

Laws of the Mosaic Covenant

Deuteronomy 25

Deuteronomy 25:1-3 - *“If there is a dispute between men, and they come to court, that the judges may judge them, and they justify the righteous and condemn the wicked, ² then it shall be, if the wicked man deserves to be beaten, that the judge will cause him to lie down and be beaten in his presence, according to his guilt, with a certain number of blows. ³ Forty blows he may give him and no more, lest he should exceed this and beat him with many blows above these, and your brother be humiliated in your sight.”*

Background Notes

The Mosaic Covenant between God and His people consisted of more than just the Ten Commandments. I think the count is 613 laws! In any case, many of these laws had to do with regulating the social life in Israel. In Deuteronomy 25, more of these laws were listed and reviewed. A number of these laws were grouped together because they protected and provided for disadvantaged people in Israel.

The law that governs the punishment of criminals in Israel was given in verses 1-4. There was no prison system in Israel. There were four levels of punishment for breaking the law. The death penalty was to be enforced for murder, adultery, kidnapping, idolatry, and certain other capital offenses. Another punishment was excommunication – banishing, or cutting off from the covenant community. In addition there was the *“lex talianis”* or law of retaliation (“an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”).

Yet another penalty was beating, as described in these verses. Notice several points about this level of physical punishment:

1. The court was to consist of judges, plural, not just one judge, to decide the disputed case. This certainly guarded against bribes or personal vendettas.
2. The guilty party was beaten only if the judges decided that physical punishment was appropriate. In some cases, a fine rather than physical punishment would be demanded.
3. The punishment had to be administered in the presence of the judge. This safeguarded the procedure from abuse and excess.

4. The maximum number of lashes was forty. (Remember, this was not the death penalty.) On the basis of this law, the level of punishment in Israel became a maximum of thirty-nine lashes, just in case a mistake was made in counting.

Because of his faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the apostle Paul suffered this punishment 5 times, under Judaism's use of this law. 2 Corinthians 11:24, *"From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one."* Keep in mind that our Lord was scourged under the Romans - and it may well have been more than thirty-nine lashes. It is well known that the Roman whips were not just rods or canes, but whips tipped with sharp materials.

Doctrinal Points

1. The Mosaic Law provided for the disadvantaged.

Deuteronomy 25:4-10 - *"You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain. ⁵ If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the widow of the dead man shall not be married to a stranger outside the family; her husband's brother shall go in to her, take her as his wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. ⁶ And it shall be that the firstborn son which she bears will succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. ⁷ But if the man does not want to take his brother's wife, then let his brother's wife go up to the gate to the elders, and say, 'My husband's brother refuses to raise up a name to his brother in Israel; he will not perform the duty of my husband's brother.'*

⁸ Then the elders of his city shall call him and speak to him. But if he stands firm and says, 'I do not want to take her,' ⁹ then his brother's wife shall come to him in the presence of the elders, remove his sandal from his foot, spit in his face, and answer and say, 'So shall it be done to the man who will not build up his brother's house.' ¹⁰ And his name shall be called in Israel, 'The house of him who had his sandal removed.'"

"You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain" (v4). The New Testament revealed that God had more than oxen in mind when He made this law part of the Mosaic Covenant. 1 Corinthians 9:9-10 says: *"For it is written in the law of Moses, 'You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain.' Is it oxen God is concerned about? Or does He say it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written, that he who plows should plow in hope, and he who threshes in hope should be partaker of his hope."*

In reference to proper care for servants of the Lord, 1 Timothy 5:17-18 says, *"Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. For the Scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain,' and, 'The laborer is worthy of his wages.'" This law not only showed kindness in providing for oxen - it involved a divine principle of provision for the servants of the Lord!*

Deuteronomy 25:5-10 gave the law of “levirate marriage,” which provided for a woman if her husband died, leaving her without a son to help provide for her. The word “levir” means “husband’s brother” in Latin. From what this passage says, and from the details in the book of Ruth, the law worked as follows: if a man died without an heir, then his unmarried brother (or closest eligible male next-of-kin) was to marry the widow and raise up an heir for her. The firstborn son of this marriage would assume the name and the property of the man who had died.

If, for whatever reason, the unmarried brother or eligible next of kin refused to marry the widow, a public ceremony was held in which the widow removed his sandal and spit in his face, and he had to live with the stigma of being labeled: “the house of him whose sandal is removed.” Clearly God was not opposed to using social pressure to motivate a person to do the right thing! That can be used (with caution) today as well.

In the story of Ruth, the closest eligible relative was unable to marry Ruth and buy back the lost property for the widow. This opened the door for Boaz, the next eligible kinsman, who had fallen in love with Ruth! He was able and eager to “redeem” (buy back) the property and marry Ruth. Boaz, as the willing and wealthy kinsman redeemer, is a beautiful spiritual picture of Jesus Christ, our loving and willing kinsman Redeemer. So the levirate law provided for disadvantaged widows. The Mosaic Law provided for the disadvantaged.

2. The Mosaic Law protected the disadvantaged.

Deuteronomy 25:11-16 - *“If two men fight together, and the wife of one draws near to rescue her husband from the hand of the one attacking him, and puts out her hand and seizes him by the genitals, ¹² then you shall cut off her hand; your eye shall not pity her.*

“You shall not have in your bag differing weights, a heavy and a light. ¹⁴ You shall not have in your house differing measures, a large and a small. ¹⁵ You shall have a perfect and just weight, a perfect and just measure, that your days may be lengthened in the land which the Lord your God is giving you. ¹⁶ For all who do such things, all who behave unrighteously, are an abomination to the Lord your God.”

You didn’t memorize verse 11 in Sunday school, did you? This rare form of punishment would have been an extension of the law of retaliation – “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” This law protected both the man and the woman. Primarily, it protected the man’s capacity to produce heirs, and it also prevented extremely immodest and inappropriate behavior.

The law protected the consumer from unfair business practices (v13-16). Accurate and identical weights and measures were to be used in buying and selling. The practical application of these consumer protection laws for today should be obvious. For example, hiding the true facts about the problems of your car or your home that you’re trying to sell would be breaking this law. You would be disobeying the divine intent of this law.

As God's people, I hope we wouldn't be guilty of anything like that. Notice - God calls such unjust actions **unrighteous**, and they are "an **abomination** to the Lord your God." Strong words! It's not just bad – it's an **abomination** to the Lord! The Mosaic Law protected the disadvantaged.

Practical Application

Obey the Lord in the "hard areas" of life.

Deuteronomy 25:17-19 - *"Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you were coming out of Egypt, ¹⁸ how he met you on the way and attacked your rear ranks, all the stragglers at your rear, when you were tired and weary; and he did not fear God. ¹⁹ Therefore it shall be, when the Lord your God has given you rest from your enemies all around, in the land which the Lord your God is giving you to possess as an inheritance, that you will blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. You shall not forget."*

Exodus 17 gave the account of how the cruel Amalekites attacked the unprotected children of Israel. Because of this unprovoked act of treachery, the Lord said that the memory of Amalek would be blotted out from under heaven - and God would use His people to do the job. Israel was reminded of this responsibility in Deuteronomy 25. But Israel failed - because it was a hard assignment! It was a lot easier to just allow the Amalekites to live. Do you remember that King Saul only partially obeyed the Lord in this matter (1 Samuel 15)? He allowed Agag, the Amalekite king, to live – and he kept all the best of the sheep and the oxen alive as well!

God expects us to obey Him, even in the difficult areas of life - such as disciplining our children, and separating from the ungodly pleasures of this world, and being faithful and committed in our marriages, and regular attendance and participation in the services and ministries of our church, and daily and dedicated reading and studying of Scripture, and a serious prayer life.

The Christian life is not easy all the time. In fact, sometimes it can be very difficult. But we are called to obey the Lord in the "hard areas" of life.