

CHOOSE LIFE



2019

Lessons in Deuteronomy by Mark Hamilton

Reading an ancient text for a vibrant church in today's interconnected world.

Choose Life

LESSONS IN DEUTERONOMY BY MARK HAMILTON

LESSON 1

“Introduction to Deuteronomy: Joy and Peace for the Exodus People”

Deuteronomy as literature takes the form of a sermon by Moses that sets forth the covenant between God and Israel. The covenant depends on God’s gracious action in liberating Israel during the exodus, not on human achievements of any source. The proper human response to this grace, however, is a life of worship, ethical behavior, and concern for the poor and marginalized.

LESSON 2

“The God Who Brings People to Life” (Deut 4:32-40; 6:4-8)

This week’s text reminds us that faith is not a purely individual pursuit. It arises out of a people’s response to God’s initiative on their behalf. It passes from generation to generation, as each age encounters God’s grace in its own time. This faith does not involve merely the acceptance of information about some past experience. Rather, it comes alive over and over again as each generation finds God living in their midst, calling them to a life of generosity, ethical behavior, and worship. The task of the older generation, whether parents or not, is to pass along to children an awareness of, and appreciation for what has happened to the people who have placed their trust in the God who does wonders.

LESSON 3

“Renewing Ethics” (Deut 5:6-33)

The Ten Commandments outline basic commitments of Israel’s ethics. First, ethical behavior derives from the character and actions of God, not arbitrary rules. Since God has acted graciously, so do we. Conversely, failure to recognize God as the source of life and hope leads to oppression and neglect. Second, the commandments concern basic human justice, the care of the powerless (strangers, servants, and even animals), and a life of nonviolence and contentment. Third, ethics takes the form of concrete behaviors and rituals, such as Sabbath, that remind us of higher commitments than personal happiness.

LESSON 4

“How to Recover from Failure” (Deut 9:1-12, 10:12-22)

A temptation facing people of faith is confidence in our own righteousness, a sense that our failures are somehow less than those of others. The opposite is also true: failure can lead to despair. Deuteronomy 9-10, however, note that despite Israel’s failures, God remains faithful and asks us of us only worship of him and respect for our fellow human beings. Recovery from failure comes through repentance and humble acceptance of God’s gift of a new way of life. The people of God, having failed, can help each other move beyond failure to new mountain peaks of the spirit.

LESSON 5

“The Faith that Lives on After Us” (Deut 11:1-32)

This lesson builds on the previous two but extends them in two directions. First, what are the outcomes of a life of faith? How far can we take Deuteronomy's description of the blessings awaiting Israel? Second, what mechanisms exist for passing the faith on to the next generation (verses 18-21)?

LESSON 6

"Renewing Worship" (Deut 12:29-13:18)

This section, following the section allowing for slaughter away from the sanctuary and thus for a secular life, discusses the difference between worship of idols and worship of the God of Israel. True worship reflects the character of God and human indebtedness to God for the grace showered upon us. The community of Israel is to protect itself from idolatry so that it can focus on the true nature of God. Contemporary worship should reflect this attention to the character of God by focusing on the story of his redemption, fleshed out in the ministries of Word and Table.

LESSON 7

"Coming Before the God Mercy" (Deut 16:1-22)

This section focuses on sacred time, that is, those times of the year when Israel commemorated God's deeds and committed itself to living in ways that extended grace to the community and the world. Since Israel was enslaved in Egypt, it is to live mercifully in Canaan. Worship in Israel, along with its focus on the majesty and generosity of God, expresses charity toward the poor, justice for the oppressed, and a passion for a better world for all.

LESSON 8

"A Renewed Concern for the Oppressed" (Deut 15:1-18)

Grace comes not merely to individuals, but to entire groups of people. Israel, when accepting God's grace, takes on the obligation of caring for those who suffer poverty, injustice, or sickness. Specific mechanisms for care of the poor are laid out in this text. Today's Christians must ask what application these verses have for our lives today. What will it mean not merely to hand out charity to the poor, but to live side by side with them as the people of God?

LESSON 9

"Leaders for a Renewing People" (Deut 17:14-18:22)

Given Israel's high calling to be in covenant with God, the choice of leaders who will share the values and commitments of the covenant seems imperative. These chapters examine the duties, character, and goals of prophets, priests, and kings, as well as the responsibilities of followers toward such leaders. Since the need for quality leadership has not abated, today's Christians must continue to ask what sorts of leaders they need and how they are to select, affirm, and support them. Leaders need to ask how they are to serve the church in its mission of living out God's grace in the present world.

LESSON 10

"Renewed Relationships Among People" (Deut 19:1-21; 24:1-22)

These chapters fit into a larger section of laws on all manner of economic, social, religious, and interpersonal issues. The goal of all the texts is to create a society in which violence, jealousy, and rivalry are minimized, while peace, justice, and loving relationships are accentuated. These texts afford Christians an opportunity

to think deeply about our responsibilities to the most vulnerable members of society, as well as those who have violated society's norms.

LESSON 11

"Renewed Generosity and Compassion" (Deut 26:1-19)

The confession of this chapter recognizes that Israel began as one nation among many and reached its present status on the basis of God's grace. By restating the basic story of Israel's redemption and by inviting each generation to embrace this story, Deuteronomy draws a close connection between what God has done and what we should do. Specifically, Israel is to show concern for the poor and those serving as priests, to avoid confusing worship with mourning, and to embrace the commands of God *with joy*. The chapter also reminds us that renewal of the present can come by reexamining the past.

LESSON 12

"Choose Life! Moving into the Future" (Deut 30:11-20, 34:1-12)

Chapter 30 concludes the main part of the book, in which Israel agrees to live by the covenant that God proposes. Chapters 31-34 form a conclusion to all of Exodus-Deuteronomy (the life of Moses), serving as Moses' obituary and final words. Chapter 34 describes the passing of an era and the beginning of another, but at the same time reminds us that the two eras are connected by the abiding presence of the God who freed Israel in the Exodus. These texts thus offer Christians hope in the face of ever-present change.

Lesson 1: Joy and Peace for the Exodus People

Deuteronomy as literature takes the form of a sermon by Moses that sets forth the covenant between God and Israel. The covenant depends on God's gracious action in liberating Israel during the exodus, not on human achievements of any source. The proper human response to this grace, however, is a life of worship, ethical behavior, and concern for the poor and marginalized. Chapter 4 states the major themes of the book and, along the way, sketches a set of options for living a meaningful life in the world God is redeeming.

The book of Deuteronomy opens with a long recitation of Israel's story, told from the point of view of Moses as leader of an exasperating people whose grip on reality was always tenuous, and whose ability to distinguish the good gifts of God from the evils of the world was always weaker than it should have been. It is curious that the book should begin this way, for the beginning reflects a profound awareness of human sinfulness and its source in the ingratitude and self-promoting attitude that always haunts us all.

Deuteronomy 4:1-43 concludes the opening section of the book and states most of the book's major themes:

- (1) The memory of Yahweh's majestic deeds;
- (2) The central importance of obedience to God (the Hebrew expression involves the word *shamar* ["to keep"] and *'asah* ["to do"], often combined in the awkward phrase "to keep to do," or perhaps in better English, "to be sure to do"). Such obedience never appears here as a burden or something done with difficulty, but rather as a gifted way of living, an easier way of life because it conforms more closely to our true human nature and to Israel's story with God;
- (3) The role of "hearing" (Hebrew: *shama*). Though often translated "obey," the verb has a slightly different connotation than *shamar* ("to keep"). Since God speaks, reveals, communicates with Israel, Israel does well to listen carefully so that it can understand and act upon that understanding;
- (4) The importance of teaching the ways of God to our children – just as Moses was the wise teacher of his spiritual children, so also must parents and other members of the older generation model the faith for those who follow them;
- (5) The prohibition of idolatry. While worship of beings other than Yahweh is understandable for Gentiles – though not necessarily defensible (see 4:19) – it is not appropriate, or even rational, for Israel given its experiences with the sovereign Lord of all, who redeems all;
- (6) The consequences of idolatry – exile (see 4:27-29); and
- (7) The beauty of repentance that leads to recognition of God's mercy.

God is the merciful one who keeps commitments. By inviting Israel into a committed relationship, Deuteronomy asks the redeemed people to reflect God's nature in their own lives and thus to grow as human beings ought.

To understand Deuteronomy's view of the world, it is necessary to recognize that the book is trying to foster in its readers not just a mindless adherence to laws, much less one based in fear, but a loving attitude toward a God who seeks the best for humankind. To do so, it seeks a comprehensive approach to human life that embraced both the individual and the group, both a sense of history and a trust in the future, and both attention to the grand ideas of God and the most mundane elements of human life. Deuteronomy recognizes that life is never about just knocking things off a checklist, but about fashioning a strong character that can survive the difficulties of life.

This approach to religion permeates not only Deuteronomy and the historical works that follow (Joshua-2 Kings), but all of the books of the Bible. Because God is revealed to Israel as a being with

deep concerns for both the beauty of the entire created world and the integrity of its human inhabitants, the concern for a whole life pervades Scripture. Attention to past and future, to the interior life of the heart and the exterior life of the community, to place and time and things and people – all this works together to form a coherent view of reality in which human beings have the opportunity to flourish. Deuteronomy is a major contributor to this overall vision.

There is a final element to chapter 4 that must be taken seriously. That is the freedom of the redeemed people to choose repeatedly whether it will keep its commitments to the covenant. Memory, prayer, ritual, and prophecy are all tools for helping us exercise freedom for good or ill. Yet Deuteronomy's view of freedom, unlike that of contemporary American consumerism, does not reduce itself to the maximization of choice, as though good would inevitably follow from having all the choices imaginable. Rather, Deuteronomy recognizes that choices always have consequences and that life is most profoundly about the commitments we make. By freeing ourselves from commitments that destroy our capacity to be our true selves, men and women in relationship to a gracious God and thus to each other as well, we actually expand our freedom of action.

Deuteronomy does not, of course, try to work out what this sort of life would look like in a modern, pluralist society. Other biblical books do reflect on what it means to be a minority alternative community in a larger world, and they take various points of view (see Esther or Jeremiah 29 for one set of approaches, Revelation for a very different one). Yet the book of Deuteronomy does offer some basic clues for how one could be a counter-culture in service of the God of all the earth. This and other lessons in this series will take up the question of how those principles could be worked out in our own day.

For Further Reflection

1. In your experience, how does the collective memory of your church work? When the group tells its story, what things are remembered, forgotten, disagreed upon? What does this tell you about the group's understanding of itself?
2. Deuteronomy 4 introduces the rest of the book and, in doing so, it frames the norms (laws) that follow as part of an overarching story of redemption and the quest for faithfulness. In your experience, does this approach make sense? How do grace and law fit together, if they do? What tensions are involved?
3. Most studies of the question show that Christians spend very little time passing on the faith to their own children. How can we do this better? What would we need to change to ensure that this happens?

Deuteronomy speaks often of "hearing" God. How does this happen in your experience? How do you test what you think you hear against Scripture and the church's experience?

Lesson 2: The God Who Brings People to Life Deuteronomy 4:32-40, 6:4-8

Goal: to reflect on the origins of our faith and practice in the gracious actions of God. We are who we are because God has first acted among us.

This lesson covers two texts in Deuteronomy, the first in the book's initial sermon, the second in the second sermon. Each has a similar point and function.

4:32-40 clinches the whole argument of the first part of the book. God has, the text notes, acted in human events in a decisive and unprecedented way. The exodus has no parallel in human experience. Accordingly, the nation that has benefited from God's actions must live a life of obedience that leads to life. As one scholar has put it, Deuteronomy is the program for a revolution in human affairs. Under the new regime, humans live creatively and generously with each other under the leadership of God.

This paragraph lays out some of the major themes of the book:

- The revelation at Sinai
- The contrast between God and idols
- Relatedly, the contrast between Israel and other nations
- The need for God to discipline, or spiritually form, his people
- The promise to the ancestors

Some of these themes are picked up and expanded upon in 6:4-8 (and 6:20-25). The emphasis there falls upon the need for educating the future generations about the mighty deeds of God, since they are not witnesses to them. Education in Israel is to be

- Systematic
- Persistent
- Tied to the rhythms of life
- Visible and dramatic
- Reflecting the crucial issues that Israel faces

Notes

In teaching these texts, one should stress their emphasis on education and their insistence that the behavior of the people of God ultimately responds to the behavior of the God of these people. In particular, discussion in class might center around questions of:

1. What is education in the church? How do we educate each other in ways that allow us not merely to acquire Bible knowledge, but to grow more fully as disciples. What would this education look like?
2. If we were to make a list of God's deeds among us, what would that look like?
3. Deuteronomy mentions God's care for the ancestors. How important are the behaviors of past generations to us? What can we learn from them? What are the limits of our following them?
4. How can we help each other grow in spiritual disciplines?

This week's text reminds us that faith is not a purely individual pursuit. It arises out of a people's response to God's initiative on their behalf. It passes from generation to generation, as each age encounters God's grace in its own time. This faith does not involve merely the acceptance of information about some past experience. Rather, it comes alive as each generation finds God living in their midst, calling them to a life of generosity, ethical behavior, and worship. The task of the older generation, whether parents or not, is to pass along to children an awareness of, and appreciation for what has happened to the people who have placed their trust in the God who does wonders.

Points for Reflection

1. Deuteronomy seems to make a connection between God's actions and our actions. What is that connection, and how does it affect how we live today?
2. Describe how your faith has been influenced by the lives of your parents or others of their generation. What did you see in them that made God seem real in your own life?
3. For parents: what dreams do you have for the faith lives of your children? Discuss these with your children.
4. For children: how did your parents come to faith in God? What are their commitments in regards to service of those around them? Ask your parents to discuss these issues.
5. For those without children at home: How can you encourage the younger generation in their walk of faith? What concerns or hopes do you have regarding them?

Lesson 3: Renewing Ethics Deuteronomy 5:6-33

The Ten Commandments outline basic commitments of Israel's ethics. First, ethical behavior derives from the character and actions of God, not arbitrary rules. Since God has acted graciously, so do we. Conversely, failure to recognize God as the source of life and hope leads to oppression and neglect. Second, the commandments concern basic human justice, the care of the powerless (strangers, servants, and even animals), and a life of nonviolence and contentment. Third, ethics takes the form of concrete behaviors and rituals, such as Sabbath, that remind us of higher commitments than personal happiness.

The Ten Commandments are familiar territory for most Christians. We learn them in childhood. This is appropriate, because they originally were arranged for easy memorization by beginners. Ten fingers, ten commandments! They offer a basic orientation to fundamental behaviors that make a decent society possible. Their very familiarity, however, may make us underestimate their significance. Though they do not cover every imaginable area of human existence, they do provide a starting point for moral reflection.

To understand them, we should pay attention to several elements:

- (1) **Structure.** The Ten Commandments break into two recognizable sections, with a bridge linking them. Commandments 1-4 (worship God, make no idols, avoid false oaths, and keep the Sabbath) orient us to God. Commandments 6-10 (do not murder, commit adultery, steal, lie in court, or covet) focus on human relationships and processes. Commandment 5 (honor parents) links the two because reverence for those who give us life relates closely to reverence for the ultimate source of life.
- (2) **Content and Character.** Commandments against violence, sexual infidelity, theft, and abuse of judicial process would hardly seem to need explanation or defense, and they receive none in this text. A society that tolerates such behaviors will have many problems. On the other hand, some of the other commandments seem less than obvious. Take the last one first. How does one enforce a command against covetousness? Answer: the commandment is trying to form character, not merely to create external rules. This commandment directly concerns justice because it instructs us to allow to each person what is rightfully his or hers. It assumes that humans need certain things to exist and that God's people should make sure that persons receive that much. Extend this point further to other commandments. For example, the rule of the Sabbath, because it concentrates on how a community regards itself in the presence of God, reveals two important aspects of justice. (a) Justice involves every person in the community, not just those with power. (b) Justice is rooted in God's creative act. We treat others justly because doing so helps return us to the state God intended for us in the first place. Moreover, the Commandments' attempt to connect human behavior with the nature and actions of God operates in the foundational commandments against idolatry and "taking God's name in vain" (involving God in our plans when we do not intend to be godly). The God of Israel does not resemble the unjust, fickle, cruel gods of the nations, but rather seeks the wholeness and happiness of human beings. To please God, to live as God intended humans to live, and thus to become God's people, we must treat each other well.
- (3) **Stories, laws, and spiritual formation.** Behind the Ten Commandments lies a story, as the introduction makes clear. The story is that God has rescued slaves from bondage and led them to a land in which they can flourish as free people. No longer must they be subject to the cruel whims of others. Now they must act as moral agents on their own. This story of faith creates the context in which the laws make sense. We can draw two further lessons from this observation. The first is that many of the biblical stories make sense as ways of reflecting on the norms of behavior set forth in the Ten Commandments and other biblical law. Think of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39; adultery), or the murder of

Naboth (1 Kings 21; bearing false witness), or the failed siege of Jericho (Joshua 7; involving God and the things of God in one's own nefarious plans), or the many stories of idolatry. The moral reflection that goes on in storytelling assumes a set of basic orientations like those of the Ten Commandments.

The second lesson is that the story of the people of God constantly returns to a consideration of the norms guiding us. Or, to put it another way, the commandments get lived out in the lives of men, women, and children. Committing to the practices of justice in the Ten Commandments will allow the story of our lives to work itself out in a godly direction.

- (4) **So it may go well for you, and you may live long.** The commandment concerning parents states a goal that applies at some level to all the commandments. God's desire for humans is that we should flourish as fully as possible. This happens when we show sustained concern for the welfare of all those around us. Responsibility is the name of the game.
- (5) **Education.** Remember that the Ten Commandments are easy to learn and very suitable for children. This is no accident. We want to raise just people from childhood on, not allow them to discover this major part of their discipleship late in life.

Important Lessons

The Ten Commandments rest on some assumptions that we do well to recover.

- ☸ The people of God are a community in which the welfare of each is the concern of all. We cannot view each other as objects to be used, but as fellow heirs of the saving acts of God.
- ☸ God works to establish justice in the world. God does not validate the power structures as we see them. Therefore, we must question those same power structures so that we can work for their eventual demise and their replacement by a world of peace. At the very least, we must make sure that they do not become characteristic of the church.
- ☸ Justice operates in the family (honor father and mother), in the economy (let everyone rest), in friendships (do not covet or lie), and so, in short, in every human relationship. Our work for justice is, at its core, work to build relationships with as many as possible.
- ☸ Worship of one God leads us to see the people of God as one people. We cannot truly worship God while allowing our brothers and sisters to remain in want.
- ☸ The story of redemption is an ongoing story initiated by God but lived out by us all. In practicing justice in our own lives, we imitate God's acts of deliverance and so become more faithful to our own calling.

Exodus 20:1-6 and Deuteronomy 5:1-10 contain the prologue to the Ten Commandments and the first commandments proper. Deuteronomy is an expanded version of Exodus. We should notice the elements of each text

Exodus

God's name (the Lord your God)
 God's action: deliverance from Egypt
 Command: do not have other gods
 Command: do not make an image
 Qualification: no image fitting any habitat
 or appearance known to people

Deuteronomy

Charge: love and keep God's words
 Reminder: God made a covenant with Israel
 Reminder: God spoke face to face with
 Israel
 Reminder (and qualification of previous
 one): Moses is the mediator
 God's name
 God's action: deliverance from Egypt
 Command: do not have other gods
 Command: do not make an image
 Qualification: no image fitting any habitat
 or appearance known to people

(compare Genesis 1)

Repeat command: do not serve them

Reason: "I am the Lord"

Qualifications of God: "jealous/loyal,"
Attentive to sin but merciful

Repeat command: do not bow to or serve
them

Reason: "I am the Lord"

Qualifications of God: same as Exodus

The basic ideas here are clear enough, but to understand the text's theological aims, we must notice how it portrays God acting and how humans should respond to those actions. (1) The texts wish to portray God as separate from the creation yet profoundly involved in it. Unlike other ancient and modern religious texts, which either risk making God simply a feature of the natural world or isolating God so fully from the world as to leave us out of touch with the divine realm, the biblical account seeks to maintain a balance. (2) Worship risks idolatry whenever it confuses the creature with the creator, no matter how blessed or perfect the creature may be. (3) Worship of God derives from the story of God's people. Worship does not happen in a historical vacuum, but rather in a continuum of past, present, and future experience.

The law of the Sabbath rests on the assumption that we can trust God enough to lay aside our habits of acquisitiveness and our desires to reduce others to the level of things. The law also creates a way for free people to preserve their freedom by creating a community of respect and dignity involving all its members. The Bible roots the practice of observing Sabbath in creation (Genesis 1:1-2:4; Exodus 20) and in Exodus (Deuteronomy 5), events that it often sees as two of a kind. Both events and the stories reporting them point to a deep feature of reality, the status of everything and everyone as a creature of God.

Hence some of the details of the story in Exodus 16, which we might well consider this week. In this story, Yahweh feeds Israel with "bread from heaven," instructing them to gather just enough manna each day for solid meals, but twice as much on Friday so as to allow them to rest on the Sabbath. None would be available that day. The story of the miracle of the manna reveals a God anxious not just to feed slaves, but to bring them dignity through rest, planning, and commitment. Israel's deep need to learn trust explains several details of the story, including the unexpected rotting of the surplus manna (except on the Sabbath), the attention to the special nature of the Sabbath itself, the emphasis on the vision of God's glory (Exodus 16:7-8), the strange manner of winning the battle with the Amalekites (Exodus 17:8-16), and so on. These unanticipated behaviors teach Israel to think in new ways. Also, the narrator helps us think in new terms by introducing several words or phrases that point us to these new ways of thinking, such as "all the community/assembly," "bread from heaven," and "Sabbath." The stories thus paint a strong contrast between Israel's confusion and complaining, on the one hand, and Yahweh's patience and mercy, on the other. Israel becomes a people when its suffering becomes an occasion for learning, rather than a source of despair or infighting.

This last point is most clear whenever God speaks in these chapters. Consider two examples, Exodus 16:4-5 and 16:28-29.

And Yahweh said to Moses, "I am going to rain down bread from heaven on you. The people should go and gather a day's worth each day so that I can test whether they will go by my instructions or not. But on the sixth day they should make sure to come and there will be twice the normal amount to gather." And Yahweh said to Moses, "How long will you [plural] refuse to observe my commands and my instructions?" Recognize that Yahweh has given you the Sabbath. Therefore, he is giving to you on the sixth day enough bread for two days. Each person should stay put and not go about from his or her place on the seventh day.

In the first speech, God responds to the cry for food by promising to give human beings angelic food (whatever that is, hence the Israelites' word *manna* or "thingamajig") and thus to provide for them the best possible sustenance, signaling the deepest possible care for their fate. God gives manna as both a

gift and a test to see if Israel can obey a single instruction (Hebrew: *torah*). Thus at some level the story foreshadows the giving of the law at Sinai, and it shows that that law reflects God's generosity.

Similarly, the second speech, which shifts from words of God (Exodus 16:28) to words of Moses speaking for God (Exodus 16:29), states God's frustration at Israel's foolish refusal to follow instructions that are for their own good (and are, in any case, easier to follow than to break). The speech also returns to the theme of "my Torah and my commandments," again foreshadowing what is to come.

The point is that the first law of God that Israel learns is the law of the Sabbath. Unlike their lives in Egypt, in which every day offered the same drudgery and utter vulnerability, their new life with God will be one in which they can afford to rest from their labors in the confidence that they will be provided for. They can cease being animals and become human beings, just as God originally intended them to be. The lesson of trust could hardly be clearer.

The commandment to honor parents forms a bridge between those commandments that have to do primarily with God and those that have to do primarily with neighbor. It leads us from the encounter with God, through the encounter with family, to the encounter with the neighbor. However, the shift from God to people does not leave God behind. Not at all. Rather, we come to understand respect and love for those closest to us – and those responsible for our upbringing and faith development – as a window onto our love for God. If we cannot honor those closest to us, then how can we honor either other people or God?

The commandment has several elements:

- It protects the well-being and good of other members of the community;
- It helps us understand our own identity, as well as the identity of others in our family, our community, and our world;
- It promises a positive outcome for those who honor their father and mother. What is heard and obeyed brings long life and good for the one who obeys. Obedience has good results, so obeying makes sense;
- It creates communion between generations and thus makes broader community possible;
- It highlights the responsibility that each of us bears to those older and younger than we are;
- It connects to other texts, such as Deuteronomy 6:4-9, which require passing on the commandments of God to the next generation and gives a mechanism and a context for doing so;
- It reminds us that respect for authority is not a bad thing when that authority is used to honor God and bless people;
- It fosters in us an attitude of reverence.

These features of the commandment, or rather the assumptions behind it and goals to which it points, paint a complete picture of an ideal according to which human relations function harmoniously. How do we make that ideal a reality?

For Further Reflection

1. The Ten Commandments root worship in the nature of God. How does our worship reflect the nature of God? When does it fail to do so?
2. The law of Sabbath assumes a rhythm to life centered on a time of quiet. Eventually the day takes on an explicitly religious quality. How do we find a religious rhythm to our lives?
3. The law of Sabbath also has a social justice aspect: no one can be treated as a tool for the use of others. How do our own religious practices help free people from being reduced to the status of property (or at least a lower status)? What do we need to change for this reality to exist?
4. What specific practices of worship do you use to shape your life? What would you like to grow in?
5. What do words like honor, respect, and obligation mean to you? How do you show them? Receive them?

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6. How could hospitality toward our elders be a way of doing justice? How could we grow in our relationships to those older than we are?
7. In a recent study, 40% of women and 26% of men caregivers reported “very high levels of emotional stress.” How can we recognize their duty to support and honor the work of these caregivers in our midst?
8. Elder abuse or neglect often occur in situations of family stress and economic hardship. How can we help the victims of such abuse?
9. Other than profanity, what are ways in which God’s name is abused? Can religious people have their own ways of doing so?
10. Miller claims that the use of God’s name is an avenue to blessing. What does that mean to you? When and how do you invite God to be present in your life?
11. How can we Christians contribute to a culture of respect among ourselves and toward others? What would we need to change to make such a reality possible?

Lesson 4: How to Recover from Failure

Deuteronomy 9:1-12, 10:12-22

A temptation facing people of faith is confidence in our own righteousness, a sense that our failures are somehow less than those of others. The opposite is also true: failure can lead to despair. Deuteronomy 9-10, however, note that despite Israel's failures, God remains faithful and asks us of us only worship of him and respect for our fellow human beings. Recover from failure comes through repentance and humble acceptance of God's gift of a new way of life. The people of God, having failed, can help each other move beyond failure to new mountain peaks of the spirit.

Goal: to think through the ways in which we as believers should understand failure and use it to grow. This week's readings are parts of two separate sections of the long sermon that began in chapter 5:
Deuteronomy 9:1-10:11 is a warning against hypocrisy and arrogance
Deuteronomy 10:12-11:32 is an encouragement to an ethical life

Failure

The opening text rehearses the story of Exodus 32-33, the Golden Calf episode, even as it also reflects on the process of entering the promised land. Most of the material repeats the story in Exodus; to it the sermon adds other stories of murmurings in the desert now found in Numbers. This rehearsal of embarrassing old stories challenges Israel's complacency.

The failure here is one of idolatry, with all its dire consequences. Note that failure is not of individuals only, but of the entire people of God. Moral and spiritual failure spread from person to person simply because humans are social beings, not just individuals.

Deuteronomy brings up this material for a rhetorical purpose. Israel, because it is about to succeed in entering the land, risks overconfidence and self-importance. As before, then, the text reminds its readers that our behavior must be grounded in God's behavior, and our confidence must be in God.

Recovery

What does recovery look like? Notice that these chapters link failure to idolatry, the over-valuing of the wrong things. Conversely, recovery is based on faithfulness to God and on ethical living. What is the connection between worship and ethics? The Bible's basic assumption is that those who love God will love their neighbor. There are some other basic assumptions in 10:12-22:

- Recovery comes from remembering our basic relationships and commitments;
- Recovery comes from remembering who God is;
- Part of the story of Israel is about failure;
- Israel (and by implication, the church) can recover from failure;
- God's love for Israel's ancestors leads Him to be forgiving of present sins;
- God's love for Israel endures across generations;
- God's concern for the weak must be translated into action by the people of Israel themselves (10:18-19);
- The community has some responsibility for bringing about recovery after failure.

The verbs in Deut 10:12-22 collectively describe the sort of person Deuteronomy tries to cultivate. The "ideal" Israelite will be one who holds God in profound respect, conducts life in a highly ethical way, has an emotional commitment the relationship with God ("love"), and shows that commitment through worship. This person should be highly focused, attentive to the larger picture, and consistent in his or her own mind.

Such integrity of purpose and life in human beings mirror the integrity of God as the one "who owns the highest heavens, the earth, and everything residing in it." That is, God's majesty and mercy

create a world in which human beings can flourish. Proper respect for God closely correlates with a human life well lived.

Points for Reflection

1. What constitutes failure and success for Christians? How do we measure failure? What counts as success for a church?
2. Given your definition of failure, what would recovery look like?
3. How can the church help us recover from failure?

Lesson 5: The Faith that Lives on After Us Deuteronomy 11:1-32

This chapter concludes the unit that began in 10:12. In fact, it marks the end of a major part of the book that began in 5:1. This bigger section is a sermon exhorting Israel to obey the instructions they are about to receive beginning in chapter 12.

Chapter 11 opens with a call to love God, who, the previous paragraphs remind us, is the awe-inspiring creator of the world who has also redeemed Israel from slavery. Verse 2 then reminds us that God's people come to faith in different ways, some as eyewitnesses to marvelous deeds, some as learners who have been nurtured in a community of believers. The next few paragraphs remind the readers of every generation what the core parts of Israel's story are.

Verse 8 begins a paragraph encouraging Israel to be faithful so that they can inherit the land of promise.

Verses 10-12 are a parenthesis explaining just what land Israel is inheriting and how it is different than Egypt.

Verses 13-17 again encourage obedience, offering both promises and threats.

Verses 18-21 return to the main topic of the chapter (and our discussion). Faith must be passed from one generation to the next. This transmission must be deliberate, sustained, and systematic. It must take place through instruction, ethical behavior, and ritual. The goal of this education is the creation of a new kind of people, Israel.

Verses 22-25 promise blessings to the obedient community.

Verses 26-32 conclude the chapter with one last mention of the choice Israel is to make: will they choose life, or death? In stating such a choice, the chapter anticipates the exhortations of chapters 30-31. Together, then, chapters 11 and 30-31 create a sort of cradle in which to nestle the laws in chapters 11-26. To understand what Deuteronomy means by "life," we must look at those laws, which the next few lessons will do.

Theological Observations

Whenever Christians have tried to describe our beliefs and practices, we have usually begun by confessing faith in God. The classical creeds usually open with the statement, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of Heaven and Earth." Beginning with God highlights the fact that Christianity is not merely a human achievement or an expression of human longing. Rather, faith is a gift from God, offered freely to all human beings, and made alive in all who accept it. Faith does not begin with us, but with God.

The statement "I believe in God" implies a relationship between two persons, between God and me. Faith does not erase the human person or in any way diminish our dignity or personal integrity. To the contrary, faith expresses fully the truth that we live in relationship with God and that this relationship gives meaning to our existence, just as it seems to do something to God.

In fact, the confession "I believe in God" implies not just two, but three persons. The third is the person who hears this confession. In the first instance, the third person is the church who teaches us who God is. The hearer of this confession may also be the world, as we see in many Old Testament texts that underscore the importance of the nations' hearing of the news about God's saving work (see below).

In this text, we can think about a God who is both the gentle parent and guardian and the almighty ruler of the Universe. Though it may seem paradoxical to speak of divine love and tenderness on one side and power on the other, in fact, the Bible consistently portrays God as exercising power for the benefit of the vulnerable, thus expressing tender love.

Points for Reflection

1. What are the implications of the fact that people come to faith in different ways? How should that fact shape how we teach, preach, and otherwise minister to each other?
2. What is the content of the faith we pass on to the next generation? How do we decide what should be passed on and what should not?
3. How does a Christian worldview (one shaped by faith) differ from other possibilities? How does one foster a Christian worldview?

Lesson 6: Renewing Worship

Deuteronomy 12:29-13:18

This section, following the section allowing for slaughter away from the sanctuary and thus for a secular life, discusses the difference between worship of idols and worship of the God of Israel. True worship reflects the character of God and human indebtedness to God for the grace showered upon us. The community of Israel is to protect itself from idolatry so that it can focus on the true nature of God. Contemporary worship should reflect this attention to the character of God by focusing on the story of his redemption, fleshed out in the ministries of Word and Table.

Commentary

The Old Testament explores the rich dimensions of worship in many ways. Psalms of lament and praise give voice to the hopes and fears of faithful groups and individuals. Leviticus describes how sacrifice works, not in order to bribe God (see also Psalm 50), but to heal the wounds of the world caused by sin. 1 Kings 8 and Ezekiel 40-48 think about the magnificence of the temple, a place of divine revelation. The prophets, meanwhile, critique those who easily ignore ethics even while they worship the God of ethics.

Deuteronomy also explores the meaning of worship. 12:1-28 modifies the practice of sacrificing at many sanctuaries (see 1 Samuel 10:8; 1 Kings 3:2, 4) by allowing slaughter of animals that were not sacrifices. Sacrifice can thus take place at only one site, Jerusalem (cf. 1 Kings 8).

12:29-32 follows up on the previous section by reminding Israel of the temptations of idolatry. The problem is with syncretism, the incorporation of pagan elements in our worship.

Chapter 13 considers three cases of apostasy:

13:1-5 takes up the case of the prophet who seeks to lead the people astray.

13:6-11 considers apostasy led by someone near you.

13:12-18 envisions the whole nation insuring that no part of it can bring about apostasy.

Application

Certain major theological points underlie this text:

1. God is at the center of the life of faith.
2. Humans are always tempted to replace God with something else.
3. The community of faith must be always vigilant about this.
4. True worship can lead one to a life of joy and hope.

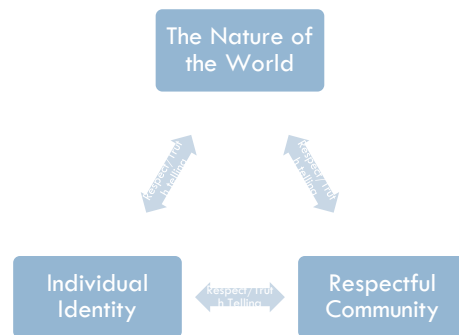
In this lesson, one may well focus on chapter 12:1-28, which emphasizes the joy of worship. It is also important to think about how worship can focus on God.

To pick up a theme from Lesson 3, we should note that the Bible portrays its chief character, God, in many ways. Some of the descriptors include promise-keeper (Genesis 12, 22); inspiration for human goodness (Leviticus 18-19; Deuteronomy 5); cohabitor with people (1 Kings 8; John 1:1-18); the rescuer of the perishing (Psalm 80); the source of justice (Amos 6; Micah 6); the One who cares for all humanity (Isaiah 49, 56; Acts 8-11); the companion of the lowly (1 Samuel 1; Luke 1); the king (Matthew 5-7); the bringer of freedom (Exodus 14-15; Romans 8); the self-emptying One (Philippians 2:5-11); the One who calls us to ministry (2 Corinthians 4); and the One to whom we go (Revelation 21-22). These and many other attributes or actions of God appear in Scripture because they remind us of who we are and whose world we live in.

In describing God, then, the Bible also describes the human search for God in many ways. Without being overly simplistic, we could say that, in some respects, the Bible is a how-to book for approaching God. Human beings come to God through prayer, moral lives, humility and sacrifice, and, in general, a recognition of our status as creatures. We bring to God only ourselves, as the hymn says, “Just as I am, without one plea, but that Christ’s blood was shed for me.” The search for God involves the whole of our lives, and it will never finish until we die, or rather, until we are united with God in the final time.

How do Christians help build a culture of respect? The charge not to take God’s name “in vain” offers us a starting point for answering that question. Reverencing the name of God leads to a culture of respect because we recognize that everyone is made in God’s image, just as we are, and that we cannot assume God’s responsibilities of evaluating the world or deciding who is good and who is evil. Our tasks are much more humble.

The following graph illustrates the levels of reality with which we must interact in building a respectful world. We must honor God and the world God has made. We must see in ourselves the image of God, covered by sin, to be sure, but still intact and still capable of goodness. We must treat others justly and graciously and ensure that the ways in which we all interact promote the same ends.



When the commandment enjoins Israel not to take God’s name lightly, it means primarily that human beings should not try to involve God in our sinful activities. We should not presume that God will endorse what we do simply because we want coverage for our actions. Rather, we should submit our will to God’s will. The commandment primarily forbids false oaths, but by extension, it also applies to any form of communication that involves God under false pretenses.

In his detailed book, *The Ten Commandments* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009], 82-90), Patrick Miller notes five features of the Old Testament’s use of God’s name.

- Revering God’s name is the same as worshiping God alone. Monotheism is respectful.
- The primary place for the use of God’s name is in worship.
- The name of God is what makes worship true and proper.
- The proclamation of the name distinguishes true worship from whatever comes from outside the story of faith or opposes God’s self-revelation.
- Speaking God’s name in worship leads to the blessing of God’s presence.

In short, the discussion about taking God’s name in vain is not just about what we do not say. It is more about what we do say. We use God’s name in honoring, world-creating ways rather than dishonoring, life-destroying ones.

Points for Reflection

1. How do you think God works among Christians today? How does this understanding influence your personal worship life?
2. How does your understanding of God reflect the worship of the congregation of which you are part?
3. How do you understand the nature of the Christian person redeemed by God? How does this understanding impact private or corporate worship?
4. What practices in place (or not yet in place) in your congregation reflect the theology of worship laid out in Deuteronomy?

Lesson 7: Coming Before the God of Mercy Deuteronomy 16:1-22

Deuteronomy 16 focuses on sacred time, that is, those times of the year when Israel commemorated God's deeds and committed itself to living in ways that extended grace to the community and the world. Since Israel was enslaved in Egypt, it is to live mercifully in Canaan. Worship in Israel, along with its focus on the majesty and generosity of God, expresses charity toward the poor, justice for the oppressed, and a passion for a better world for all. Therefore, the Old Testament's ideas about worship have profound implications for our own approach to God as we seek to be covenant people too.

The worship of Yahweh in Deuteronomy centers on Israel's memory of God's mighty deeds in the period of the exodus and the wilderness wanderings as well as a lively anticipation of support in the future. Such worship does not rest on fear of punishment or a need to appease a threatening deity, but on a deep sense of gratitude and solidarity. Perhaps the most succinct statement of this attitude comes in the famous call to a relationship with God in Deuteronomy 6:4-5,

Hear O Israel, as for Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one! And you shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your life and with all your strength.

This credo, called the Shema after the Hebrew word for "hear," is the central confession of Judaism. One God creates one people, and this God deserves all the love and honor human beings can muster. Worship originates, as far as Israel is concerned, in a profound awareness of the benevolence and justice of God. Worship is a response to God's action, not a humanly originated activity, or merely our search for something beyond ourselves.

Deuteronomy discusses worship in detail in two contexts. Chapter 12, the opening of the book's law code properly speaking (chapters 12-26), takes up the question of the central sanctuary. Rather than having temples or open-air holy sites all over the land, which was the practice throughout much of Israel's history, Deuteronomy calls for one central site, which God would "choose" (Hebrew: *bachar*). Just as Yahweh "chose" a people, and the people "choose" to follow Yahweh, so now a central site for worship would be "chosen." Deuteronomy never names this place, but it is clear from 1 Kings, that Jerusalem is the location in question. (Though, interestingly, because their Bible contains only the books of Moses, Samaritans do not agree that Jerusalem is the site and place it instead further north on Mount Gerizim, near modern Nablus, which is still the location of that community's annual sacrifices.) However, centralizing the sanctuary raises an immediate problem, namely, it makes it impossible to connect the eating of meat with a sacrifice in every case, which was the practice everywhere else in the ancient world. What to do? Deuteronomy 12 makes it clear that Israel may eat any clean animal anywhere as long as they pour out the blood (much as in a real sacrifice) and eat with thankfulness and generosity toward others. This discussion may seem obscure to us (as ours would to ancient Israelites!), but it raises real issues about where God was present and how one acknowledged God's presence. There may be something for us to learn even in our world of highly industrialized food production, distribution, and consumption.

In any case, the main discussion of worship appears in chapter 16. The chapter expands the discussion in Exodus 23:14-17. Notice the parallels between the two texts:

Three times in the year you shall keep a feast to me. You shall keep the feast of unleavened bread; as I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. None shall appear before me empty-handed. You shall keep the feast of the harvest, of the first fruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall keep the feast of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor. Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the Lord your God.

(Exodus 23:14-17)

Notice that Deuteronomy clarifies the Exodus law in several respects. (1) It specifies the timing of each festival (Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles, or in Hebrew, Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot). (2) It explains who can eat the festivals (strangers as well as Israelites). (3) It insists that the vulnerable members of the community (the poor, children, Levites) will participate fully in the festivals. And (4) it expands Exodus's explanations for the festival by reflecting theologically on Israel's experience of life with the God who redeemed them.

Let me develop this point further. Exodus refers in its law about festivals to God's liberation at the exodus ("for in it you came out of Egypt"). Deuteronomy refers to God's ongoing care of the people (16:7, 11, 15, 17), and clarifies the reference to the Exodus with the bold statement of orientation, "Remember that you were a slave in Egypt..." (16:12). This line is actually reminiscent of Exodus 23:9, which commands Israel to treat resident aliens well because "you know the heart of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Both texts remind Israel that their experiences of suffering in Egypt should call them to fulfill their moral obligation not to inflict suffering on others. In other words, God's work on their behalf created a pattern of life in which they now had obligations to other human beings. This was true of everyday ethics (in Exodus) and of worship (in Deuteronomy) because ethics and worship are two sides of the same coin in the Old Testament. Both morality and religion come from the same attitude of respect toward the other, whether the other is God or my neighbor.

Commentary

Deuteronomy 16 describes a yearly cycle of festivals that gives a rhythm to Israel's life. In part, the cycle coincides with the agricultural year, but these are not merely harvest festivals. They are also tied to Israel's remembrance of its own history.

- 16:1-8 is about Passover (in March-April). Notice the theological rationale for the festival: liberation from Egyptian slavery. Notice also the rhythm of the festival itself.
- 16:9-12 is about Pentecost (in May-June), again emphasizing the concern for the vulnerable in the community.
- 16:13-15 is about Tabernacles/Sukkot (in September). This is a time, coinciding with the final harvest, of public celebration.
- 16:16-17 summarizes the section, emphasizing the human response to worship.

Application

Again, this text emphasizes the theological motivations for worship. We come to God because he is praiseworthy, because He hears our pleas, because we are in covenant with Him. One might ask: how does a cycle of worship, perhaps even a yearly cycle, shape the life of a community? How important is the creation of such festivals for us now? To what degree and in what ways does the basic Christian story inform our worship? How much room for creativity should we exercise in worship?

For Further Reflection

1. In what ways have your experiences of worship been about the presence of God and God's continuing saving work? Why are such considerations sometimes absent from worship in your experience?
2. What can we do to help outsiders and our own children grow as worshipers of God? How can we practice together the presence of God? How important is intergenerational ministry in this connection?
3. What have been some meaningful one-time experiences of worship for you? Also, what ongoing patterns of worship do you find helpful?
4. Passover is about memory. What do you believe it is important for Christians to remember as we worship? What should we learn from worship?

Lesson 8: A Renewed Concern for the Oppressed Deuteronomy 15:1-18

Grace comes not merely to individuals, but to entire groups of people. Israel, when accepting God's grace, takes on the obligation of caring for those who suffer poverty, injustice, or sickness. Specific mechanisms for care of the poor are laid out in this text. Today's Christians must ask what application these verses have for our lives today. What will it mean not merely to hand out charity to the poor, but to live side by side with them as the people of God?

Goal: To help the class think about our obligations to others, particularly those who are poor or otherwise vulnerable.

The Old Testament includes many texts concerned with social justice. The prophets in particular call Israel to account when it neglects the vulnerable in order to allow elite groups to aggrandize themselves. Good examples of these practical concerns include Amos 2:6-8 and Amos 6, among many others.

Deuteronomy 15:1-18, meanwhile, offers both ideals for social and practical suggestions for implementing the ideals.

Verses 1-6 introduce the practice of the Sabbath Year, a practical way of limiting indentured servitude. The law here connects to that of Exodus 23:10-11. Note that the specifics of the rule are appropriate in a society in which most people are peasants practicing subsistence farming. But the principles behind the practice may be more portable. Verse 4 lays down the goal of Israel: the absence of poor persons. The rest of the chapter thinks about how to reach that goal.

Verses 7-11 describe appropriate ways of distributing funds to others. Notice the relational language throughout these verses. The discussion is not about abstract programs, but about real people.

Verses 12-18 specify a procedure by which a servant may remain in a family context.

Theological Reflections

When we talk about justice, many of us are prone to think in purely political or economic terms. Surely the pursuit of justice does have implications for the political and economic practices of a society. Or sometimes, we think of justice in connection with the punishment of criminals, again a partly correct idea. But justice has many dimensions, not just retribution. It also includes equitable distribution of social and economic goods (we call them human rights).

Yet, for Christians, there is more to say. For us, the pursuit of justice is ultimately tied to our search for God, because God is just. As Psalm 11:7 puts it, "The Lord is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face." The word the NRSV translates "righteous" can equally well be translated "just." The Old Testament's word *tsedaqah* and the New Testament's word *dikaioσύνη* both refer to God's commitment to dealing rightly with human beings and all the creation. God's righteousness, or justice, are relentlessly social qualities.

Points for Reflection

1. What goals for social justice should Christian communities have? Why?
2. What practical means should be in place for accomplishing these goals? How do we assess success or failure of these means?
3. Given the fact that Israel was a state, and the church is not, how do we translate the goals of Deuteronomy into contemporary practice?
4. Much of the language of the chapter is relational ("brother"). How would we translate that relational sense of social justice into practice?
5. Note that this chapter immediately precedes that on worship. What precisely is the connection between worship and social justice?

Lesson 9: Leaders for a Renewing People Deuteronomy 16:18-18:22

Given Israel's high calling to be in covenant with God, the choice of leaders who will share the values and commitments of the covenant seems imperative. These chapters examine the duties, character, and goals of prophets, priests, and kings, as well as the responsibilities of followers toward such leaders. Since the need for quality leadership has not abated, today's Christians must continue to ask what sorts of leaders they need and how they are to select, affirm, and support them. Leaders need to ask how they are to serve the church in its mission of living out God's grace in the present world.

Leadership. All of us have strong opinions about it, and all of us are afraid to take it on. Good leadership requires self-sacrifice, commitment, and care for the others because the good leader is the good person who leads well. Leadership is not simply a bag of tricks or techniques we pull out to use in order to get our way. It is, instead, a way of shaping one's life toward worthwhile goals so that we draw others toward those goals.

Now the previous paragraph used the word "leadership" three times in a brief space because it is difficult to find a single synonym that does the idea justice. Because our American culture is obsessed with self-promotion and learning the skills for getting ahead, we are very fond of talking about taking charge or mastering our circumstances or developing the key habits of highly effective people. Yet thinking about leadership from a theological point of view requires some extra considerations. For example, I should ask how my character is being formed to fit the character of the God I worship. Am I just and fair to others? Do I love as Christ loved? Does my agenda – and as a leader, I must have one – fit within the larger agendas of the redeemed community as articulated in the Bible?

In the Pentateuch, many texts address the questions surrounding leadership in its various forms. The stories of Moses, for example, concentrate on his roles as spokesperson, celebrator of divine mercies, lawgiver, and so on. And Deuteronomy in particular concentrates on his role as leader, though it admits that, in some respects, he failed because his people did not always follow him. And then comes our text.

Deuteronomy 16:18-18:22 discusses the multiple forms of leadership that Israel must have in the post-Mosaic period. Obviously, the text does not address every aspect of the roles it names, but it does give basic orientations (values, practices, and structures). Let us consider some of them.

16:18-17:13 focused on the judiciary. Each town is to have its own judges who sit in the plaza outside the city gate (or if the city is large enough, in the gate house itself, a sort of small castle). They should handle cases large and small, and especially cases of known idolatry (the most radical sort of crime in Deuteronomy's worldview), unless the case is too complex or the evidence is unclear. These more complex cases should go to Jerusalem, where the high priest or his designees – interestingly, not the king, whose power Deuteronomy wishes to reduce – will settle it. (The parallel text to this is Exodus 18, which also sets up a tiered judiciary with Moses as the final court of appeals.)

17:14-20 is the "Law of the King." It accepts the reality of monarchy but tries to check its power by limiting (1) tax-collecting and wealth preservation; (2) the size of the military; and (3) diplomatic relations (which is what the limit on harem size is about). Moreover, the king must submit to the instruction of the Levitical priests, who provide checks and balances to his power.

18:1-8 describes the role of the priests, and in particular the need for the community to take care of them. Since Levites do not hold land, the community must care for them. Verses 6-8 ensure that all priests have the same rights to offer sacrifice (and thus to receive part of them), regardless of where they live.

18:9-22 explores the question of the nature of revelation, and in particular the role of the prophet. In contrast to Canaanite practices of divination, the Israelite prophet could not manipulate God but could only wait divine inspiration of whatever form. The expectation of a prophet like Moses reminds one of Jeremiah's self-image (see for example Jeremiah 28). All prophets are to be like Moses in that

all receive the divine word with a sense of awe and wonder. Prophets do not serve their own purposes, but those of God. They function as mediators, internalizing the viewpoints and objectives of both God and the people, attempting to bridge the gaps between the two parties so as to reinforce the covenantal relationship between God and Israel.

Stepping back from the details of these texts makes it clear that certain underlying principles are in play here, and that these principles have significance for all of us who take the Bible seriously.

- (1) Power is not absolute. Leaders are accountable to higher principles and to their people.
- (2) Checks and balances are absolutely necessary. No matter how virtuous a given leader is, he or she needs others to offer correction, advice, or even opposition.
- (3) The goal of leadership is to preserve and enhance the core values of the community. In the case of Israel (and the church) these values include honoring the true God, caring for the most vulnerable among us, and building individual and communal lives of integrity.
- (4) Leaders should not line their own pockets or use their power for personal gain of any sort.
- (5) Leaders should attend to their own spiritual health (just as the king must do in consultation with the priests).

In conclusion, these texts paint a picture of a well-ordered community in which oppressive behaviors are kept to a bare minimum and in which individuals, families, and communities can flourish. Fashioning such a culture seems a high priority in our world of disintegrating communities and lone individuals.

Points for Reflection

1. What principles of leadership underlie this text? How do we translate them into action in our own time?
2. What gifts must Christian leaders have? How do we help each other acquire them?
3. How can we better support our leaders? How do we prevent burnout, cynicism, and defeatist attitudes in leaders?
4. Name some leaders (with or without formal titles) whose example and work have helped you grow spiritually. What made them effective? What made you want to follow them?
5. The strong prohibition of idolatry seems important in these texts. What is the role of Christian leaders in helping us focus more intently on God? How can we do that better?

Lesson 10: Renewed Relationships Among People Deuteronomy 19 and 24

These chapters fit into a larger section of laws on all manner of economic, social, religious, and interpersonal issues. The goal of all the texts is to create a society in which violence, jealousy, and rivalry are minimized, while peace, justice, and loving relationships are accentuated. These texts afford Christians an opportunity to think deeply about our responsibilities to the most vulnerable members of society, as well as those who have violated society's norms.

Goal: to learn to think practically about how to build relationships with people. Note that the focus is not on the specifics of the laws in Deuteronomy, but on the principles underlying them. The temptation will be to get bogged down in the details without seeing the bigger picture. It is important to emphasize that these laws set forth principles that lead to other applications in other settings.

Chapters 19 and 24 are part of a longer section of randomly arranged laws that ends in chapter 26.

19:1-13 concerns the cities of refuge. In a culture in which blood feud and revenge killings were common, the goal of the chapter is to set up a mechanism for limiting violence. The operative principle is, then, that violence is to be limited as far as possible and that social and legal mechanisms have that as a goal. A parallel to this text appears in Numbers 35.

19:14 is an appendix to the law on manslaughter. A cause of blood feud is the movement of boundary markers. Cheating causes strife.

19:15-21 is a second appendix to the law on manslaughter. Capital cases in ancient Israel required two witnesses.

NOTE: Verse 21 is the so-called *lex talionis* ("law of the talion"). Contrary to popular opinion, the goal of the verse is not to encourage revenge but rather to limit it. Punishment must fit the crime.

24:1-4 permits divorce in the case of irreconcilable differences. The vagueness of the law led to prolonged discussion in both Jewish and Christian ethical thinking. See Matthew 19 etc.

24:5 exempts newlyweds from military service.

24:6 forbids taking millstones as collateral on a loan. That is, lenders cannot deprive creditors of their means of livelihood.

24:7 kidnapping and enslavement are capital offenses.

24:8-9 a brief rule on leprosy. See Leviticus 13-14 for further commentary on leprosy.

24:10-13 picks up the theme of verse 6, with varying means of livelihood.

24:14-15 forbids oppressing vulnerable people.

24:16 calls for individual responsibility for crimes. Again, compare this to chapter 19's rules on feuds. Deuteronomy is trying to move a society from family responsibility to individual responsibility, and from a culture ruled by family custom to one ruled by law.

24:17-18 again picks up the theme of verses 6, 10-13, this time adding a theological justification.

24:19-22 again instructs Israel to care in practical ways for poor people.

Note for Teachers

It is important in this lesson not to get bogged down in the details of the laws, interesting though they are. The best strategy is to ask what sorts of principles underlie each law and try to trace connections that way (see question 1 below). You might then move to think about how our own lives are shaped by such norms, large or small, and whether the norms guiding our lives are based on principles similar to those in Deuteronomy.

Points for Reflection

1. Several principles underlie these laws, including: (1) the brotherhood of all Israelites; (2) the necessity for caring for the vulnerable; (3) the need to move from principle to practice. How would we work out these principles in our community today?
2. Given the differences between ancient Israelite society and ours, how do we move from these laws to our situation?

Lesson 11: Renewed Generosity and Compassion

Deuteronomy 26

The confession of this chapter recognizes that Israel began as one nation among many and reached its present status on the basis of God's grace. By restating the basic story of Israel's redemption and by inviting each generation to embrace this story, Deuteronomy draws a close connection between what God has done and what we should do. Specifically, Israel is to show concern for the poor and those serving as priests, is not to confuse worship with mourning, and is to embrace the commands of God with joy. The chapter also reminds us that renewal of the present can come by reexamining the past.

Goal: To begin to tie together all the implications of our study of Deuteronomy.

This chapter concludes the long series of laws in the previous chapters by setting forth some basic principles about Israel's life:

1. Israel reached its present condition through grace, not merit.
2. Being in Israel implies obligations to the vulnerable.
3. Being in Israel demands reverence for, and gratitude toward, God.
4. Being in Israel creates confidence in one's standing before God.

The fact that the law appears at the end of all the series of laws in chapters 12-26 is significant. The community that observes Deuteronomy's call for lives of integrity should be able to celebrate the positive outcomes of that life.

Commentary

26:1-11 emphasize God's gift and the human response to it. Israelites do not confine themselves to individual prayers of thanksgiving but have a ritual through which they thank God. During it, they bring part of their goods to God, and then recite the story of their people. Verses 5-9 are often called a Credo, or statement of core beliefs (compare the word "creed").

The ritual must occur "after you've entered the land" as an annual event. As each harvest comes from the field, Israelite families resort to the Temple to present their gifts to God. In doing so, they repeat a speech that affirms eight things: (1) the ancestors were perishing Aramaeans, nomadic people; (2) they went to Egypt to live as migrants; (3) the Egyptians oppressed them; (4) they cried to God for help; (5) God acknowledged their bad situation (see Exod 3:7); (6) God delivered them from Egypt and (7) brought them to the Promised Land so that (8) they might say "thank you" through their sacrifices on the altar.

This Credo affirms God's mighty acts in history: (1) the choice of Abraham; (2) the deliverance from Egypt; (3) the gift of the land. As Deuteronomy repeatedly emphasizes, God acted on Israel's behalf because of an old promise to the ancestors. God, being a keeper of promises, keeps this one. In affirming God's mighty acts of salvation, Israel also reminds itself of its true identity. And it calls each of its members to avoid treating others as the Egyptians treated their ancestors. Instead of living lives of grasping acquisition, they live more grateful lives.

26:12-15 expand this idea to another ritual moment, the giving of tithes to support vulnerable people. The text blurs what we would call charity with what we could call taxation. The gift is obligatory, not optional, and yet it comes from one member of the community to another. The aim is not just to feed and clothe people, though that is important. Yet a deeper goal is to build communal solidarity. All Israel must live together, and to do so it must overcome the common divisions that arise around money, family ties, and personal history. The text does this by calling on everyone to care for the vulnerable, and it ties that obligation to God's promise.

26:16-19 extends the idea of promise. Keeping the commandments will not go unrewarded. A gracious God will keep his commitments to Israel.

Points for Reflection

1. What is the relationship between behavior and blessing? How do our behaviors over time determine our character?
2. How do we cultivate habits of gratitude? What are you grateful for and why? What do you do to show that gratitude?
3. This chapter connects the story of Israel to their behavior. How important is it to remember our story? How do we move from story to action?

Lesson 12: Now Choose Life! Moving into the Future Deuteronomy 30-31

The call to follow the God who redeems a people is fundamentally a call to a life of freedom and meaning. Deuteronomy 30-31 stakes out the behaviors, emotions, values, and knowledge required to live fully into the beauties of the call of God. As this lesson shows, Israel's call is also ours because their God is also ours. Living in a deep and abiding relationship with this God makes us into the sorts of individuals and communities that can be forces for the ongoing redemption of God's world as justice and peace dawn about us.

Deuteronomy follows its law code (chapters 12-26) with a call to decision along with promises and threats (chapter 27-28). As the book reflects on Israel's history, it recognizes the fatefulness of the decisions made in each generation regarding whether the community would adhere to the ethical and religious standards of the God of Israel, or not. Chapter 28, for this reason, offers dire warnings of the catastrophe awaiting any people who threw away such advantages as Israel had received. The warnings proved all too true, as the rest of this series, focusing on 1-2 Kings, will make clear.

Chapter 30, in any case, asks a simple question. What happens if the people of God abandon their faith and fall into the terrible situations that the covenantal curses in chapter 28 envision? Is there life after death? Can Israel be saved?

Chapter 30 works toward a positive answer to the question in three moves. Each builds on the previous idea to construct one of the most beautiful pictures of repentance, reconciliation, and hope in all of Scripture.

Verses 1-10 make an offer of reconciliation. While acknowledging the tragedy of Israel's failure of nerve in pursuing the life of Torah, the text asserts that all can be forgiven. Yahweh has already set up the conditions under which reconciliation can occur, and all Israel needs to do is to respond penitently.

To clarify: unlike our modern tendency to think of repentance as the act of an individual (because we tend to think of sin in strictly individual terms), Deuteronomy envisions a whole group of people changing. The difference between us and Israel lies in part in our conception of human nature: the Bible assumes that humans naturally exist in association with one another and thus it is impossible to understand the individual without thinking of the group at some level. Sin also is communal, and so turning away from sin is communal, as is the reconciliation that follows the turning away. While this ancient view of things seems alien to many contemporary people, it certainly fits better with what we know from the social sciences about the behaviors of humans. The extreme individualism on which many of us base our thinking simply has no foundation in the real world. It is an ideology, and like all ideologies, it must be examined.

Verses 11-14 expand the idea of reconciliation by describing what is on offer. The choices facing Israel are "life" and "death," perhaps literally in many cases, but certainly in a deep way. By describing the way of Torah as life and the opposite as death, and by emphasizing that no heroism is required of the life of faith, Deuteronomy makes clear its assumption that the laws of chapters 12-26 are easier to keep than not doing them would be. True, this assumption is highly counter-intuitive to American Protestants. Yet if we focus upon the content of the laws, we recognize the validity, or at least defensibility, of the book's assumptions. Avoiding violence, theft, greed, power mongering, and other corruptions of the soul certainly makes for a better life.

At the same time, this section also emphasizes the nearness of God even to the nation in its state of punishment. Distance from the redeeming God is never a matter of physical space. It is always a question of moral and spiritual disposition. The redeemed people, no matter how much they have lost their way, can return because God stands ready to call them to their best selves.

Verses 15-20 summarize the preceding offer, and as in Joshua 24 and 1 Samuel 8, state clearly the choices confronting the nation. Although this section does not describe a specific mechanism for

accepting the covenant, much less maintaining it, we do see here a deep awareness that each generation of Israelites must accept the consequences of their actions and commitments.

The chapter ends with one of the most telling lines in the Bible, inviting its audience “to love Yahweh your God, to hear his voice, and to cling to him – for he is your life...” It then promises the restoration of the land as a token of God’s generous love. Notice that the relationship is not simply one of trading goods for respect, as though one party could buy the loyalty of the other. Rather, it is a relationship of love and longing, of clinging and communicating face to face. No empty religiosity here. Neither quid pro quo nor tit for tat, but just a simple mutual acceptance of God and God’s people.

To conclude, recall the old Latin phrase often used to describe the church, *semper reformanda*, “always to be reformed.” The idea did not start with the church’s view of itself, though it is appropriate there. It started with Deuteronomy, which was designed to articulate a view of Israel’s past, present, and future that would make room for ongoing reform in the interest of ongoing life. By acknowledging that Israel’s sin was inevitable – avoidable because humans choose sin and so could choose virtue, but inevitable because we always often choose virtue and are strongly influenced to do so by our environment – Deuteronomy gives great freedom to its readers to choose something different. Rather than being consumed by shame or despair, they can move to something better.

For Further Reflection

1. In your experience, what are the conditions necessary for significant change in individuals or groups? How can we do a better job of creating or enhancing those conditions?
2. Deuteronomy 30 describes following Torah as “life.” In what ways do you find Christian commitments to worship and ethics to be life-giving? Give examples from your personal experience.
3. Repentance requires the courage to admit wrongdoing, to change patterns of behavior and relationships with others, and to let go of self-interest (as we perceive it, at least). Give examples of times you have either had or not had such courage. In what areas do you need it again?
4. Repentance here is communal. In what areas of its life does the church need to repent? Where are our blind spots, in your view? How are you personally implicated in the church’s need to repent (since it can’t just be for the “other people”)?
5. In what sense is God the source of our life? Give examples from personal experience or observation of others.