

Session 10, Deuteronomy 19 – 25 Community Laws

Dr. Cynthia Parker

This is Dr. Cynthia Parker and her teaching on the book of Deuteronomy. This is session 10, Deuteronomy 19 - 25 community laws.

Review and Introduction of Deuteronomy 19-25

So, we are still in the middle of the law code. Now we started this law code talking about it from chapter 12, and we looked at 12, 13, 14, 15, and we've been going all the way up to the feasting in chapter 16 and the establishment of leaders in chapters, at the end of 16 into 17 and 18.

The rest of the law code is quite different. It reads very differently than everywhere else we've been in the law code so far. So, as we begin looking at chapter 19, we're looking at a different format to the law code. So, in previous chapters, we've had entire chapters, like all of chapter 14, that talk about kosher and dietary laws. Or all of 17 and 18 that are talking about leaders. Now as we move into chapters 19 through 25, we find a whole scattering of laws. So, one chapter isn't just one topic anymore. So, there is a little bit of clustering together of certain laws that have something to do with each other.

Another thing we're going to find that is quite different about these laws is we don't have the same interaction with the chosen place. So far, starting in chapter 12, in the establishment of the chosen place, we've had lots of back and forth between the city gates and chosen place. The righteousness expected of the people in the distributed places is the same as the righteousness that is expected from the place where God will dwell. So, this chosen place has been a very significant way of organizing Israelite society. Now we get to chapter 19, and we don't have any references at all to the chosen place.

So, it's quite different in the form, at the sound of the laws, and the absence of the chosen place from these texts. What we are going to see, though, is the continuation of the themes that Deuteronomy has been developing: the idea that the Israelites are one, the "you" that is both singular and plural, the responsibility of all the people who dwell in the land to manage, to care for this gift, that God has given them, and the responsibility demanded of them. So, we see a lot more emphasis in these chapters on the individual, the community, and the responsibilities that they both share.

Deuteronomy 19: Accidental Manslaying

So, we're going to go ahead and start by looking at Deuteronomy 19. And chapter 19 is going to set us off with the case of what happens when there is an accidental murder.

So, I'm going to put a map up on the screen because we talked about establishing Cities of Refuge in the very early lectures when we were doing the historical chapters 1 through 3. Actually, one through four, we got to the end of four and said before we got to the Decalogue, before chapter 5, and the re-declaration of the Ten Commandments, we had these verses where Moses stands up, and he tells the Israelites that you need to establish Cities of Refuge and he names three of them.

Well, chapter 19 is going to start with the same concept of establishing Cities of Refuge, except it's a little bit different than Deuteronomy 4, verses 41 to 43. So, I can actually mark on this map where those cities are because those cities are named specifically in chapter 4. However, when we get to Deuteronomy 19, these cities are not named. There's more of a general idea of the organization behind them. So, I'm going to read from chapter 19 to establish first what is City of Refuge is.

Now, I'm going to start reading in verse four. "Now this is the case of the manslayer who may flee there and live when he kills his friend unintentionally, not hating him previously." And then we get a little, for example. "As when a man goes into a forest with his friend to cut wood, and his hand swings the ax to cut down the tree, and the iron head slips off the handle and strikes his friend so that he dies. He may flee to one of these cities. Otherwise, the avenger of blood might pursue the manslayer in the heat of his anger and overtake him because the way is long and takes his life though he was not deserving of death since he had not hated him previously."

So, this example is packed full with really good cultural information. So, first of all, we're saying the manslayer is different than a murderer. So someone who commits murder, who has premeditated the murder, who has acted out of hatred and gone out to find someone and kill them. We're not talking about that.

We're talking about accidental deaths. So, what happens if the ax head comes off the ax, hits someone, and they die? Well, the problem is, when you live in a culture in which your identity comes from your family. Then a misdeed or an offense done to someone in the family, done to an individual, you might as well have done it to the whole family.

So, for instance, if you come and kill me and it was an accident, and we've been very good friends up until this point, forging a friendship through Deuteronomy. But you accidentally kill me. Customarily then, my father has the right to go and kill you. It's avenging of my blood. What Deuteronomy says is when it is accidental the person who accidentally killed, so that would be you, you have an opportunity to flee to a City of Refuge. And you can find sanctuary in the City of Refuge. And then my father, or my family members, who are pursuing you, cannot kill you.

Now, you may say, but then you get away with murder. In a way, yes, it's true. You are not killed for the accidental murder, but you have left your family, you have left your land, you have left your family inheritance. In a way, that is death of a sort. It's just not your spilled blood, a kind of death.

Cities of Refuge

So, when Deuteronomy says you need to establish these kinds of cities for this purpose, this is what it says about those cities. In verse seven, "Therefore I command you saying, you shall set aside three cities for yourself. If the Lord your God enlarges your territory just as he has sworn to your fathers and gives you all the land which he promised to give your fathers, if you carefully observe all of this commandment which I command you today to love the Lord your God to walk in his ways always, then you shall add three more cities for yourself besides the first three. So innocent blood will not be shed in the midst of your land, which the Lord your God gives to you as an inheritance, and blood guiltiness be on you. But if there is a man who hates his neighbor and lies and waits for him and rises up and strikes him, so that he dies and he flees to one of these cities, then the elders of that city shall send and take him from there and deliver him into the hand of the avenger of blood that he may die. You shall not pity him, but you shall purge the blood of the innocent from Israel so that it may go well with you."

Okay, so again, murderers, if they have actually intentionally planned this murder, and they murder someone, they cannot then pretend to be a manslayer. They cannot pretend it was an accident and run and hide in a City of Refuge. So a City of Refuge is really for those who commit unintentional murder.

So, when we look at how are the cities chosen well, in verses 8 and 9, the cities are chosen so that they are of equal distance from everyone. In other

words, you don't establish a City of Refuge in Ephraim's territory because Ephraim is an influential tribe. Or you don't establish or fail to establish one in Simeon's territory because Simeon is a weak or smaller tribe, right? That is not actually the way the laws go. See, you do build the cities based on how powerful the various regions are. You build it an equal distance so that anyone, regardless of where you live, has an equal opportunity to be able to run and find refuge in a City of Refuge.

It would be very unfair if, for instance, if all of the Cities of Refuge were right in the heartland of the hill country because then, the people who are on the coastal plain or the people who are much further north would have very far to travel. And if they're traveling really far to get to a City of Refuge, the likelihood of the avenger of blood overtaking them on the road is much greater.

So, Deuteronomy says to make it equal for all people. Establish these cities that are in equal distances. If you expand your territory, add three more. So, the difference between chapter 19 and chapter 4 is in 4, we have them named. In chapter 19, we have the vision of when you go into the land, choose for yourself these places, just make sure they're an equal distance from everyone.

Shedding Innocent Blood and Justice

So, what is wrong with shedding innocent blood? Well, blood is the life force of every animal or every creature, every human. And so, there is very specific attention that is paid to the blood that is spilled. It is almost sacred. And so innocent blood must be avenged for.

So, what does it say about justice for all people? Well, it says that everyone should have equal opportunity to find justice. And it lets us know that the people, the citizens, even of the Cities of Refuge, they're also responsible to

make sure that if someone truly is guilty of murder, that person is held accountable for that offense or that sin.

Going back to the idea of why is the blood so sacred? I'd like to read a quote from Gordon McConville, this comes out of his Deuteronomy commentary. McConville states, "The spilling of blood has the consequence, not only of making the murderer liable to just judicial penalty but also of making the land itself ritually impure. And for Deuteronomy, that pays so much attention to the where; it pays so much attention to the land and to nature. It's looking towards righteousness and right living that takes care of the land, as well. Making sure that the land itself is not impure is a major theme or something that is at the forefront of the author's mind in Deuteronomy."

The Case of the Unknown Manslayer or Murderer

Now we have another problem because Deuteronomy 21 is kind of tangentially related, but we have these ideas of justice for all people and purging, or at least redeeming, the innocent blood that has been spilled. But what happens if you don't have a manslayer or a murderer to point to? So, this is what Deuteronomy 21 is addressing for us.

So, Deuteronomy 21. I'm going to start with verse one. It says, "if a slain person is found lying in the open country in the land, which the Lord your God gives you to possess and it is not known who has struck him, then your elders and your judges shall go out and measure the distance to the cities which are around the slain one. It shall be that the city which is nearest to the slain man that is the elders of that city shall take a heifer of the herd, which has not been worked and which is not pulled a yoke, and the elders of the city shall bring the heifer down to the valley with running water, which has not been plowed or sown, and shall break the heifer's neck there in the valley. Then the priest, the

son of Levi, shall come near. For the Lord your God has chosen him to serve him and to bless him in the name of the Lord, and every dispute and every assault shall be settled by them. All of the elders of the city which is nearest to the slain man shall wash their hands over the heifer, whose neck was broken in the valley. And they shall answer and say, 'Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it. Forgive your people Israel whom you have redeemed, O Lord. Do not place the guilt of innocent blood in the midst of your people, Israel.' And the blood guiltiness shall be forgiven them."

Okay. So, what is the problem? A murder has been committed. Innocent blood has been shed. The land of Israel, all that is in the midst of Israel, the land and people of Israel, that land has been tainted. Something has to happen to redeem that innocent blood. And if they don't have anyone to blame, who is it that takes responsibility for that? Well, it is the leaders of the community who come out, those who are closest to where that murder happened. But notice it's not just the judges who show up. It's not just a representative from the city gates who goes. It is a Levite, someone who is concerned with the sacredness of all of Israel. So, a representative of those who serve before God at the chosen place.

So, we have Levites who show up, and we have leaders of the people who show up, and they take responsibility, and they ask for God's forgiveness over the shed blood that has been shed. It's a way of redeeming the larger Israelite population and a way of redeeming the land as well.

Although this seems to be a little bit of a law that is too old for us to care about now, this strikes me all the time for modern-day application. I just always wonder what would happen in our cities and our neighborhoods if the community leaders showed up every time someone died and took responsibility

and said, "This is our community. This happened on our watch. We now are trying to redeem that together." What an amazing thing that would be, as an example to the larger community about the type of place that we are trying to build, the type of society that we are trying to build.

On Warfare – Deuteronomy 20

So, moving on from the idea of finding Cities of Refuge, now we're going to discuss warfare, which is always a tricky subject when it comes to Old Testament law. We're looking specifically at warfare, as it is discussed in chapter 20. There are other laws that have to do with warfare. I'm going to focus particularly on what the mentality of the people should be when they go to war. So, in other words, there's not necessarily the rules of battle, there's a little bit of that, and we'll get there. But part of even building up towards war is, what is the mentality? How do you even approach this conflict? So, we're looking at chapter 20.

So, in verse 1, it says, "When you go out to battle against your enemies and see horses and chariots and people more numerous than you. Do not be afraid of them because the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, is with you." So, we have to remind ourselves again we've seen this God as warrior theme. It has already shown up in Deuteronomy. So, now in this segment dealing with war, we are reminding the people once more. You should not be afraid because God is the one who goes with you. God is a warrior, and he goes with you. He already proved his skill with Egypt. And now he is the same God and will go with you and do the same thing. So, since the war actually doesn't depend on you, your righteousness, your strength, or the amount of horses and chariots that you have, it doesn't have anything to do with you.

Therefore, it says in verse 2, "When you are approaching the battle, the priests shall come near and speak to the people. He shall say to him, 'Hear, O Israel, you are approaching the battle against your enemies today, do not be fainthearted, do not be afraid, or panic or tremble before them. For the Lord your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to save you.' The officer also shall speak to the people saying, 'Who is the man that has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him depart and return to his house. Otherwise, he may die in battle, and another man will dedicate it. Who is the man who has planted a vineyard and has not yet begun to see its fruit.'" Vines usually take about five years, three years but five years to really produce good fruit. "Let him depart and return to his house. Otherwise, he might die in battle, and another man would begin to use its fruit. And who is the man that is engaged to a woman and has not married her? Let him depart and return to his house. Otherwise, he might die in battle, and another man would marry her.' Then the officer shall speak further to the people and say, 'Who is the man that is afraid and fainthearted? Let him depart and return to his house. So that he might not make his brothers' hearts melt like his own.'"

It's really very interesting, and it must be very unique to say when you go to war, let all these people go home. Now, if we pay attention to the particularities of this, we notice, basically, it is anyone whose household has not yet been established. If you are engaged to be married, but you haven't married the spouse yet. You don't have children yet. Go home. Have a chance to start a family.

What if you've planted land you've inherited, you've taken over the land, you have a new field, you planted a new crop, and you have not yet been able to enjoy the fact that God has given us the early and the latter rains and that the

earth will produce for you. You haven't enjoyed that yet. Go home. Have a chance to enjoy the fruit out of the field.

You haven't built your home yet. Go home. Build the house. So, establish your family's house. It's a way of providing to make sure that they can continue to exist in the next generation.

So, it starts with God is the warrior. It doesn't really have anything to do with you anyway, and so, therefore, go home if you need to establish yourself in your household and the well-being of your family before you go to war. Or if you're just flat-out afraid, don't go. God can do this on his own.

We actually see this happening. In fact, maybe you thought of it, as I was talking about it if you're where in the book of Judges, we have Gideon who pulls together quite a large army. And God keeps telling Gideon, send those men home, send those men home. I don't need a huge army of people to prove that I am in the midst of Israel. I can do it with just 300 men. So, we get a little bit of echoes of what we have seen here in the book of Deuteronomy.

Israelite Care for Creation – Deuteronomy 22 & 25: Lost animals, birds, Muzzling Oxen

The next little cluster of laws that I want to talk about is the ideas that Deuteronomy is not just addressing the people and their community and how people and people interact. But it also talks about how people should be interacting with the rest of creation.

So, I'm looking at chapter 22, and then we'll pick up a little bit in chapter 25. So, again, because these laws are kind of scattered around. Let's see if we can figure out if there is a theme in some of these chapters or some of these verses.

So, in chapter 22, through reading verses 1 through 4, "You shall not see your countrymen's ox or his sheep straying away and pay no attention to them. You shall certainly bring them back to your countrymen. If your countrymen are not near to you, or if you do not know him, then you shall bring it home to your house, and it shall remain with you until your countrymen looks for it. Then you shall restore it to him. Thus, you shall do with his donkey, and you shall do the same with his garment, and you shall do likewise with anything lost by your countrymen, which he has lost, and you have found. You are not allowed to neglect them."

So, there's an idea that these animals participate; they contribute to the wealth of the household. Most people are not accumulating coins. They are not accumulating gold and silver and tchotchkes and things that pay for the wealth and pay for their sons and daughters to go to university. Their fields, their garments, their grinding stones, and their animals are their family wealth.

And so, when you see it, you are responsible to treat ethically these things even though they are not humans. So, the ox may not be a human, but you are still expected to look at it with respect and to recognize that that ox is contributing to the household of another person. And you are, therefore, obligated to pay attention and to treat it well.

In verse 6, we have, "If you happen to come upon a bird's nest along the way in any tree or on the ground with young ones or eggs and the mother sitting on the young or on the eggs. You shall not take the mother with the young. You shall certainly let the mother go. But the young you may take for yourself in order that it may be well with you and that you may prolong your days."

So again, it seems rather random. Why do we really care about birds, and if we take both the bird and the eggs?

Well, again, because Deuteronomy is more forward-thinking because we're looking at, we're building the idea of a full and robust society, where people are flourishing, but the land and nonhuman creation around them is also flourishing. So, if there is a mother and also eggs or young in the nest, you can take the young but leave the mother. Why? It allows for that bird to have more chicks, for the bird to keep producing. It has the ability to go on and create more. Although if you take both of them and if you kill one, eat the others, you're destroying a generation of these animals. So, it is just a way of paying attention. Can you make sure that all things are flourishing in your midst?

Well, we have another seemingly, random law in chapter 25. It's one law inserted in the midst of another conversation, but it also has to do with animals. Verse 4, "You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing." So, oxen were often used out on threshing floors. They would drag the threshing sledges behind them. And if you leave the ox unmuzzled, there's a lot of grain on the ground that ox can consume. In fact, that ox can consume a huge portion of the grain on the ground. So, you may think it sounds very practical to muzzle the ox and prevent it from eating all of this grain. If I want all of that grain for my family, what I have just harvested has to supply my family for the whole entire year. Why would I let an animal eat that?

Well, Deuteronomy is recognizing that animal has worked for you. That animal is in the process of working for you. God is the one that gave you the grain anyway. Let the oxen eat.

This concept of the ethical care of creation is something that Dr. Sandy Richter has worked on, and she has some really wonderful published articles about what it means to show ethical care of creation in the book of

Deuteronomy. So, I would encourage you to go and read some more of her articles.

So, we kind of come to the conclusion though, that nature, based on the laws in Deuteronomy, nature is actually cared for instead of controlled. In our modern-day economy, we tend to want to go out and control nature or take everything that we can that is for our profit. Deuteronomy says nature is part of what God has created. It's part of what he calls good. You can care for it. In fact, do care for it, do not control and manipulate and dominate it.

Social Ethics: Lending Laws

So, another type of law that we see in these chapters is social ethics. We're going to find several of these in chapter 24. This is going to be pretty similar to some of the topics, some of the issues, that we talked about when we were looking at Deuteronomy 15.

So, I broke them down based on what you see on the screen based on certain types of topics. So, we'll go through these one by one. First, we have 24:6 and then again in 10. So, in verse 6 of chapter 24, it says, "No one shall take a hand mill or an upper millstone in pledge for he would be taking a life in pledge."

In verse 10, this is a related topic; it says, "When you make your neighbor a loan of any sort, you shall not enter his house to take his pledge. You shall remain outside. And the man to whom you make the loan shall bring the pledge out to you. If he is a poor man, you shall not sleep with his pledge. When the sun goes down, you shall surely return the pledge to him that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you, and it'll be righteousness for you before the Lord your God."

So, the laws are, if there are the poorest of the poor who are among you, do not take their livelihood away from them. If the temptation is there is a poor

woman, and she's making a living out of grinding grain, the only thing she has to offer up as a pledge for the loan, or the money she is asking for, is her only commodity, which is her grinding stone. But don't take that away from her. It robs her of her ability to pay back the loan. So, take the longer view.

It was also quite common for people to use their outer cloak, which is a very multi-purpose kind of garment. You can roll it up and sleep on it like a pillow. You can put it over yourself and use it like a blanket. It was a sign of modesty as she went out onto the street. That may be the only thing that a poor person has to pledge to offer up as collateral for the loan. But don't take that. You can take it symbolically, but when it comes time for the night, and they have need of it, give it back to them. Let that be part of the generosity that you share.

Timely Paying of Wages

There's also quite a lot to be said about paying wages. So, in verses 14 and 15, "You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your countrymen or one of the aliens who is in your land in your towns. You shall give him his wages on his day before the sun sets. For he is poor and sets his heart on it. So that he will not cry against you to the Lord, and it becomes a sin in you."

So interesting to notice that the law related to paying servants is not just Israelite servants, not just Israelite employees, but even the ger is the other person, even the foreigner, who may not own land among you but is living in your midst. Both of them get treated the same and are treated and given the same kind of wage. And because they are poor, they probably need payment every single day as a day laborer. They need to be paid so that they have food that they can eat later that evening. So don't withhold them. Don't manipulate the

power that you have over them. So, make sure that you are paying them a fair wage and a fair price, and in a very timely manner.

Equal Justice

We also have an idea that everyone receives the same kind of justice. So, we touched on this a little bit when we were looking at the end of chapter 16 and the beginning of chapter 17. But we'll read again, so this is Deuteronomy 24. I just lost my place, verses 17 and 18. "You shall not pervert the justice to an alien or an orphan or take a widow's garment in pledge. But you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and that the Lord your God redeemed you from there. Therefore, I am commanding you to do these things."

It's really easy to further oppress those who do not have very many resources. So, the widow, the one who doesn't have a husband to publicly defend her; or an orphan who doesn't have parents to provide; or the alien, the foreigner, the ger, among you who does not have their own land, who's treated as an outsider. They do not get a different system of justice. So, justice that is given, God's justice for his people, is for all people regardless of which social or economic level of society you are on.

Harvesting Provisions for the Widow, Orphan, and Resident Alien [WORA]

So, in verses 19 through 22, we shift away from these defensive prohibitions of injustice to offensive guarantees of well-being. So let me read 19 through 22. This would be the very end of chapter 24. So, these are the ones that we read actually tied to the agricultural calendar. The one that says, "When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. That is for the orphan, the widow, and the alien. Same thing with the olive trees; you let the extra stay in the tree, and that is for the orphans, widows, and the alien. Same with the grapes, and in verse 22, "You

shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt. Therefore, I am commanding you to do this thing."

Prohibitions & Generosity

So, we have seen just in this collection of laws that there are the laws specifically saying, do not, do not withhold wages, do not take a pledge overnight, do not oppress the animals, do not do all of these things, and here we have but do make sure that you are also cultivating a spirit of generosity.

And what is the underpinning of all of that is because you were once a slave in Egypt, and God did it for you. And so, therefore, you are being called to act righteously in a similar manner.

Summary/Conclusion – Not a Zero-sum Game

I will go ahead and leave you with this quote because I think that Deuteronomy spends a lot of time trying to develop this ideal way of living. We talked about how Deuteronomy is casting vision for the potential that is there. If they go in, if they can set up society in a wise way, if they have leaders who are of the people, for the people, if they treat nature and humans in a righteous and God-directed way, it has great potential.

So this quote it's by Ruel How and it says, "How does the church or any other group of people become a community? This is what the Israelites are trying to do when they go into the land." Well, the answer is simple. "It becomes a community when as persons, the members enter into dialogue with one another and assume responsibility for their common life. Without this dialog, individuals and society are abstractions. It is through dialogue that we accomplished the miracle of personhood and community."

And although this is a modern quote dealing with our modern ideas of building community. This reflects Deuteronomy so well. Because Deuteronomy talks about you, the individual, and you, the collective group of people. It talks about you, the individual taking responsibility, but then you, as citizens taking responsibility for the entire community. And when Deuteronomy casts a vision for how good of a place this can be. It's not a zero-sum game. So, zero-sum game is a modern business term. We often talk about how if I win, you lose. That my wealth depends on you not having wealth, it's either mine or it's yours. And we end up with a zero-sum in the middle. So, my plus-one is your -one, which equals 0.

Place is not that way. Deuteronomy says the more you invest in place, in community, in the land around you, the greater that place is collectively, and the greater that is, it kind of buoys everyone up. Deuteronomy isn't saying you need to flatten out the economy and everyone needs to own the same amount. There is recognition that there are poor, there are rich landowners, those who don't own land, there are foreigners, there are widows--things happen. There are differences within society, but if everyone invests well in society, then everyone can flourish. And that is part of the great design that God has for the land.

When we go on to chapter 26, we will talk about the festivals that the people participate in once they step foot over the Jordan River and enter the land.

This is Dr. Cynthia Parker and her teaching on the book of Deuteronomy. This session 10, Deuteronomy 19 - 25 community laws.