

Deuteronomy 19 – Cities of Refuge

Introduction

When we look at the law of God, we must recognize that it is not a lifeless system of rules. It is the revelation of God's righteous character. In Deuteronomy 19, we enter the section of the covenant law that applies the Sixth Commandment, which declares plainly, "Thou shalt not kill." Over the next five days, we will examine how God applied this command to the nation of Israel through the Cities of Refuge. Through this detailed section of the law, we see that God demands deliberate justice, He requires us to guard our hearts against hatred, and He calls us to hold human life in the highest possible regard.

Day 1: The Revelation of a Righteous God

Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 19:1-3 (NKJV)

We often make the mistake of viewing the Old Testament law merely as an ancient civic code. But of course, it is much more than that. It is a window into the very nature of the God we serve. The law shows us what God loves and what God hates.

God is a God of justice who will have the guilty punished and the innocent protected. He does not want human passion to rule in society, but sober, deliberate justice. In God's order, in God's way, justice is never left up to the fleeting emotions or the unchecked rage of a mob. By commanding the Israelites to prepare roads and set apart three cities in the midst of their land, God was building physical monuments to His own righteousness. He was ensuring that when a tragedy occurred, there was a designated place where the truth could be established.

When we read the law, we are confronted with the holiness of God. We must approach these commands not as distant historical footnotes, but as the enduring standard of a God who demands righteousness in the land He gives His people.

Reflection:

How does viewing the Old Testament law as a reflection of God's own character change the way you read it?

Prayer:

Father, thank You for Your holy and righteous law. We confess that we often fail to see the beauty of Your commands. Open our eyes to see Your justice, Your mercy, and Your holiness in the pages of Scripture. Teach us to love Your law and to govern our lives by its light. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Day 2: The Value of the Image Bearer

Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 19:10 (NKJV)

Why does the law place such heavy emphasis on the shedding of blood? What do we mean by this? We mean that the Sixth Commandment is grounded in a profound theological truth from the very beginning of creation. Man is made in the image of God.

Because of this truth, a human life is exceedingly precious and valuable. When a life is taken unlawfully, it is an assault on the image of the Creator Himself. The law commands that innocent blood be not shed in the land. This is an indictment against the casual disregard for life that we see so often in our own culture. We live in a society that treats life as cheap, celebrating violence in entertainment and discarding the vulnerable. But God's people must be different. We are called to recognize the divine stamp upon every human being.

If we truly believe that man is made in the image of God, it will govern how we speak to one another, how we treat the weak, and how we view the sanctity of life from the womb to the grave. We must hold human life in the highest regard.

Reflection:

In what ways does our modern culture devalue human life, and how can your family stand against those cultural lies?

Prayer:

Lord, we confess that human life is exceedingly valuable and worth protecting because it is made in Your image. Give us an overwhelming sense of duty to protect the lives of those around us. Keep our minds free from the cheap violence of this world, and give us a deep reverence for the lives You have created. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Day 3: A Sanctuary from Blind Vengeance

Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 19:4-6 (NKJV)

Moses instructs Israel to establish Cities of Refuge. These cities were a provision of God's grace and justice. They were designed to protect a man who accidentally killed his neighbor. This is the case of someone who killed ignorantly and whom he hated not in times past.

Consider the example Moses gives. Two men go into the woods to cut timber. As one man swings the axe, the iron head slips from the wooden handle and strikes his neighbor, resulting in his death. Men die from various causes, do they not? Old age, sickness, and sometimes, a tragic accident. The man who swung the axe did not harbor malice. Yet, the dead man's family might be consumed with grief and rage. The City of Refuge allowed the unintentional manslayer to flee and find sanctuary.

This prevented the avenger of blood from acting out of blind passion and shedding innocent blood. It guaranteed that the matter would be handled according to proper judicial procedure rather than through the blood lust of vigilante vengeance. God's law demands that truth outrun emotion.

Reflection:

How does God's provision of the Cities of Refuge demonstrate His desire for sober, deliberate justice over unchecked human emotion?

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank You that You are a God of order and not of chaos. We praise You for Your profound wisdom in protecting the innocent from the blind rage of men. Help us, Lord, to value truth and justice above our own emotional reactions, and to trust in Your righteous judgments. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Day 4: The Root of the Crime

Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 19:11-13 (NKJV)

God's law draws a sharp distinction between a tragic accident and deliberate murder. If a man hated his neighbor, lay in wait, and struck him mortally, the City of Refuge offered no permanent sanctuary. The elders of his city were commanded to fetch him and hand him over to justice. The guilty must not go unpunished.

And here is where the law strikes deep into our own souls. Murder does not begin with the physical act. It begins in the heart. Hatred is the root of murder. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught us that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause is in danger of the judgment. The law is spiritual, and it searches the deepest corners of our minds. We cannot claim to keep the Sixth Commandment merely by keeping our hands clean of physical violence.

We must guard our hearts against bitterness, resentment, and hatred. If you harbor secret malice against another, you are nursing the very seed of murder. We must quickly quench the flames of hatred should they ever arise in our hearts, seeking forgiveness and reconciliation with our neighbor.

Reflection:

Are there any lingering feelings of bitterness or unjustified anger in your heart toward someone else right now?

Prayer:

Search us, O God, and know our hearts. We pray that You would give us the grace to quickly repent of any bitterness, anger, or hatred we hold against our neighbor. Purify our minds by the power of Your Spirit, and teach us to love one another fervently. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Day 5: The Active Duty to Protect

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4:31-32 (NKJV)

The Sixth Commandment requires more than just avoiding violence. It demands that we actively protect human life. We must always be thinking of how we might act so that human life will be preserved.

This brings the law right into the daily habits of our lives. We must never act recklessly or foolishly in ways that endanger others. This applies to how we drive our vehicles on the highway. It applies to how we maintain safety at our workplaces. It applies to how we play and recreate. If human life is precious, then negligence is a sin. We must be deliberate and careful, honoring God by safeguarding the lives of those He has placed around us.

As Christians, we are called to love the Lord our God, to walk ever in His ways, and to reject the destructive patterns of the world. Let us be a people known for preserving life, speaking words of grace, and demonstrating the covenant faithfulness required of God's people.

Reflection:

What is one practical way you can show a greater respect for the safety and well-being of others in your daily routine?

Prayer:

Father, put in each one of our breasts an overwhelming conviction to protect life. We pray for our land, that the shedding of innocent blood would be stopped and that Your justice would prevail. Give us wisdom in our daily tasks to act safely and carefully, that the righteousness of Thy law might guide our homes and honor Your Name. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Conclusion

Through the study of the Cities of Refuge, we are reminded of the weight of God's law and the profound value He places upon human life. Let this truth shape the way your family interacts with the world. May we be quick to repent of anger, diligent to protect the innocent, and ever mindful that we serve a God of perfect justice and boundless mercy.