

Pursuing Holiness in an Unholy Culture

Deuteronomy 7:1-26

Introduction

In Romans 15:4, the apostle Paul wrote, “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.”

Deuteronomy 7:1-26

When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you—² and when the LORD your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. ³ Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, ⁴ for they will turn your children away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD’s anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you. ⁵ This is what you are to do to them: Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire. ⁶ For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

⁷ The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. ⁸ But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. ⁹ Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. ¹⁰ But

those who hate him he will repay to their face by destruction;
he will not be slow to repay to their face those who hate him.

¹¹ Therefore, take care to follow the commands, decrees and laws I give you today.

¹² If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the LORD your God will keep his covenant of love with you, as he swore to your ancestors. ¹³ He will love you and bless you and increase your numbers. He will bless the fruit of your womb, the crops of your land—your grain, new wine and olive oil—the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks in the land he swore to your ancestors to give you. ¹⁴ You will be blessed more than any other people; none of your men or women will be childless, nor will any of your livestock be without young. ¹⁵ The LORD will keep you free from every disease. He will not inflict on you the horrible diseases you knew in Egypt, but he will inflict them on all who hate you. ¹⁶ You must destroy all the peoples the LORD your God gives over to you. Do not look on them with pity and do not serve their gods, for that will be a snare to you.

¹⁷ You may say to yourselves, “These nations are stronger than we are. How can we drive them out?” ¹⁸ But do not be afraid of them; remember well what the LORD your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt. ¹⁹ You saw with your own eyes the great trials, the signs and wonders, the mighty hand and outstretched arm, with which the LORD your God brought you out. The LORD your God will do the same to all the peoples you now fear. ²⁰ Moreover, the LORD your God will send the hornet among them until even the survivors who hide from you have perished. ²¹ Do not be terrified by them, for the LORD your God, who is among you, is a great and awesome God. ²² The LORD your God will drive out those nations before you, little by little. You will not be allowed to eliminate them all at once, or the wild animals will multiply around you. ²³ But the LORD your God will deliver them over to you, throwing them into great confusion until they are destroyed. ²⁴ He will give their kings into your hand, and you will wipe out their names from under heaven. No one will be able to stand up against you; you will destroy them. ²⁵ The images of their gods you are to burn in the fire. Do not covet the silver and gold on them, and do not take it for yourselves, or you will be ensnared by it, for it is detestable to the LORD your God. ²⁶ Do not bring a detestable thing into your house or you, like it, will be set apart for destruction. Regard it as vile and utterly detest it, for it is set apart for destruction.

Exposition

This morning's passage has a lot to teach us about pursuing holiness amid an unholy culture. Moses' instruction to the Israelites was given as they prepared to enter the land that the LORD God had promised Abraham and his descendants. For those interested in the background, you can read about these promises in Genesis 12. For the sake of time, however, we can summarize the promises to Abraham as a promise to make his descendants into a great nation that would dwell in a particular land that God would provide for them and that they would be a blessing to all peoples of the earth. As God fulfilled this promise, the people grew and were known as Israel. Our passage, Deuteronomy 7, tells a portion of the story of how God would keep His promise to Israel by delivering them into the promised land.

The problem with the promised land, however, was that it was occupied. Verse 1 lists the seven nations in this region at that time as follows:¹

- **Hittites** - Came from Anatolia, though from an early date there were Hittite migrants settling in Palestine
- **Girgashites** - May have been a tribal people living in the north of Palestine.
- **Amorites** and **Canaanites** - Amorites were probably located in the Judean hill country and the Canaanites further west, toward the coast land
- **Perizzites** - Like the Amorites, appear to have been a group living in the central hill country
- **Hivites** - Perhaps "tent-villagers," were located in the north of Palestine in the vicinity of the Lebanon mountains, though they may have been distributed more extensively
- **Jebusites** - A group of people controlling the region of Jerusalem and the territory surrounding the city, and they were to prove to be among the most stalwart in their resistance to the Israelite settlers

These nations represent the enemies of Israel that had to be driven out of the land before the Israelites could settle there in fulfillment of the LORD's promise. God commanded the Israelites to trust Him and enter the land occupied by these nations. Though these nations were larger and greater than the Israelite, they were to believe that God would keep His promise and drive His enemies out of the land for His people.

As they obeyed God and moved into the land which He promised to them, they Israelites were to keep themselves holy, unstained from the unholy culture into which they were stepping. As verse 2 states, the Israelites were forbidden from making peace with the inhabitants of the land. They were commanded to go in and drive their enemies out. They were to defeat their enemies completely by the power and provision of the LORD. Admittedly, the language of verse 2 is jarring. It is unsettling to read the words of our merciful God coming through Moses commanding the Israelites to "show no mercy." Our impulse at this moment may be to think, "Why wouldn't God be merciful?" This is not a bad question. In fact, it is a good question because it is one that is wrestling with the nature of God as He has revealed Himself in His Word.

When God revealed Himself to Moses, He described Himself as "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin."

¹ Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 178.

And to this we say, “Amen.” But we must not cut God off when He is talking. He continues to describe Himself to Moses, saying, “Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.”

You see, it is absolutely true that God is merciful. Yet He is not only merciful, He is also just. And while God had shown mercy to the inhabitants of the land for centuries, allowing the rain to fall, as Jesus would say, “on the just and unjust,” there would also come a time of judgment for the people in the land who did not turn to God and acknowledge Him rightly. We see this in the example of Rahab as she and her household are delivered from judgment at the Battle of Jericho. Rahab abandoned the gods of her upbringing and turned to the one true God, and she was saved, along with everyone else in her household. You see, God is certainly and truly merciful, but He will not leave the guilty unpunished. If the guilty resolve to remain in their guilty and spurn His mercy and grace, one day judgment will come, which is what we are seeing in Deuteronomy 7.

The LORD is using Israel in a special way, as an instrument, to punish these seven evil nations. It is not so much that Israel is driving out the inhabitants of the promised land as it is the LORD driving them out. And as the LORD using the Israelites to punish and drive out the evil nations, they must be holy, set apart for the work that He is calling them to, which is why He commands the Israelites to not intermarry with the pagan nations.

And just as a sidenote, because some people have used this passage in terrible ways, the command to “not intermarry” is not about race or ethnicity, it is about religion. Scripture nowhere prohibits people of different ethnicities from marrying one another. On the flipside, though, Scripture is very clear that God’s people should marry only those who believe and follow God as they do. Believers should not marry unbelievers in hopes of changing them. We are not to be “unequally yoked.” However, if you are here this morning, and you find yourself married to someone who does not believe as you do, take heart, as long as your spouse is willing to live with you in an understanding manner, and they are not abusing or harming you, Scripture encourages you to remain married to them in hopes that God would use you in their life. There is more to say on this point, but I did not want to pass over this verse without making some clarifying comments about what is actually being forbidden in the passage.

Not only were the Israelites not to intermarry with the nations, but they were not to tolerate their idols or places of worship in the land. Why? Verse 6 tells us, “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.” As the holy people of the LORD, Israel was to live different amid an unholy culture.

Verses 7-11 go on to develop this theme of holiness in relationship to God’s election of Israel. We are told that they were not chosen because of something inherently good in them. They were not promised victory because they were powerful or had great potential. No. God set His affection upon them because it was His pleasure to do so. The LORD’s choice was rooted in His love.

From His pronouncement of love for His people, the LORD moves on to warn them of the temptations that they will face as they enter into the land. Verses 12-16 deal with Israel’s lust for the nations. Verses 17-26 deal with Israel’s fear of the nation.

With verse 12-16, the LORD knows that the enemies that the Israelites are dispossessing are well-known for their pagan worship, which was part of what is known as a fertility cult. What this means is that the nations believed that worshipping their gods was what made them have children and lots of crops. Thus, the temptation that the Israelites would face as they enter the promised land would be the temptation to receive blessings through unholy means. The temptation would be to not trust the LORD to provide everything that He promised to provide, but instead, turn to the idols of the nations.

The other temptation, which is noted in verse 17-26, is the temptation of fearing the enemies. The Israelites would not be blind to the greatness and power of their enemies. They were more numerous. They were more settled. Yet their enemies lacked what the Israelites possessed: the favor of the LORD God's presence which would go before them. The battle already belonged to the LORD. The victory was already assured. All the Israelites had to do was walk in that victory. To keep themselves unstained by the unholy culture that they were enter and obey what God has commanded. His Word would not fail!

Conclusion

Thus, the words of Deuteronomy 7 which the Israelites heard through Moses from the LORD would serve to prepare them to live as a chosen and holy people committed to the God who had guaranteed their victory over their enemies as they settled in the promised land. It would fill them with hope to pursue holiness in an unholy culture.

Application

There are so many points of application that we could draw out of this passage this morning for our lives as Christians who have been called to pursue holiness in an unholy culture. We too, like the Israelites in Deuteronomy, are called "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (1 Peter 2:9). Ephesians 1:3 tells us that we have been chosen in Christ in love to "be holy and blameless in his sight." We too belong to God as His people not on the basis of any merit of our own, but completely on the basis of His mercy in Christ alone.

So, while it true that Deuteronomy 7 is describing the terms of warfare for Israel against the seven nations at a particular time in history, there is still great implications for Christians who are likewise engaged in warfare, but of a different kind.

As Ephesians 6:12 tells us, "For our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" So, as we march forward to take possession of the promised land that Christ has secured for us through His life, death, and resurrection, what might we learn from Deuteronomy 7 about pursuing holiness in an unholy culture?

- 1) Realize that who you are precedes how you live. (Parallel w/ "my chosen people")
- 2) Refuse to make peace with "the world." - James 4:4 (Parallel w/ "no mercy")
- 3) Recognize God's Victory in Christ. - John 16:33 (Parallel w/ "the LORD your God is among you")
- 4) Repent like Rahab.