

Civil Laws (Deuteronomy 16:18-19:21)

Competent Judges (Deut 16:18-17:13)

On Jethro's advice, Moses chose able men out of all Israel, and made them heads over the people, leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens. And they judged the people at all times; the difficult dispute they would bring to Moses, but every minor dispute they themselves would judge (Exo 18:25-26). What type of government would be suitable once they entered into the Promised Land? There were 2½ tribes on the East of the Jordan and Moses would not be with them anymore.

The basic unit of government in Israel was the local town council, made up of judges and officers, who with the elders, conducted business at the city gates (Ruth 4:1-12). The judges and officers were appointed or elected by the people. God is the supreme Legislator in the land, because He gave the laws. The judges formed the judiciary branch of the government while the officers kept the official records and carried out their decisions. The word means "writers, secretaries." They formed the executive branch.

Godly Character (Deut 16:19-20)

The courts became corrupt and allowed the rich to rob the poor and needy and the wealthy soon owned great estates and controlled the economy. Because the leaders didn't obey the laws about the Sabbath year and the Year of Jubilee, the economy got out of balance and the land was stolen from its rightful owners.

God couldn't permit such flagrant disobedience to His law, so He punished His people severely by sending them into Captivity.

The most important thing about the judges and officers was that they be men of character, because only just men could honestly execute just judgment. They were not to twist the law and distort justice. They were to be impartial and to not accept bribes.

The decisions of the judges affected not only the individuals on trial but the entire nation. If the judges freed the guilty at the expense of the innocent, the land would be defiled and God would eventually remove the nation from the land which happened in 722 BC for the Northern Kingdom of Israel and 586 BC for the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

Relevance to Us Today: Leadership in the local church must be given only to those who are qualified (Acts 6:1-7; 1 Tim 3; Titus 1:5-9). These are God's non-negotiables because "Everything rises or falls with leadership" (Dr Lee Roberson). The tragic state of the church worldwide is largely because the church has compromised on the very things God said we are NOT to compromise on: proven character and ability to handle the Word.

Forbidden Forms of Worship (Deut 16:21-22)

Idolatry was the greatest enemy of the spiritual life of Israel, and the judges had to be alert enough to detect it. The "groves" were areas dedicated to the worship of Baal's consort, Ashtaroth. They tried to plant their groves "beside the altar" in order to encourage God's people to worship BOTH the Lord and Ashtaroth, and eventually Ashtaroth would win out because she appealed to their baser immoral nature. The "pillar" which the Lord hates are sexual symbols used in their licentious worship.

Judgments made by the Priests (Deut 17:1)

What was demanded of the judges was also demanded of the priests. They too had to be men of godly character and totally devoted to God so that they would reject any sacrifice that has a blemish, no matter the cost, the problems and the inconvenience to the people. They too had to be impartial and immune to bribes or else the judgment of God would fall on them and the nation. They had to believe that even sacrifices with a small blemish would be detestable to God and they could not accept them.

Unfortunately the spiritual leadership was corrupt and this corruption soon spread to the people and Hosea said, "like people, like priest" (4:9).

Shortly before the Babylonian captivity, Jeremiah said of his own people in his day, "Everyone is greedy for gain; From the prophet even to the priest Everyone deals falsely" (6:13) / "Everyone practices deceit" (8:10).

Israel forgot the holiness of God because her leaders (both civil and spiritual) forgot to treat God as holy. That was why the judgment on Moses and Aaron was so severe! (Num 20:12; 27:14; Deut 32:51)

Judgments made by the Judges (Deut 17:2-7)

If the judges were devoted to God, they would carefully investigate such practices, get the facts, condemn the guilty and remove the idols from the land. They had to put the LORD first. Then they would serve as a deterrent for sin and help God's people live long in the land (Eccl 8:11).

The Wisdom of God (Deut 17:8-13)

Many times, the local judges and courts would have to consider cases that were complicated and too difficult for them to settle, cases involving bloodshed, accusations, lawsuits, and various kinds of assault. To assist the local officials, the Lord would establish a central "court" at His sanctuary where the priests and Levites would share their wisdom and explain the law of God. In Israel, God's law was National Law, and the best ones to interpret and apply the law were the priest and the Levites.

This sanctuary "court" was not a court of appeals where a convicted person could seek a 2nd trial, nor was it an advisory committee whose decisions could be accepted or rejected. It was a court that tried cases carefully and whose decisions were authoritative and binding.

Anyone who showed contempt for the authority of the courts or the decisions that they rendered was actually showing contempt for God and His law. Such rebels were guilty of a capital crime and were subjected to the death penalty. God would not have rebellious citizens in His nation or permit people to resist His law presumptuously. No sacrifices were provided for such presumptuous sin (Num 15:30-36).

Application: When Woodrow Wilson became the US president, he said, “There are a good many problems before the American people today, and before me as President, but I expect to find the solution of those problems just in the proportion that I am faithful in the study of the Word of God”.

Statesman Daniel Webster said, “If we abide by the principles taught in the Bible, our country will go on prospering and to prosper; but if we and our posterity neglect its instruction and authority, no man can tell how sudden a catastrophe may overwhelm us and bury our glory in profound obscurity”.

Living as we do in a democratic and pluralistic society, we can't expect the government to make the Bible its official guidebook, but it sure would help if professed Christians and Christian churches would major on preaching and teaching and obeying the Word of God.

The Authority Structure in Israel

Israel had 4 different levels of authority: (1) The judges and officers who were elected by the people – they deal with the everyday affairs of life. (2) The priests who were chosen because of their ancestry – they had to be from Aaron's line. (3) The king who was chosen by the Lord Himself – they had to be from the line of Judah. (4) The Prophet who could be from any tribe at all – they were called by the Lord. These acted as checks and balances for each other: If the judges and officers were corrupt, the king could deal with them because he is the highest civil authority. So could the priests because they were the spiritual authority ordained by God. If the priests were corrupt, the king could also deal with them because he was the civil authority in the land. But if the king was corrupt, then God would raise up the prophets to speak to the king (e.g. Nathan to David).

But what would the people do, if everyone was corrupt, together with the prophet and priest as in Jeremiah's days (see 6:13; 8:10)? Then the only thing that is left is for God to move in and judge the people and destroy the land. One can know how near one is to destruction by the level of corruption in any society.

Godly Kings (Deut 17:14-17)

Israel was to be a theocracy, ruled by God, with the Levites who were scattered throughout the land to teach the people His laws, while the priests and judges were to enforce the law justly. When the Israelites bring their tithes and sacrifices to the central sanctuary 3 times each year, all the adult males would celebrate the Lord's goodness and worship their King, the Lord God of Israel.

But the Lord knew they would yearn to be like the nations and seek after a king, so He gave them laws that would protect them and provide for His people wise kings who will ensure Israel's continued prosperity IF they obeyed Him. The king was to be chosen by God and had to be from Israel. Whenever God wanted to chasten His people, He would set a foreign ruler over them and let the people experience the contrast between His goodness and the oppressiveness of the idolatrous Gentiles. Israel's king must put his full trust in the Lord and not depend on horses and armies (v16), foreign alliances based on marriage (v 17a) and material wealth (v17b). King Solomon violated all 3 of these regulations and it led him and Israel into sin.

Wisdom for the King (Deut 17:18-20)

The most important qualification for the king was a personal knowledge of the law of God (v18-20). He was to write out his own copy of the law, using the official copy provided by the priests (31:9,24-26), read it regularly, and take it to heart (cf. Josh 1:7-8). His study of the law would help him rule the people justly and wisely. It would also reveal to him the character of God and would keep him from getting proud and abusing the authority given by the Lord.

Faithful Spiritual Leaders (Deut 18:1-8)

The church of Jesus Christ is a priesthood (1 Peter 2:5,9) fulfilling God's original intention for all the first-born of Israel to be priests unto Him (Ex 13:1-2; 22:29; 34:20; Lev 27:26). How was it that the Levites were chosen to be priests instead of all the first-born males of every tribe of Israel?

- The First-born Belongs to the LORD (Ex 13:1-2; 24:4-5)
- The Levites chosen as Priests instead (Num 3:12-13, 45; 8:17)
- How the Levites won the Blessing (Ex 32:25-29)

The Priests' Due (Deut 18:3-5)

The priests received specified parts from the sacrifices except for the burnt offering which was totally consumed on the altar. They would burn a handful of the meal offering on the altar and keep the rest for themselves, and various parts of the animal sacrifices were given to them as their due (Lev 6:8-7:38). They were also given the firstfruits of the grain, oil, wine and wool. This OT practice carries over into the NT (1Cor 9:13-14; Luke 10:7; 1 Tim 5:18). If the people didn't support the priests as God commanded, then the priests would have to find their support elsewhere; and this would take them away from the ministry at the sanctuary. But only the priests could offer the sacrifices, care for the lamps and the table of bread, and burn the incense on the golden altar. Without the presence of the priests, the ministry at the sanctuary would come to a halt and the people would be without intercession and spiritual help.

It is different in the New Testament because ALL believers now have the privilege of going into the presence of God directly through Christ Jesus. But it is nonetheless true that God HAS raised up certain ones in His body to be in “full-time” ministry.

The Levites (Deut 18:6-8)

The Levites lived in 48 cities scattered throughout Israel (Josh 21). They would come in on scheduled times to minister at the sanctuary in their specified tasks (cf. 1Ch 23-26). The priests and Levites could purchase land if they wanted to (1Ki 2:26; Jer 32:7; Acts 4:36-37) and even get an income from the land; but their major interest had to be serving at the sanctuary and helping the people know God and obey His Word.

If a Levite sold or leased his property and came to the sanctuary because of his love for the Lord and His house, he must be permitted to serve there and to share in the gifts that the people brought. The fact that he earned money by leasing or selling his land did not change this policy.

In the time of Nehemiah, the people didn't bring their tithes and offerings faithfully to the temple, and some of the Levites had to return to their lands in order to live (Neh 13:10-14). Nehemiah urged the people to obey the Word and support their spiritual leaders and they brought their tithes and offerings to be distributed to the Levites.

It's tragic the way professed Christians fail to support their churches by faithfully bringing their tithes and offerings, yet expect their churches to help them when they have needs and problems.

[The Abominations of Satan \(Deut 18:9-14\)](#)

If people don't know the true and living God and don't have His Word to guide them, they will find substitutes to help them make decisions and face up to the demands of life. People are incurably religious because God has put a God-sized vacuum in every human soul to enable them to yearn for Him (John 1:9) - the light of Creation (Ps 19; Rom 1:18-32) and of Conscience (Rom 2:14-16). When men reject the light that God gives (the light of creation and conscience, Ps 19; Rom 1:19-20; 2:14-16), they will be turned to idolatry and myths (2Tim 4:3-4). Regardless of what religious experts in "comparative religions" might say, pagan idolatrous religion is SATAN worship (1 Cor 10:14-22; Rev 9:20).

The explosion of the occult in recent years is evidence that people are seeking in the wrong places for the spiritual help they need. People who refuse to love the truth MUST end up believing lies (2 Thess 2:7-12) and only Jesus Christ can deliver them from the bondage that these occult practices being to their lives.

God forbids His people to have anything to do with occult practices and had already warned them to have nothing to do with them (Ex 22:18; Lev 17:7; 19:26,31; 20:6,27). He gave more details here.

The false prophet Balaam found that no sorcery could work against Israel (Num 23:23), but the Jews could ensnare themselves if they investigated these dangerous practices and got themselves involved.

One reason why God commanded Israel to wipe out these nations in Canaan was because of their evil occult practices (Deut 18:14) and why should the conqueror follow the religion that brought judgment to the conquered?

[Relevance to Us Today:](#) Lest we conclude that these warnings don't apply to believers today, the New Testament lists idolatry and witchcraft among the sins of the flesh (Gal 5:19-21), and says that occult practices will be widespread in the end times (Rev 9:20-21; 18:2). These are the ones who are destined for the lake of fire (Rev 21:8; 22:14-15).

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[The Abominations of Satan \(Deut 18:9-14\)](#)

Moses listed the practices that were forbidden by God, beginning with sacrificing children (Deut 18:10; 12:31). If you want to worship Satan, you have to pay the price he demands. He will give you what you want if you give him what he wants. He offered Jesus the kingdoms of the world in return for one act of worship (Matt 4:8-10) and he sneered at Job and claimed that Job worshipped God only for His gifts (Job 1-2). There are poems, novels and plays in ancient and modern literature telling about people who sold themselves to Satan, received their "rewards", and then regretted they had ever entered into the bargain.

The 2nd forbidden practice is divination which is seeking to get secret knowledge, especially about future events. Divination was widely practiced in the ancient world in various ways, including interpreting omens, consulting the stars, inspecting various animal organs, using divining rods, interpreting dreams, watching the movement of the water, and contacting the dead (1 Sam 28). In some way, the sacrificing of children was also involved in divination. Mediums, necromancers, and spiritists consulted the dead with the hopes of learning forbidden things about the future.

The diviner wants to know about the future, but the sorcerer wants to control people and the future by using various forms of magic, witchcraft, and spells. By being in league with the demons and casting spells, magicians and witches seek to influence people and events to achieve their own selfish purposes. People in today's "scientific world" may scoff at these things, but demonic forces are already working in the "modern" Western world with greater subtlety than with the "backward" peoples of the Third World.

If any Jew ever considered getting involved with these wicked practices, he must consider Moses' admonition, "You shall be blameless before the Lord your God" (v13). "Blameless" implies not sinless perfection, but a heart totally devoted to the Lord. It speaks of integrity and an undivided heart. [No believer today is allowed to practice such things. What does the Lord about those "Christians" who consult or read their horoscopes in newspapers and other media?](#)

[The Revelation of the True God \(Deut 18:14-19\)](#)

Israel did not need to experiment with new religions because the true God has already revealed Himself and His Word to them through Moses, His chosen prophet. Once you have the real thing, why do you still search for substitutes?

Jesus Himself said, "You worship that which you do not know; we worship that which we know, for salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22) With this statement, He rejected all other religions except Old Testament Judaism and New Testament Christianity.

Moses promises the people that God would raise up other prophets as the nation needed them, and the people were to give heed to their message and obey it, for their message would be the Word of God. God raised up many prophets: some were oral prophets (e.g. Elijah and Elisha) and some wrote their prophecies down (the Major and Minor Prophets in the OT). These prophets rebuked Israel for their sin and encouraged them to holy living, but they pointed to the coming of the Messiah who would be the Saviour of the world

Over the centuries, Jewish scholars interpreted v15 to refer to a special prophet who would appear before Messiah came to establish His kingdom. They knew that Elijah would return at the end of the age (Mal 4:5) and wondered if John the Baptist was Elijah (Luke 3:1-9; Matt 3:4). John denied being Elijah or that prophet (John 1:19-21). He was the forerunner of Messiah (Isa 40:3-5). In one sense John was an "Elijah" who prepared the way for Christ (Mt 11:14; 17:12; Lk 4 1:13-17).

Moses was doing more than promise the whole line of prophets that the Lord would send; he was also announcing the coming of the Prophet, the Lord Jesus Christ (see Acts 3:22-26).

Our Lord has 3 offices: Prophet, Priest and King. When He ministered on earth, He declared God's Word as Prophet, and by the inspiration of His Spirit has caused it to be written down for our learning. He intercedes now for His people as High Priest in heaven (Heb 7:25) and He also sits on the throne and reigns as King, working out His purposes in this world (1Cor 15:25; Eph 1:18-23). One day He will return and reign on earth as King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Rev 19:11ff).

[Our Response to God's Revelation of Himself and His Son](#)

It is a serious thing to hear God's Word and not respect and obey it, for it is the Word of the living God, the God of truth. The written Scriptures are a priceless treasure; they teach us what we need to know about God, the way of salvation, and how to live godly lives and please Him. There is NO substitute for the Word of God. Peter was right when he said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life."

[Identification of True Prophets \(Deut 18:20-22\)](#)

Moses promised that God would send prophets who would teach them what they needed to know, so it was imperative that they could identify who these true prophets of God were. The first test was doctrinal (Deut 13:1-5) – they were to test everything by the Word of God, not by signs, wonders or dreams which come true. The second test was practical (Deut 18:20-22) – it had to come true, 100% accuracy.

Modern day "prophets" boast of being 75% or 80% accurate, but that admission brands them already as false prophets. A prophet sent by God is NEVER wrong; what he predicts WILL COME TO PASS.

[Relevance to Us Today:](#) Believers today must exercise spiritual discernment because "many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 Jn 4:1-6). John makes it clear that the first test of a true minister of the Word is the confession that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh and is indeed the Son of God (doctrinal test) and his life will be lived out in submission to Jesus' Lordship, resulting in obedience to God's commands, love for others and a pure life (moral test).

Notes adapted and taken from "The Bible Exposition Commentary", Old Testament, Genesis-Deuteronomy by Warren W Wiersbe

[Manslaughter and Murder \(Deut 19\)](#)

The people of Israel were greatly blessed. They had the Lord God for their King, a wonderful land for their home, and a holy law for their guide, and yet they faced some of the same problems that society today faces. Sinful human nature being what it is, nations will always have to deal with "man's inhumanity to man". Because the heart of every problem is still the problem of the heart, laws are necessary to bring order to society, to restrain evil, and to help control behaviour. But laws can never change the human heart. Only the grace of God can do that.

This portion of Scripture emphasizes the fact that God holds human life precious and wants us to treat people fairly, for they are made in the image of God (Gen 9:1-7). God's desire for all nations is, "But let justice roll down like waters And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). His standard for us individually is, "He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8)

[Justice in the Land \(Deut 19:1-20\)](#)

The Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier called justice "the hope of all who suffer, the dread of all who wrong." That's the ideal, but it isn't always achieved in real life.

Without justice, society would fall apart, anarchy would take over, and it wouldn't be safe for people to leave their homes. Israel didn't have the elaborate police system we have today, so locating and punishing guilty criminals depended primarily on the elders and the judges. By singling out the "cities of refuge", the Lord promoted justice in the land.

[The Cities of Refuge \(Deut 19:1-3\)](#)

There were already 3 cities of refuge east of the Jordan (Deut 4:42-42). It would be Joshua's responsibility to set up the other 3 cities west of the Jordan after Israel had conquered the land (Josh 20). All these cities were easily accessible to those who needed protection. The roads had to be kept in good repair and clearly marked. Rabbinical tradition states that there were signs at all the crossroads pointing the way to the nearest city of refuge. The Lord wanted to make it easy for the innocent manslayer to escape the vengeance of angry people.

[The Manslayer \(Deut 19:4-6\)](#)

Modern law follows Moses in distinguishing between murder and manslaughter (Exo 21:12-14; Lev 24:17). When manslaughter occurs, the manslayer had to flee immediately or else a member of the victim's family might chase him down and become the "avenger of blood" and kill him. Israel had no system for locating and arresting suspected criminals; it was left to the family of the victim to see that justice was done. The "avenger of blood" wasn't given authority to act as judge, jury and executioner; he was only to hand the accused over to the proper officers.

But if the relative was angry, he might take the law into his own hands and kill an innocent man. By fleeing to the city of refuge, the manslayer was safe until the facts of the case could be examined and a verdict declared. If found innocent, he was allowed to live safely in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest. Even though he was innocent, he still paid a price for accidentally killing another human being. If he left the city of refuge, his life was in danger and the elders couldn't protect him.

Relevance to Us Today: These cities of refuge illustrate our salvation in Jesus Christ to us who have "fled for refuge in laying hold of the hope set before us" (Heb 6:18) but they do so by contrast. The man who fled to Israel did so because he wasn't guilty of murder, but we flee because we are guilty and deserve to be judged. Nobody has to investigate our case because we know we have sinned and deserve God's punishment. In the case of the cities of refuge, the innocent man was allowed to live, but in our case, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Innocent One, was condemned to die.

The Israelite had to remain in the city of refuge, for if he left, he might die at the hand of the avenger. The believer can only live IF he stays in Christ, our city of refuge, for if he ever forsakes Christ or refuses to believe in Christ, then he will die (this is the sad case of the "professing" believer; see Heb 6:4-6). The Israelite had to stay until the death of the high priest. The believer in Christ can never leave our city of refuge, because our great High Priest ever lives, thus all believers live IN Christ!

There is also another way this truth is illustrated. The devil killed us by enticing us to sin and thus our Lord Jesus Christ, our Kinsman Redeemer, as the avenger of blood must do justice by destroying our murderer, i.e., the devil, AND HE DID!

Three More Cities of Refuge (Deut 19:7-10)

The Lord also made arrangements for the nation to add 3 more cities of refuge if the borders of their land were expanded. He had promised Israel a large land (Gen 15:18; Ex 23:31), and if they had obeyed His Law, He would have kept His promise. It was only during the reign of David that they obtained much of the territory promised in Genesis 15:18-20 (though not all). But they lost it when things fell apart during Solomon's reign when he introduced idolatry into Israel. If we don't obey God's will and claim God's promises, we can never receive all that God wants us to have.

The Murderer (Deut 19:11-13)

What about a man who deliberately killed another and then flees to the city of refuge? The elders of the man's city had to send to the city of refuge and bring the murderer to his native city so that he could be tried and if found guilty, be executed. God expected each citizen to be concerned about seeing that justice was done in the land. It would be easy for the officers in the murderer's home city to let the elders in the city of refuge worry about the case, but that wouldn't promote justice or prevent the defilement of the land and the only way to cleanse the land was to punish the offender (Num 35:33).

The Thief (Deut 19:14)

After the conquest and division of the land, each tribe had their assigned territory. Each family and clan would make its own claim and mark it out with boundary stones. Everybody was expected to honor these landmarks because to move these stones was to steal their land (Prov 22:28). There were no real estate maps in those days. Unscrupulous officials could easily exploit poor widows and orphans and take away their land and their income (Prov 15:25; 23:10-11). Since God owned the land and the people were His tenants, moving the stones also meant stealing from God, and He would punish them (Hose 5:10). No wonder this crime was included among the curses announced from Mount Ebal (Deut 27:17). The punishment of the murderer reminded them that human life is precious. The punishment of the thief reminded them that personal property must be respected.

The Liar (Deut 19:15-21)

Every system of justice depends on people knowing the truth and speaking the truth. To bear false witness is to break God's commandment (Ex 20:16) and to undermine the foundation of the legal system. The person who swears to tell the truth and then tells lies is committing perjury, which itself is a serious crime.

The Jewish law required 2 or 3 witnesses to establish the guilt of an accused person (Deut 17:6; Num 35:30), and both Jesus (Matt 18:16) and Paul (2Cor 13:1; 1Tim 5:19) applied this principle to local church discipline. The fact of 2 or 3 witnesses doesn't guarantee that they are telling the truth (1Ki 21:1-14), but Moses warned that false witnesses would be punished with the same punishment they wanted for the accused.

However, there could be situations where only one witness stands up to accuse a person and he is a false witness. What then? Both the accused and the single witness would have to go to the central court at the sanctuary and present the case to the priests and the judges there (Deut 17:8-13). If the court discovers that the single witness is not telling the truth, he would receive the same sentence that would have been given to the accused if he had been guilty. This law would make liars think twice before falsely accusing an innocent person (Prov 19:5,9). Sometimes people say that fear of punishment is not a deterrent, however Deut 19:20 says otherwise. Who would you choose to believe?

Moses closed this section by reminding the people that in every case, the punishment must fit the crime (Deut 19:21; Exo 21:23-25). This is known as the lex talionis, which is Latin for "the law of retaliation". This judicial principle emphasizes fairness and human treatment at a time in history when punishments were terribly brutal.

When our Lord referred to the Lex Talionis in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:38-42), He wasn't talking about the official judicial system but about how believers should deal with personal offenses and injuries. He wasn't rescinding the OT law, because He came to fulfill it (Matt 5:17-20). He was prohibiting His disciples from "paying back in kind" those who offend them or take advantage of them. If our law courts followed what our Lord meant for personal believers and applied them judicially, our country would be in the hands of criminals! Jesus meant believers to never take personal vengeance but to leave such matters to the Lord (Rom 12:17-21).

