

Old Testament Literature

Deuteronomy, the Institutions of Israel, and the Concept of Law

Session 17

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Abstract

In this lecture on the book of Deuteronomy, Dr. Ted Hildebrandt examines the foundational legal and social structures of ancient Israel, beginning with the Ten Commandments organized under the mnemonic "BIG LC SPAMS" and the core theological confession of the Shema. He analyzes the constitutional offices established to govern the nation—prophets, judges, kings, and priests—highlighting their biblical mandates and safeguards against systemic corruption. Hildebrandt explores complex hermeneutical questions regarding how ancient Mosaic laws relate to modern society, proposing a search for underlying universal principles rather than rigid literalism or arbitrary legal categorization. Ultimately, the lecture addresses the interplay between law and grace, demonstrating how God accommodated laws to human weakness while utilizing the law as a mentor to expose sin and point believers toward divine grace.

Outline

I. Introduction and Foundational Law: The Ten Commandments and the Shema

A. Context and Scope of Deuteronomy Lecture 17

1. Final address of Moses on Mount Nebo before Israel enters Canaan under Joshua
2. Central themes: Law, grace, covenant, divine accommodation, and biblical transition between Old and New Testaments

B. General Stipulations: Mnemonic "BIG LC SPAMS" for the Ten Commandments

1. B - No Blasphemy: Refraining from using God's name in a light, casual, or trivial manner
2. I - No Idols: Rejecting physical idols, modern material/conceptual idols, and improper mental images of God
3. G - No Other Gods: Absolute allegiance to Yahweh above all competing deities
4. L - No Lying: Speaking truth faithfully in all human relations

- 5. C - No Coveting: Rejecting greed and cultivating generosity rather than desiring others' property or relationships
- 6. S - No Stealing: Respecting personal property rights through active giving
- 7. P - Honor Father and Mother: The single positive commandment, establishing foundational family respect
- 8. A - No Adultery: Protecting marital covenant; elevated by Jesus to prohibit inner heart lust
- 9. M - No Murder: Distinction between murder (requiring malice and forethought) and unintentional killing or legitimate state actions
- 10. S - Remember the Sabbath: Keeping the Sabbath day holy as set apart unto God

C. The Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4–5)

- 1. Core confession of faith: "Hear, O Israel: Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one"
- 2. The Supreme Commandment: Loving God with all heart, soul, and strength
- 3. Historical and cultural practices: Doorpost reminders (mezuzah featuring the letter Shin)

II. The Constitutional Institutions of Ancient Israel

A. The Office of the Prophet (Deuteronomy 13 & 18)

- 1. Discerning true vs. false prophets:
 - a. Miracles or sign fulfillment alone do not validate a prophet if the message entices people toward other gods
 - b. Penalty for false prophets leading Israel away from God: Capital punishment
 - c. Core message of true prophets: Shuv (Repentance); historically rejected or killed by Israel while false prophets proclaiming false peace were applauded
- 2. The Mosaic Model and Messianic Prophecy (Deuteronomy 18:15–18):
 - a. God raising up a prophet like Moses, putting divine words directly into his mouth ("Thus says the LORD")
 - b. Second Temple and New Testament expectation of "The Prophet" fulfilled in Jesus Christ

B. The Judiciary and Administration of Justice (Deuteronomy 16:18–20)

- 1. Localized Justice: Appointing judges and officials in every town for accessible legal recourse
- 2. Judicial Integrity: Absolute prohibition of bribery, perversion of justice, or partiality
- 3. Modern Contrast: Hildebrandt's critique of contemporary legal systems where financial wealth and celebrity influence judicial outcomes
- 4. Cities of Refuge:
 - a. Three cities on each side of the Jordan protecting unintentional manslayers from the "avenger of blood"
 - b. Judicial evaluation by city elders: Innocence granted protection; intentional murderers extradited

C. The Law of the King (Deuteronomy 17:14–20)

- 1. Qualifications: Chosen by God and a native Israelite brother (never a foreigner)
- 2. Three Explicit Prohibitions:
 - a. Do not multiply horses (prevents military self-reliance and returning to Egypt)

- b. Do not multiply wives (prevents heart turning away from God, exemplified by Solomon's 700 wives and 300 concubines)
- c. Do not multiply silver and gold (prevents using executive power for personal enrichment at public expense)

3. Primary Mandate:

- a. Handwrite a personal copy of the Law under the supervision of the Levitical priests
- b. Read and study the Law daily to foster reverence, humility, and obedience

D. The Priests and Levites (Deuteronomy 18:1–8)

- 1. Landlessness: No tribal territorial inheritance; "Yahweh is their inheritance"
- 2. Distribution: 48 Levitical cities scattered across Israel enabling widespread teaching of the Law and ritual care

III. Hermeneutics: Bridging Ancient Law to Contemporary Application

A. The Challenge of Cultural Context vs. Universal Principles

- 1. Illustrative Case Study: Deuteronomy 22:5 ("Women shall not wear men's clothing")
 - a. Misapplication: Rigid legalistic enforcement regarding skirts vs. pants in modern institutional settings
 - b. Cultural context: Ancient garments (robes/tunics) differed contextually from modern attire
 - c. Underlying Universal Principle: Maintaining clear distinction between the sexes and avoiding deliberate confusion of gender identity

B. Interaction Between Culture and Divine Law

- 1. Dynamic relationship: Laws given in historical settings addressing specific socio-cultural realities
- 2. Distinguishing trans-cultural underlying principles from ancient cultural particulars

IV. Theological Perspectives on the Law in the Biblical Canon

A. Christ's View of the Law

- 1. Permanence and Fulfillment: Matthew 5:17–18 (not one yodh or tittle shall pass away until fulfilled)
- 2. Defensive Weapon: Quoting Deuteronomy three times to defeat Satan in the wilderness temptations
- 3. The Heart of the Law: Internalizing commandments (Sermon on the Mount) against Pharisaic externalization

B. Paul's View of the Law

- 1. Critique of Legalistic Justification: Galatians 3–5 (law cannot justify; curse of relying on legal performance)
- 2. Affirmation of Moral Quality: Romans 7:12 ("The law is holy, righteous, and good")
- 3. Pedagogical Purpose: The Law as a "schoolmaster" (paidagogos) to expose sin and direct sinners to justification by faith in Christ (demonstrated by Abraham in Genesis 15:6)

C. Evaluation of the Tripartite Division (Civil, Ceremonial, Moral)

- 1. Traditional Categorization:

- a. Civil Law: Governmental/safety ordinances (e.g., parapets on roofs / modern pool fences)
 - b. Ceremonial Law: Cultic rituals, temple sacrifices, priestly regulations
 - c. Moral Law: Universal ethical imperatives (Ten Commandments, love commands)
2. Critical Evaluation: Dissecting Torah into rigid containers breaks its organic unity; all laws carry underlying moral principles

D. Divine Accommodation and Hardness of Heart

- 1. Principle of Accommodation: God adjusting legal standards to human weakness and cultural corruption
- 2. Case Study: Divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1–4 vs. Matthew 19:8
 - a. God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16), yet permitted it through Moses due to "hardness of heart" to protect vulnerable wives from violence or murder

E. Canonical Continuity, Discontinuity, and Expansion

- 1. Transformation of Ritual Identifiers: Dietary/Kosher laws in Acts 10 & 15 superseded as the Gospel expands beyond ethnic Israel to Gentiles
- 2. Fulfillment as Expansion: The Law's underlying purpose is magnified and fulfilled in global Christian community

V. Pastoral and Practical Applications: Misuse of Law vs. Misuse of Grace

A. The Misuse of the Law

- 1. Legalism, self-righteous pride, external performance security, and condemnation of others

B. The Misuse of Grace

- 1. License/Antinomianism, devaluing sin, and severing actions from their moral consequences