

Rules for Law Courts and Future Kings

Deuteronomy 17

Deuteronomy 17:1-13 - *“You shall not sacrifice to the Lord your God a bull or sheep which has any blemish or defect, for that is an abomination to the Lord your God.*

²*“If there is found among you, within any of your gates which the Lord your God gives you, a man or a woman who has been wicked in the sight of the Lord your God, in transgressing His covenant, ³ who has gone and served other gods and worshiped them, either the sun or moon or any of the host of heaven, which I have not commanded, ⁴ and it is told you, and you hear of it, then you shall inquire diligently. And if it is indeed true and certain that such an abomination has been committed in Israel, ⁵ then you shall bring out to your gates that man or woman who has committed that wicked thing, and shall stone to death that man or woman with stones. ⁶ Whoever is deserving of death shall be put to death on the testimony of two or three witnesses; he shall not be put to death on the testimony of one witness. ⁷ The hands of the witnesses shall be the first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of all the people. So you shall put away the evil from among you.*

⁸*“If a matter arises which is too hard for you to judge, between degrees of guilt for bloodshed, between one judgment or another, or between one punishment or another, matters of controversy within your gates, then you shall arise and go up to the place which the Lord your God chooses. ⁹ And you shall come to the priests, the Levites, and to the judge there in those days, and inquire of them; they shall pronounce upon you the sentence of judgment. ¹⁰ You shall do according to the sentence which they pronounce upon you in that place which the Lord chooses. And you shall be careful to do according to all that they order you. ¹¹ According to the sentence of the law in which they instruct you, according to the judgment which they tell you, you shall do; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left from the sentence which they pronounce upon you. ¹² Now the man who acts presumptuously and will not heed the priest who stands to minister there before the Lord your God, or the judge, that man shall die. So you shall put away the evil from Israel. ¹³ And all the people shall hear and fear, and no longer act presumptuously.”*

Background Notes

In chapter 16 we saw that judges and officers were to be appointed in all the towns of Israel, so justice would be maintained. Maintaining the Law in the area of religion included judgment and punishment for breaking the law, because there was no “freedom of religion” in Israel. The people of Israel were to worship the one true God – and Him **only!** Any kind of false religious activity was not allowed, and was judged as idolatry.

The laws against false gods and false religious activities continued in the first half of chapter 17. That context helps to explain verse 1: *“You shall not sacrifice to the Lord your God a bull or sheep which has any blemish or defect, for*

that is an abomination to the Lord your God.” Why was this verse about the regulation of defective sacrifices placed in the context of laws against false gods and false religious activity?

1. Because this was part of the Law - someone had to judge when an animal was defective. No doubt there were a lot of arguments about what constituted a defect or a blemish in an animal that was brought for sacrifice, and that dispute had to be settled by a judge.
2. Giving anything less than your best to the Lord was a step towards idolatry - both then and today! When you give less than your best to the Lord, essentially you are moving God lower on your priority list, while your own possessions are moving up on your priority list. If you fulfill your own desires first and give only your leftover time and leftover money to the Lord - this is a step in the direction of idolatry.

Doctrinal Points

1. Judges in Israel were to follow strict rules of justice.

If a man or woman in Israel was found guilty of false worship, they were to be stoned to death (v2-5). Such a stiff penalty would certainly convey the seriousness of the sin of idolatry, and would be a barrier against people drifting away from the Lord into idolatry.

But why was stoning prescribed as the method of execution? I think there were at least two reasons. First, it clearly set this death penalty apart from any method of sacrifice to the Lord. This was **not** a human sacrifice - this was **justice**. Second, stoning ensured that all the people were involved in carrying out the sentence. *“The hands of the witnesses shall be the first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of all the people. So you shall put away the evil from among you”* (v7). No one was excused from involvement in maintaining justice by public execution. In this way all the people were to acknowledge that God's laws were right and just.

Notice that the testimony of at least two witnesses was necessary to carry out the death penalty. The man or woman may have been guilty of idolatry, but one eyewitness was not good enough to convict. Requiring two or three eyewitnesses ensured that lynch mobs or vigilante groups did not carry out “justice,” and no one was railroaded in an unfair trial. Anyone who was accused received a fair and systematic trial, so that justice and righteousness were maintained. (Look at Matthew 26-27 to see how this law was twisted and manipulated at the trial of our Lord.)

Deuteronomy 17:7 says that the witnesses had to be the first to cast the stones: *“The hands of the witnesses shall be the first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of all the people.”* This ensured that witnesses did not make their charge on the spur of the moment, or in an emotional moment, or make their charge lightly, because if they were shown to be false witnesses, they would be guilty of murder and would be subject to the death penalty themselves!

Cases that were too difficult for local judges to handle were brought to Jerusalem. There a “supreme court” was set up with at least one chief judge and one chief priest to decide the case (v8-13). The decision of this court was final, and was considered the will of God. Anyone who disagreed would himself be prosecuted. Judges in Israel were to follow strict rules of justice.

2. Kings of Israel were to follow strict regulations in office.

Deuteronomy 17:14-17 - *“When you come to the land which the Lord your God is giving you, and possess it and dwell in it, and say, ‘I will set a king over me like all the nations that are around me,’¹⁵ you shall surely set a king over you whom the Lord your God chooses; one from among your brethren you shall set as king over you; you may not set a foreigner over you, who is not your brother.¹⁶ But he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, for the Lord has said to you, ‘You shall not return that way again.’¹⁷ Neither shall he multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away; nor shall he greatly multiply silver and gold for himself.”*

God knew that the children of Israel would eventually want a king, like the other nations around them. God’s original intent, of course, was that Israel would be a theocracy, directly ruled by God. God would be their King, and they would be a kingdom of priests. But God knew that the nation would spiral downhill during the time of the Judges and the people would want a king. The Lord anticipated this situation, and in His grace God said that He would even choose a king for them. Then He gave strict regulations for fulfilling the office of king in Israel.

The first regulation was that the kings of Israel were to be descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (v15). The king could not be a foreigner. Israel’s kings were not to “multiply horses for themselves” or send people to Egypt to get horses (v16). Why not? They were not to trust in their own military strength - they were to trust in the Lord.

Two more regulations for the kings were given in verse 17. They were not to be polygamous, and they were not to try to get rich. God might make them rich, and He might make them militarily strong, but the kings were not to strive after these things. Even David and Solomon, these great kings of Israel, did not measure up to these regulations. King David had more than one wife, and King Solomon’s many idolatrous wives led to his downfall.

Deuteronomy 17:18-20 - *“Also it shall be, when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book, from the one before the priests, the Levites.¹⁹ And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes,²⁰ that his heart may not be lifted above his brethren, that he may not turn aside from the commandment to the right hand or to the left, and that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he and his children in the midst of Israel.”*

Verses 18-20 contain further regulations that were designed to help the king make decisions in line with the Word of God, and to walk close to the Lord. The king was to write out a copy of the entire Law for himself. And remember - no copy

machines or electronic Bibles were available in that day! If you were the king, I'm sure you would have been glad that the entire Bible was not yet completed, or you'd be writing for a long time! Seriously speaking, the king not only was to write a copy of the Law, but he was to read it every day, all the days of his life. This practice would keep both him and his sons humble and obedient, and contribute to a long and pleasing reign before the Lord. Kings of Israel were to follow strict regulations in office.

Practical Application

Read the Bible all the days of your life!

“And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes...”(v19).

The regulations for the king in Deuteronomy 17 are certainly applicable for us today as well. Thankfully we have printed Bibles, so we don't have to follow the regulation to write out our own private copies of the Word - but we should certainly read it every day!

How do you stay humble, reverent, and obedient before the Lord? And how do you teach your children about the Lord, and how to live a life that's pleasing to the Lord? Read and obey the Bible “all the days of your life”!

We should know God's Word so thoroughly that its teachings will characterize our whole way of life – in our personal lives and in our role as parents.

Read the Bible “all the days of your life”!