

Ethics in War

Date: 7 November 2021, 23rd Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Words for Life (Deuteronomy)

Texts: Deuteronomy 20: Romans 8:31-39; John 18:33-37

Over the course of this year we've been working our way through the book of Deuteronomy. Some of you have asked me why we've been preaching on this book. First, because all of the Bible is God's word and it's all for our good. St Paul writes in 2 Timothy:

All Scriptures is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Second, Deuteronomy is an immensely practical book. The book is something of a guide for organising a society. It's a manual for how Israel as God's people are to live in all aspects of life. The text we're looking at today, Deuteronomy 20, speaks about how Israel were to conduct themselves in war. Some of you may be wondering, how on earth can this text speak to us today, in the 21st century? Others may have been asking questions about the morality of the text as you heard it read. I hope to answer some of those questions and show that this text does have great wisdom for us today, in fact it has shaped the world you live in today. Rather than work through the text verse by verse, we'll tackle it thematically in 4 points.

1. Objections to this text.
2. The blessings of peace
3. Ethical warfare
4. The Lord fights for you.

The subject of ethics in war is immense, so we're only dipping our toe in those waters, but I hope you can stay with us.

1. Objections

I recognise that Deuteronomy 20 says some things that sound barbaric or immoral to our ears. Does this chapter gives license to enslaving conquered peoples, including sexual slavery, killing innocent people, even genocide. It's one of those texts the new atheists delight to throw at Christians to say, "Look, see what your God is like!" We will address each of those objections in turn, but first, it's worth considering our own historical location as we read these texts.

The Reality of War

For most of us here, war is something we see on the news, not something we've lived through. Most people in the West read this text from the experience of a long and comfortable peace. That means we can often assume that if the Bible is God's word then it must be all about peace and love. How can there be anything about war in it, and certainly commands like in this chapter? I say most, but not of us. Some of you have seen military service and lived under foreign occupation. I'd wager it would be worth us younger folk

listening to how this text strikes you. Our experience of peace is historically unusual. Most people through the ages have experienced war, with its violence and moral ambiguity. We must read the text with that frame in mind. So let's turn to the specific issues this text raises.

Forced Labour

In verse 11 we read, that for ancient Israel, if a city made peace with them,

All the people in it shall be subject to forced labour and shall work for you.

This command offends against our sense of equality. In reality, it answers the question of what to do with conquered peoples and what was their relationship to be with Israel. In Joshua 9 we read of how this command played out in their history. The Gibeonites made peace with Israel and were made woodcutters and water carriers for them, and in particular to provide for the altar of the Lord.¹ Interestingly in 2 Samuel 21 God punishes Israel with a famine because king Saul tried to wipe out the Gibeonites. These 2 texts show that in practice this command meant that a city that made peace with Israel could be incorporated into the nation, and come under God's protection.

Killing all the men

In Deuteronomy 20.13 we read that if a city refuses to make peace, when Israel conquers it they are to put all the men to the sword.

Doesn't go against the 6th commandment, *You shall not murder?* War is a special circumstance where those who kill will not be punished for murder. But what about this command, to kill all the men? This answers, in ancient Israel's context, the question of when you win a war, how do you ensure that the people you have conquered will not start another war against you? In a world with no professional standing army, all able bodied men would be expected to fight and are thus considered combatants. This command then is actually about ensuring a lasting peace. The context is war, and that means that for there to be peace, people must die.

Women as plunder

In verse 14 we read that, *the women, the children, the livestock and everything else in the city, you make take these as plunder for yourselves.*

We've all read that armies "rape and pillage". Does this verse say that raping the women of a conquered people is ok? The answer is no. Why? Because Deuteronomy 21:10-14 outlines how captured women are to be treated. We read that if an Israelite man wanted to sleep with a captive woman, he had to take her as his wife. But he could marry her only after she had had a month of mourning. Furthermore she could not simply be used as sexual property and discarded or sold as a slave. The text implies that she would enjoy all the rights and protections of marriage, including the right to go free in divorce.

What about the Canaanites

¹ Joshua 9.26-7

I hope you can see that dismissing this text as immoral after a quick surface reading is a failure on our part, not the text. But what about verses 16-18?

There we find an exception to the general rules for war in this chapter.

However, in the cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them.

Doesn't this command ancient Israel to commit genocide? Tristan explored this question more fully way back in May in a sermon Deuteronomy 7, but let me offer 3 comments.

First, I want to acknowledge that this command to wipe out the Canaanite nations is indeed shocking and confronting not only for us, but also throughout the ages, and I imagine for the people Moses was speaking to on the plains of Moab about to enter the promised land.

Second, God gives 2 reasons for this command. We see the first in verse 18 of our text.

Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshipping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God.

What are the detestable things that these nations did in worshipping their gods?

Deuteronomy 18:9-12 tells us.

*When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. **10** Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, **11** or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. **12** Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord; because of these same detestable practices the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you.*

Central to Canaanite worship was child sacrifice. The true and living God, who made people in his own image, does not want us to worship him or anything else by burning our children alive. He hates this. He cannot stand it. He will not stand it. He commanded Israel to wipe out the nations in the land they were entering to possess so that they would not be tempted to do such a thing. He wants a people who will worship him in righteousness and holiness.

And this leads to the second reason God gives for this command. Israel is to be God's instrument of judgment on these nations who do such wicked things. It is because of their wickedness, God says, that he is driving them out. Indeed in Leviticus 18 God says that the land was defiled because of their sin, and so it vomited them out.² Lest Israel be tempted to ethnic pride, God tells them again and again it is not because of their righteousness that he is giving them the land.³ Further as Deuteronomy closes God warns Israel that if they behave like the Canaanites they too will come under God's judgment and be vomited out of the land,⁴ and this in fact is what happened.

Third, just briefly, this text says that totally destroying the Canaanites is a single exception to the normal rules for war. Nowhere does the Bible say that the command to wipe out the

² Leviticus 18:24-25

³ Deuteronomy 7:7-10, 9:1-6

⁴ Deuteronomy 28:15-68

Canaanites is anything other than a single, once off, never to be repeated command. Put another way, any attempt to use this command to justify holy war or genocide is wrong. Those who have done so have sinned grievously.

In summary, God commanded Israel to wipe out the Canaanites, 1 in judgment upon their wicked practices, including child sacrifice; and 2 so that Israel would not be tempted by them to do the same thing, but instead live and worship in righteousness. The command was not to commit genocide, but rather an act of righteous judgment and to prevent future evil. We may not agree, we may find this troubling, but we must ask the question whether we take the offense of child sacrifice as seriously as God. You cannot have justice without judgment.

What I've suggested may not be entirely satisfactory to you, but I hope it goes some way to answering questions that this text may raise. What about the positive teaching of this chapter? We'll move through these a little quicker.

2. The blessings of peace (5-9)

Verses 5-9 give instructions for who out of Israel's able bodied men is to stay home and not go to war.

Has anyone built a new house and not yet begun to live in it? Let him go home, or he may die in battle and someone else may begin to live in it. **6** Has anyone planted a vineyard and not begun to enjoy it? Let him go home, or he may die in battle and someone else enjoy it. **7** Has anyone become pledged to a woman and not married her? Let him go home, or he may die in battle and someone else marry her."

If war is in defense of peace, then these verses give a picture of what enjoying that peace looks like: Home, family, the fruits of your labour. In chapter 28 these are part of God's blessing for obedience and rest from enemies. This is what wars are engaged in to protect. This command was meant to ensure that the Israelite could be given a chance to enjoy the fruit of peace before they had to take up the responsibility of war.

3. The Ethics of War (10-15 + 19-20)

That brings us to the main thrust of this chapter, in verses 10-15 and 19-20, ethics in war. In a fallen world, war is a reality. This text, written over 3000 years ago, is designed to regulate the exercise of war so as to minimise its use and its impact and to ensure the best possibility for peace after war. This chapter is not an ideal, but a God given restraint on our tendency towards violence and destruction so as to ensure we do not annihilate each other.

Deuteronomy 20 is the parent of Just War theory developed by theologians like St Augustine, and the grandparent of modern International humanitarian law and the Geneva Conventions. So let's briefly explore Just War and humanitarian law in turn and see what elements are traced back to Deuteronomy 20.

Just War

We've already seen the first element of Just War theory. That is, although there is the command, *You Shall Not Murder*, states and governments have a duty to defend their citizens and maintain justice. As Paul writes in Romans 13 - *rulers do not bear the sword for no reason*. Second, protecting innocent life sometimes requires force and violence. We saw this in point 2 - war is to defend the goods of peace. That is to say, there must be a just cause for war and it must only be entered into to seek a just outcome.

Third, war is a last resort. In verse 10 we read, *when you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace*. All other avenues before war should be exhausted.

To these 3 points just war theory adds 3 more.

- That war must be prosecuted by a legitimate authority;
- That it must only be engaged in where there are good prospects for success;
- And that the anticipated good achieved by the war will outweigh the evils inflicted by the war.

These are the 6 conditions under which war is permissible according to Just War theory.

International Humanitarian Law

International Humanitarian Law outlines the second aspect of Just War theory, namely how to conduct a war in a morally responsible way. It aims to preserve human dignity and the possibility of living together after war ends. I would suggest that Deuteronomy 20 shares that aim. Verse 11 aims at restraint towards an enemy that surrenders. As we've seen, they are incorporated into Israel's life and come under God's protection. We've seen how in chapter 21 captured women are to be treated humanely. That principle can be extended to other prisoners of war and non combatants. The Geneva Conventions outline that prisoners of war are to be fed and allowed to contact loved ones. The wounded in war are to receive medical treatment and medics are not to be harmed in fighting. Non combatants are to be protected and not harmed in war.

Verses 19-20 prohibit the destruction of fruit trees when besieging a city. This may seem like a peculiar addition to the ethics of war, but it contains a vital principle. Namely, that one should not conduct a war in such a way as to destroy the possibility of the land producing food. That is, a scorched earth policy is ruled out by this passage. These principles raise the question that with the destructive power of modern weapons, can warfare today be conducted ethically? At the very least an application of this text would be that we can and should hold our governments to the standards outlined in International Humanitarian Law. How else might we apply this text? That brings us to point 4.

4. The Lord fights for you (1-4)

While the commands in this chapter were addressed directly to ancient Israel they apply to us as Christians indirectly. How so? In our Gospel reading from John, Jesus says, *My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest.*⁵ Here Jesus lays down a

⁵ John 18:36

vital distinction between the church and ancient Israel. Jesus is Israel's long awaited king. But whereas before Jesus God's people were a geopolitical entity, the nation of Israel, now God's people are the church, drawn from every nation and tribe and language. That is to say the church cannot be identified with any geopolitical entity, but crosses national and political boundaries. When Moses said to Israel, *when you go to war against your enemies*, he was speaking about swords and shields and horses. The church does not go to war in this way. We have no army or physical territory to defend. Our enemies, St Paul says, are not flesh and blood, but the powers and principalities of this dark world. Our weapons are not tanks or guns, but prayer and the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God.⁶

Finally, chapter 20 begins with the exhortation,

Don't be afraid [...], because the LORD your God [...] will be with you. Today you are going into battle against your enemies. Do not be fainthearted or afraid: do not panic or be terrified by them. For the Lord your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory.

There was a time when the Lord our God stepped in to fight for us against our greatest enemies - sin and death and Satan. He was abandoned, but he did not abandon us. On the cross all the powers of Satan, all the wickedness of men was thrown against him. Hebrews says,

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death - that is the devil - and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.⁷

In his death he broke the power of sin and threw open the gates of hell. Jesus' death was God's great victory for his people sealed by the empty tomb and the resurrection. And so Paul can write in Romans, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" If that was true for ancient Israel on the battlefield, how much more for us for whom Christ has died and upon whom he has poured out his Holy Spirit? Jesus' last words in Matthew are these, "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

So, sisters and brothers, what enemies do you face? What are you afraid of? A bully at work? The pains of aging? Sickness? COVID? The accusations of people or of your own mind? The failures of the past? Financial hardship? Your children's future? No! Deuteronomy charged the priest to speak to the people. And so I speak to you today. Yes, when you leave this place you will face your enemies. But do not be afraid! Do not be terrified! For the Lord your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you. Hear God's word to you today.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? **36** As it is written:

"For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

⁶ Ephesians 6:10-20

⁷ Hebrews 2.14-15

37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. **38** For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, **39** neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Collect for Peace

O God, the author and lover of peace, in knowledge of whom stands our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom; defend your servants in all assaults of our enemies, that, surely trusting in your defence, we may not fear the power of any adversaries, through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.