obey God’s word by faith in times of good and bad.

### III. ON DEATH, MARRIAGE, AND CHILDREN IN THE NEW LAND (21:1-22:8)

If someone is found slain by an unknown murderer, the elders of the town nearest the body must come forward to do something for the poor soul. Sometimes a terrible crime is committed and the guilty one eludes justice. God’s righteousness still demanded that something be done. God told them to mourn and pray for atonement for the entire community. They were to break the neck of a heifer that had never been worn a yoke (3). This looks forward to the one whose body would be broken on the cross for our sins. God is ready to forgive and cleanse those who want to do what is right in his eyes (9). Again God taught them how he valued human life.

Look at verses 10-11. *When you go to war against your enemies and the Lord your God delivers them into your hands and you take captives, if you notice among the captives a beautiful woman and are attracted to her, you may take her as your wife.* If an Israelite man were attracted to a beautiful woman POW, he could bring her into his home and have her shave her head, trim her nails and put aside the old clothes (to shed her former identity), and after letting her have a period of mourning for her parents, he

could become her husband. Verse 14 added additional guidance: “If you are not pleased with her, let her go wherever she wishes. You must not sell her or treat her as a slave, since you have dishonored her.” In those days, mistreatment of women was the norm. God’s laws granted them unprecedented protection. They had to treat even captive women with honor and respect.

God also told his people to protect the rights of the unloved people. Look at verses 15-16. *If a man has two wives, and he loves one but not the other, and both bear him sons but the firstborn is the son of the wife he does not love, when he wills his property to his sons, he must not give the rights of the firstborn to the son of the wife he loves in preference to his actual firstborn, the son of the wife he does not love.* God intended marriage to be between one man and one woman. But he knew that some of his people in their sinful nature would have more than one wives, by taking, for example, a captive woman as the second wife. This would create complications for dividing the inheritance, especially if the man loved one wife over others. If his oldest son is from his unloved wife, he still must honor the rights of the firstborn by giving him a double share of his inheritance.

What if someone had a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his parents? (18) Even God-fearing parents have children who rebel. Parents naturally want to protect their children from punishment, but the rebellious son must face the consequences of his actions. All are accountable. (The rebellious sons in these verses violated the 5<sup>th</sup> commandments of God. They disobeyed the Lord by refusing to obey their father until they got older (they were glutton and drunkard).

In verses 22-23, God told his people not to leave a murderer’s body hanging on a pole overnight. He said, “Be sure to bury it that same day, because anyone who is hung on a pole is under God’s curse. You must not desecrate the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance.” To be killed and hung on a tree was the most extreme form of punishment, reserved only for the worst offenders. But our Lord Jesus, God’s own Son, was hung on a tree, bearing the curse of God for our sins.

Look at 22:1-2. *If you see your fellow Israelite’s ox or sheep straying, do not ignore it but be sure to take it back to its owner. If they do not live near you or if you do not know who owns it, take it home with you and keep it until they come looking for it. Then give it back.* Trying to take care of stray animals and returning them to their owners required time and effort. But God’s people were not to ignore them. Neither should they use the misfortune of their neighbor to their own advantage. God told them “... love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord” (Lev 19:18b).

Look at verse 5. *A woman must not wear men’s clothing, nor a man wear women’s clothing, for the Lord your God detests anyone who does this.* Men should dress and act as men, and women as women. This is natural. God intended this when he created human beings. Sadly, in our society today, many people think otherwise. In verses 6-7, we learn how we should take care of our resources from God. We should not harm the mother birds. In verse 8, we learn how we should promote safety in building a

new house. We should make a parapet around our roof to prevent people from falling from it.

In conclusion, there is nothing more valuable than life. Our life is a precious gift from God. We should value other people's lives as well as ours. Our spiritual life is even more important than our physical life. Let us remember what our Lord Jesus said: "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ... If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels" (Mk 8:36,38).