

“Being a Good Neighbor”
Deuteronomy 22:1-12
April 13, 2014

INTRODUCTION:

A surprisingly wide variety of laws are addressed in Deuteronomy 22-25, with most of them being very practical in nature. Laws are given that address such matters as public health, town planning, lost property and agricultural practices. The common thread that seems to tie most of them together is the idea of being a good neighbor. It may seem odd to some that the Bible should give so much attention to such topics. Isn't the Bible supposed to limit itself to spiritual matters?

There are several reasons why the Bible addresses such practical matters as we see addressed in this part of Deuteronomy. We've noted before that God's people are an outpost of the coming kingdom. We are to demonstrate to the watching world what the coming kingdom is like. One aspect of that coming kingdom is vibrant community life, and these chapters describe the components of such life. It is to be a life that mirrors what God is like, a generous and loving God. The community of his people is also to be generous and loving.

Another reason for addressing these practical matters of living as good neighbors is that the quality of our neighborliness reveals a great deal about our inner character. One of the biblical requirements for officers in the church is that they should have a good reputation with outsiders (1 Timothy 3:7). Someone outside the church would have no opportunity to observe a person's behavior within the church. But that behavior would be seen in the community. If a person is not a good neighbor, such a lack reveals a character flaw rendering one unfit for office in the church.

Broadly considered, there are two kinds of neighbors. There are those who are willing to sacrifice the community for their own sakes, and those who are willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the community. Because of the way God is, willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of others, we are called to form the kind of communities that reflect him. We are to be willing to live in community as those who give of themselves for the sake of others. These laws give us the specifics of what that is supposed to look like. Let me point out four qualities of good neighbors from our passage.

I. By Taking Responsibility

The opening verses of our chapter address the situation of lost property. What is our responsibility if we find something that was lost? The Bible's advice is opposite from the saying that is frequently repeated today, "Finders keepers, losers weepers." According to the Bible, finding a lost thing doesn't bestow ownership rights upon the finder. It doesn't change the ownership at all, and these verses say that ownership is maintained by the original owner. Not only does the finder not gain ownership rights, but he is also forbidden from another common response—ignoring the problem. He is commanded to take responsibility to do everything in his power to restore the property to its rightful owner. So if he knows the rightful owner of a wandering sheep or ox, he is to capture the animal and take it back to the owner. If he doesn't know who owns the animal, he is to capture the animal and care for it until the owner comes looking for it. Verse 3 expands this to apply to any lost property. The finder is to take responsibility to do whatever he can to see that property restored to its rightful owner.

Consider the kind of heart necessary to obey this command. First, it would have to be a heart that is not greedy. A few years ago, a member of our church came up to me following church one Sunday with a very valuable diamond ring that he had found in the church parking lot. A greedy person could easily have realized that the ring could be kept with no one being the wiser. But this person didn't do so, choosing instead to bring it in and ask our help in finding the rightful owner, which we were able to do.

Not only does the person behaving in the way commanded here have to be free of greed, a merciful heart would also be necessary. The finder in our text is asked to put himself out, in both time and money. If he knows the owner, he must take the time to return it. If the owner is unknown, he has to take the time and money to care for it while waiting for the owner to find it. And the whole time, it would not be hard to find fault with the owner for his negligence. Animals can't unlatch gates by themselves. It is usually something the owner has done wrong that has allowed the animal to escape. And this negligence on the part of the owner causes inconvenience on the part of the finder. Those who lack a heart of mercy would find in such negligence an adequate reason not to be put out. On top of all that, the owner is a stranger to you.

Verse 4 moves to a different need. A friend of yours is traveling down the road in front of your house with his donkey loaded up with produce he is transporting to market. The donkey slips on some loose gravel and falls into the ditch, and because of the load on his back, he can't get up by himself. As you watch, the donkey's owner gets on the lower side of the donkey and attempts to assist the donkey. But his efforts are insufficient. You are busy with your own work, and don't really want to stop to help this friend. What should you do? You could pretend not to see the need and go on with your own

work. No one could criticize you for that. And if they did, you could just plead that you didn't see it. That is exactly what this verse says we must not do.

I notice that the warning not to ignore these needs is repeated three times. Isn't that our tendency? We see a need, and our instinct is to think of the reasons why we shouldn't be troubled to help with it. Surely there must be others who could better help. I have some urgent business somewhere and can't be troubled by this need. It sounds like the priest and the Levite in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, who crossed to the other side of the road and passed by the man in need. Or if that doesn't work, we will sometimes make an attempt to do something so we won't feel so bad. But when we do that, our actions will be determined by the minimum amount necessary to relieve guilt, not the amount needed genuinely to help. These are all simply different ways of ignoring a brother in need.

The only way I know not to ignore the problem is to be able to enter into the need of another by feeling their need with them. Our hearts go out to people who have lost valuable things because we know what it's like to experience that, and we put ourselves in their place. This is exactly what Jesus has done with us. Instead of ignoring our problem of being lost, he puts himself in our place. He did so literally, dying in our place, which we are going to remember this Friday at our Good Friday service. We learn to do the same as we follow Jesus. That is what is required here.

II. By Protecting the Fruitfulness of the Earth

We won't have time to look at verse 5, which speaks of transvestism. I believe what is in view in that verse is the call to live fully as God's image bearers as either male or female. But we will need to move on to verses 6-7, which give laws relating to conservation of the earth's fruitfulness. The scenario envisioned is that of finding a bird's nest with the mother bird with her eggs. The command is not to take both mother and eggs for food, but only the eggs, leaving the mother to reproduce for another time. If the mother were taken without the eggs, the eggs or babies would not be able to survive without the mother. There is a similar command back in chapter 20, which addresses laws concerning warfare. Israel is told that when they lay siege to a city, they are not to cut down the fruit trees.

This is a principle of conservation. Even though God has given to mankind dominion over the earth, we are to remember that the earth still belongs to God. We are managers of it, and we are called upon here to manage it for long-term benefit, not for short-term gain. Let me ask again the same question I asked in the previous point. What kind of heart is needed to obey this? It is a patient heart, willing to wait for the earth's fruitfulness to mature. It is also a

heart free of greed and selfishness, willing to take less than could be taken, for the sake of others in the future who can benefit. That's what good neighbors do. They don't live as if they are the only ones who count, but willingly deny themselves for the sake of others.

III. By Pursuing the Safety of Others

We move from laws of conservation to building codes in verse 8. Houses at this time were built with flat roofs, which were used as an additional living space. Access was gained by an exterior stairway or ladder and the space could be used for entertainment or for sleeping during hot weather or for several other purposes. Because of the height involved and the inherent danger associated with that, the owner was told to add the safety feature of a parapet, or short wall, around the perimeter of the roof. If he failed to take this precaution and someone was injured by falling off his roof, he would be culpable, bringing blood guilt upon his house. He would not be allowed to excuse himself by blaming the fall on the clumsiness or inattention of the one who fell, even though that person likely was either clumsy or inattentive.

We have similar practices in our day, with building codes designed to promote safety. Historically, Christians have been leaders in this area of requiring people to do things that promote the general safety of others. In sixteenth century Geneva, John Calvin worked tirelessly for matters of public health in order to arrest the spread of disease in his city. He urged regulations that would provide adequate ventilation and drainage so people could live in healthier conditions. The same thing happened in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when a group known as the Clapham Sect, led by William Wilberforce, led in efforts to promote public health and worker protection laws.

Let's ask again the question we have asked of these other laws. What kind of heart is required to keep such a law? It's the same as the other laws. A heart not in bondage to greed and selfishness, as well as a heart of mercy, would be required for obedience to this law. It would cost money to put up a parapet, and a homeowner might be tempted to argue that the clumsiness or inattentiveness of others is not his problem. But God disagrees, requiring here a heart that thinks of others and their needs above our own.

IV. By Maintaining Holiness

This last section of our passage prohibits the mixing of various things that seem arbitrary and meaningless to us. Vineyards were not to be mixed with other crops, donkeys and oxen were not to be yoked together to pull a plow,

and fabric was not to be woven with a mixture of wool and linen. It seems to me that this is part of Israel's ceremonial law that portrays how Israel is to maintain its holiness. Holiness means to be set apart, and Israel is to be set apart and not "mixed" with the nations just as these different groupings are not to be mixed. They are to maintain their distinctives as God's people.

The Bible is clear throughout in teaching that God's people act as a preserving influence on society. We are the salt of the earth, and the salt serves to preserve from rottenness. One of the ways we are called to be good neighbors is by preserving our uniqueness. If the world is compromising in the area of sexuality, we are not to do so. When so many are concerned only with making money, we are to be distinctive by serving God first and being generous with our money. When the world gives itself to work to the point that there is no more room for rest, we are to say "Enough—God has designed us to require rest." Remember that God stepped in to judge Sodom and Gomorrah only when ten righteous people could not be found in it. We are called to love our neighbors simply by being faithful to swim against the current of our generation and obey God first of all.

CONCLUSION:

This passage calls upon us to be good neighbors. As we have seen, that requires some heart issues to be addressed, such as freedom from greed and self-centeredness, the ability to enter into someone else's world and see their needs and empathize with them, and the willingness to sacrifice oneself for others. As we approach Good Friday this week, we are reminded that Jesus excels in all of these. He is the epitome of a good neighbor. He could have ignored our plight, but our lost condition tugs on his heart to the point that he does something about it, dying that cruel death on the cross, the death we should have died. He has also looked out for our safety, securing it for all time by his resurrection, which he is pleased to share with us to make us safe for all time. And he has preserved the fruitfulness of the earth, where we will live with him forever on a new earth.

Jesus transforms us from self-centered men and women who think the community exists to serve us, to those who live to serve others, just like Jesus. We are like Beauty and the Beast, with Jesus loving us when we look so beastly that no one can bear to see us as we really are. But we have been transformed by the love of Jesus to handsome princes and princesses, free of self-centeredness and greed and able to live for the welfare of others. Jesus makes us to be good neighbors.