Whole-Hearted: Loving the Difficult God of Deuteronomy

Sermon Starters for Preaching Deuteronomy

Kevin J. Youngblood

Text: Deuteronomy 1 – 3

Title: Generation Next: Breaking Sinful Generational Cycles

Focus Statement: Thoughtful, balanced, and accurate commemoration of the past is crucial to our spiritual progress, exposing and preventing the repetition of spiritually hazardous generational cycles.

Function Statement: To equip the current generation with a healthy respect for tradition enabling them to both honor and critique the past with a view to contributing to God’s shaping of the future.

Illustration: Historical reenactments and their purpose – an exercise in empathy and an opportunity to consider alternative scenarios that may help us shape a better future by avoiding the mistakes of the past.

Textual Summary: Moses revisits events and places of the past 40 years as a means of preparing the current generation of Israelites to progress toward the Promised Land. Moses insists that the key to their future lies in learning from and avoiding the mistakes of the previous generation. Every place Moses mentions and every event he recalls is imbued with symbolic significance, pointing to vices to avoid and essential virtues to cultivate for grateful receipt of YHWH’s gift of land and successful participation in YHWH’s gift of covenant.

Key Ideas to Emphasize

* One cannot help but notice the text’s preoccupation with geography and time. Time and place have special theological significance in Deuteronomy as they help us recall past failures as well past successes. God uses these to instruct us in how to formulate a spiritual strategy for progress in the future.
* All of Moses’ words are addressed directly to this second generation as if they were the ones who received the covenant and the commandments at Sinai and as if they were the ones who failed at Kadesh Barnea. YHWH’s word never comes second hand. Even though it may have originally been addressed to an earlier and entirely different audience through an historical intermediary, the Spirit speaks it directly to us now as a living relevant word for today.
* “You have stayed at this mountain (Horeb) long enough. . . . You’ve been traveling around this mountain (Seir) long enough.” – We must always beware of stagnation, the paralysis of analysis, and the “ivory tower” that would trap us in endless theoretical and intellectual pursuits while our participation in the divine plan stalls and the world languishes waiting for the divine blessing mediated through us. YHWH prods us on to keep moving. We are a people always on the move under YHWH’s direction.
* YHWH is the God of second chances. Rather than give up on Israel because of the previous generation’s failure, YHWH renews his covenant and his promise with the next generation and proceeds with his plan for blessing all creation through his covenant people.
* Ironically, gentiles are often more ready to accept YHWH’s grace than YHWH’s own people are. Caleb is the model from the first generation for the second and he isn’t even an Israelite. Edom and Moab both readily received the land YHWH offered to them despite the challenges settling it posed. Israel needs to learn from their example rather than look down on them from some delusional sense of superiority.
* The victories over Sihon and Og in the Transjordan serve as YHWH’s reassurance of his promise to protect Israel and us from those enemies who would impede our progress in realizing the divine promise.

Text: Deut. 3:23-29

Title: When God Says “No!”: Dealing with the Disappointment of Denied Requests

Focus Statement: Even the most spiritually mature among us struggle to overcome their disappointment when God denies their dearest dreams, but effective spiritual leadership requires the ability to die to our dreams for the sake of realizing the purposes of God.

Function Statement: To prepare believers to accept God’s denial of certain prayers and find a way forward in spiritual growth in the wake of such devastating disappointment.

Illustration: The Justin Zackham/Rob Reiner film *Bucket List* introduced into our English vernacular the term “bucket list.” Moses had a bucket list and at the very top of his bucket list was his deep desire to enter Canaan with Israel and see the land YHWH had promised.

Textual Summary: Moses bitterly recounts his unsuccessful attempts to persuade YHWH to reconsider banning his entry into Canaan, blaming Israel for the punishment that he must now bear. Moses’ frustration is only surpassed by YHWH’s who sharply rebukes Moses for revisiting the issue, prohibiting him from ever bringing it up again in addition to denying his request. Instead, YHWH commands Moses to devote all of his energies to preparing Joshua to take his place. This Moses does with admirable grace and poise.

Key Ideas to Emphasize

* Our theology of prayer must include a robust understanding of YHWH’s right of refusal and of the petitioner’s appropriate response when having to accept such a denial.
* One could think of this text as Moses’ Gethsemane. This resounding divine “No!” is not the end of the story. One should pair this text with Deuteronomy 34 noting that YHWH personally buried Moses – an honor bestowed upon no other biblical character, including Jesus – and eulogized him in the most glowing terms imaginable. One should also keep in mind the transfiguration scene in the synoptic gospels when Moses appears before the praying Jesus finally standing on the Cis-Jordan side!
* Moses serves as an excellent model of how to make a graceful exit from leadership. He in no way sabotages Joshua’s succession but rather eases his way into leadership, doing everything within his power to ensure his success. Rarely do leadership transitions occur so smoothly with so much care and grace, but it is always to the benefit of the people and to the glory of God when they do!

Text: Deuteronomy 4:5-20; 32-40

Title: The Secret to Our Success

Focus Statement: The secret to being a successful church lies not in any of our attributes or skills, but solely in God’s self-disclosure, God’s presence in our midst, and in God’s command of our undivided attention.

Function Statement: To correct an unhealthy emphasis on technique in ministry that misplaces our focus on human wisdom and power instead of on divine presence, revelation, and glory.

Illustration: Once in the pulpit, simply look up and stare at the ceiling with a look of intense concentration for an entire, silent minute. Instinctively, everyone in the congregation will follow your gaze and begin looking up to see what it is that has captured your attention. When the minute is up, look back down at the congregation and say, “Made you look!” This little experiment demonstrates the power of focused attention. It is contagious and draws others into the mystery and wonder of whatever has captured your attention.

Textual Summary: Moses sets the stage for his exposition of the Ten Commandments by reminding Israel that their uniqueness and appeal to the nations lies not in themselves but in the divine wisdom of Torah, in the captivating presence of YHWH that inhabits their camp, and in the story of YHWH’s preservation and preparation of Israel to be his treasured possession. For this reason, they must relentlessly eschew idolatry and every other attempt to confine or limit YHWH since all such distractions will inevitably sabotage their participation in the divine mission.

Key Ideas to Emphasize

* This text is punctuated by commands to pay careful attention and to be on guard (1:5, 9, 15). In fact, these commands divide the text into three sections suggestive of how one might structure the sermon. Each section opens with Moses’ warning to Israel (and to us) to pay careful attention to Torah and to be on high alert for distractions from our singular focus on YHWH. Moses here reminds me of my driver’s ed teacher in high school who repeatedly told me to keep my eyes on the road and to avoid all manner of distracted driving. This is good advice for navigating life as well.
* What the nations should first notice about us is our God – how uniquely forthcoming God is with information about himself and his will and in what close proximity he lives among us (now, in the Holy Spirit, even within us!). But is this what we capitalize on? Is this what we advertise about our churches or do we focus instead on our programs, our size, our accomplishments, our orthodoxy, our unorthodoxy and innovativeness? Moses does not hesitate to call all such distractions idolatry.
* Moses’ emphasis on the accessibility of YHWH and his Torah stands in stark contrast to the typical ancient Near Eastern view of divinity in which the gods often left humans in the dark about their will and afflicted humans with punishments for no obvious reason. The following prayer recovered from a tablet in Mesopotamia provides an excellent example.

“May the wrath of the heart of my god be pacified!  
May the god who is unknown to me be pacified!  
May the goddess who is unknown to me be pacified!  
May the known and unknown god be pacified!  
May the known and unknown goddess be pacified!  
The sin which I have committed I know not.  
The misdeed which I have committed I know not.  
A gracious name may my god announce!  
A gracious name may my goddess announce!  
A gracious name may my known and unknown god announce!  
A gracious name may my known and unknown goddess announce!  
Pure food have I not eaten,  
Clear water have I not drunk.  
An offense against my god I have unwittingly committed.  
A transgression against my goddess I have unwittingly done.  
0 Lord, my sins are many, great are my iniquities!  
My god, my sins are many, great are my iniquities! . . .  
The sin, which I have committed, I know not.  
The iniquity, which I have done, I know not.  
The offense, which I have committed, I know not.  
The transgression I have done, I know not.  
The lord, in the anger of his heart, hath looked upon me.  
The god, in the wrath of his heart, hath visited me.  
The goddess hath become angry with me, and hath grievously stricken me.  
The known or unknown god hath straitened me.  
The known or unknown goddess hath brought affliction upon me.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Compared to such uncertainty and desperate groping for answers, the Torah is a manifestation of overwhelming grace. What a gift to know the divine will, to have it expressed so clearly.

* Moses’ emphasis on the fact that Israel saw no physical form when encountering YHWH on Horeb (Sinai) but only heard a voice serves to warn us not to limit God with our anemic imaginations, not to put God in a box. Calvin once said that our minds are perpetual idol forges. How true! J. B. Phillips’ classic little book *Your God Is Too Small* does an excellent job of cataloguing the most popular misconceptions that distort and limit God. Of course, they do not really limit God but they limit our ability to rightly relate to God and to fully enjoy his presence and benefits in our lives.

Text: Deuteronomy 5:1-22

Title: How to Live with a Jealous God: 10 Do’s and Don’t’s

Focus Statement: Divine jealousy is not a vice but a virtue, insisting on our exclusive loyalty to YHWH as vital to our and our children’s well-being.

Function Statement: To correct misunderstandings of divine jealousy and restore it as a legitimate motivation for love and devotion to YHWH.

Illustration: Recent article on marriage.com, “Is Jealousy Healthy in a Relationship?” makes a helpful distinction between healthy and unhealthy jealousy. Unhealthy jealousy arises from personal insecurities and imposing past relational failures on the present relationship. Healthy jealousy arises from a desire to protect a valued relationship from genuine threats. Obviously, when YHWH describes himself as “jealous” YHWH is not exposing some kind of insecurity (contra Richard Dawkins). Nonetheless, this is how many people, including Christians, think of divine jealousy. The Ten Commandments actually revolve around the theme of divine jealousy and serve to clarify its salutary nature.

Textual Summary: Moses reenacts the covenant ceremony of Exodus 20 with this new generation who was not present for the Sinai theophany. At the heart of this reenactment is Moses’ exposition of the Ten Commandments which, though mostly aligned with their wording in Exodus 20, does make a couple of significant alterations underscoring the connection between YHWH’s jealousy for his own holiness and YHWH’s jealousy for Israel’s holiness. According to Stephen A. Kaufman (see bibliography below), the Ten Commandments proceed to serve as the structural device for Moses’ second and primary homily on Torah (5:23 – 26:19).

Key Ideas to Emphasize:

* The first three commandments arise from YHWH’s jealousy for his own uniqueness and glory. While this at first may strike us a megalomaniacal, in fact, YHWH’s concern for his glory is entirely for our benefit because YHWH knows that our greatest joy and fulfillment is only found in acknowledging and participating in YHWH’s utterly unique divine glory. We are most satisfied in God when God is most glorified in us.
* YHWH is also jealous for our time. Sabbath is a way of honoring both God and the image of God by both receiving and granting rest. It is precisely here in the longest commandment that we find Deuteronomy’s most significant departure from Exodus 20. The rationale for the Sabbath in Exodus is God’s rest from creation whereas in Deuteronomy it is the exodus from Egypt. The point is that Israel is under new management. YHWH is nothing like Pharaoh whose jealousy was exclusively for his own aggrandizement at others’ expense. YHWH’s jealousy is for his people’s well-being. Therefore, unlike pharaoh, YHWH grants rest and commands his people to grant rest.
* YHWH is also jealous for the health of the covenant community and therefore insists that the honor we show God be coupled with an honor we show to our fellow human beings as is appropriate to each relationship: parental honor, spousal honor, neighborly honor. In fact the commandments in Deuteronomy exhibit a kind of parallelism such that commandments to honor God can be easily be paired with commandments to honor neighbor in similar fashion.

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| Parallel Commandments | |
| I am YHWH your god who brought you out of the land of Egypt | Sabbath command grounded in YHWH’s emancipation of Israel from Egyptian slavery |
| You shall have no other gods before me | Honor parents; Do not commit adultery |
| You shall not make for yourselves carved images | You shall not murder (i.e. destroy the divine image) |
| You shall not bear YHWH’s name in an untrustworthy manner | You shall not testify against your neighbor as an untrustworthy witness |
| You shall not steal | You shall not covet |

Text: Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Title: The All-Consuming Love of God

Focus Statement: Human beings are made for one all consuming love, a love that integrates life and infuses it with meaning and purpose. God alone is worthy to be the object of such love because only God can receive and reciprocate such love without abusing it. All other loves are derivative from and manifestations of this all-consuming love of God.

Function Statement: To help Christians rightly order their loves and their lives.

Illustration: Augustine famously prayed in his Confessions, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” Augustine knew what he was talking about because he had lived the first half of his life as a restless heart. He easily could have beat Johnny Lee to the punch of his song “Looking for Love in All the Wrong the Places” had Augustine been more musically inclined. Augustine sought to expend his love on learning, on erotic adventures, on travel, and partying in general but none of these satisfied Augustine’s deepest hunger: to give himself to a truly worthy cause. It was only when he finally encountered God that Augustine’s restless heart found a home – an all-consuming love worthy of all of his being. Augustine’s autobiography, *Confessions*, remains to this day an undisputed classic of Western literature because his journey resonates so deeply with most humans. We were all made for one all-consuming love and deep down inside, even the most committed atheist knows it.

Textual Summary: Moses exhorts Israel not only to obey YHWH’s commands but to do so out of an all-consuming love for God and to ensure that succeeding generations at least know what YHWH has done for and expects of Israel. The faith is to be transmitted by immersion (pun intended). Scripture is to decorate the doorposts and walls of their houses as well as the gates of their city. Scripture is to be the first thing that children hear upon waking and the last thing they hear before falling asleep. Every time a parent rises from or sits down in a chair should be accompanied by a biblical recitation. Israel is to exude Scripture in both word and deed so as to imprint it on the next generation – something the parents of the generation Moses is currently addressing DID NOT DO.

Key Ideas to Emphasize

* Loving God is an exercise of the mind which means it is necessarily intellectual even for those of us who are not academically inclined. Of course, different disciples will stress one of these organs of love more than the others. For example, pragmatic types will spend less time contemplating God and more time feeding the hungry and caring for the poor in God’s name. But even these actions cannot be done to God’s glory without some thought. To love God with our minds, however, is less about academics and more about strategy. It is about being thoughtful, deliberate, and strategic about our love for God so that loving God and expressing that love preoccupies our thoughts. We think about how everything we do and say in life relates to God and reflects on God.
* My translation of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 is as follows: “Hear, O Israel, YHWH is our god, YHWH alone. You shall love YHWH your God with your every thought, with your every breath, and with your every endeavor.” In other words, every human action is to flow from a profound sense of love for and gratitude to God. This is intended to be an antidote for the kind of spiritual amnesia that Moses anticipates will ensue once Israel is comfortably settled in the land (6:10-15).
* The transmission of faith to the next generation is a recurring concern in Scripture. Deuteronomy 6 is perhaps the most explicit outline of tips and strategies for Scriptural and spiritual saturation of our homes. Of course, in Judaism this took a turn toward the literal with the invention of phylacteries and mezuzas. While Christians might balk and even mock such literalism, we must admit that in our case, more often than not, this took a turn toward the negligent. A useful exercise would be to think of contemporary meaningful ways of saturating our lives and homes with thoughts of God and his word that will bless rather than burden our children. We cannot control whether our children believe and choose to become disciples of Jesus, but we can ensure that if they choose not to, we aren’t the reason why.

Text: Deuteronomy 7:1-11

Title: Texts of Terror: The Deeply Disturbing Command for Annihilation

Focus Statement: According to Deuteronomy, YHWH’s command that Israel show the Canaanites no mercy when subjecting them to annihilation is a reflex of the divine concern to protect his people from assimilation to a spiritually toxic culture. Nonetheless, it remains the greatest struggle of the Christian faith to explain and apply these admittedly brutal and bloody texts, especially in light of Jesus’ stringent ethic of non-violence.

Function Statement: To help Christians come to terms with the divinely ordained violence of Scripture without either abandoning or radicalizing their faith.

Textual Summary: Moses outlines the procedure for the special kind of warfare YHWH has decreed against the Canaanites. It entails complete annihilation of all traces of Canaanite culture as well as of all remaining inhabitants in the land. Forming treaties, showing mercy, and intermarrying are all completely out of the question.

Illustration/Opening: Richard Dawkins’ book *The God Delusion* is (in)famous for its championing of a religionless, especially a God-less, world. At the heart of his argument against the Judeo-Christian vision of an ethic rooted in the belief of an omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent and omnibenevolent divinity are the numerous ethical problems posed by what he calls the OT’s portrayal of a god who sanctions genocidal brutality, misogyny, homophobia, slavery, and megalomaniacal narcissism. Dawkins’ argument has resonated with many, including a number of Christians who are now ready to chuck the OT as an embarrassment to faith. Jesus, however, would never countenance such a response to an attack on YHWH’s integrity as he made clear in Matthew 5:17-20. But how should Christians who love the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and his revelation in the OT respond?

Key Ideas to Emphasize:

* It is entirely appropriate to be bothered by what YHWH prescribes in this text. YHWH is bothered by it as well. God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked and neither should we (Ezek 18:23; 33:11). We must keep in mind, however, that our very revulsion at such drastic measures is only possible because of the divine nature. Apart from God’s deep and abiding desire to bless creation, we would not even recognize the problem this text creates. In other words, the cognitive dissonance that Deuteronomy 7 creates is itself evidence of the divine image in us – the *sensus divinitatis* – that recoils with God at the extreme measures required to contain and reverse the destructive effects of sin ultimately leading to a fate worse than death.
* It is important to place this text in the larger context of Deuteronomy’s theology of war. Deuteronomy 7 is not a prescription for the normal rules of engagement. That is found in Deuteronomy 20 where we learn that God’s ideal was for Israel never even to have a professional standing military. Furthermore, the law of the king in Deuteronomy 17:16 prohibits the king’s stockpiling weapons and building an arsenal as a show of strength (i.e. the prohibition against acquiring many horses and even of creating alliances with Egypt in order to procure more horse and chariots). Clearly, YHWH is not grooming Israel to be an imperial, aggressive, colonizing power.
* Deuteronomy 7 must be compared with other texts in the Pentateuch that describe a “driving out” of the Canaanites rather than their annihilation (e.g. Exod 23:28-31; 33:2; 34:11; Lev 18:24; 20:23; Num 33:52-55). This indicates that YHWH was engaged in reducing the Canaanite population prior to Israel’s arrival – a detail confirmed by archeological remains indicating a dramatic drop in the Canaanite population between Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages. Was this perhaps to minimize loss of life during Israel’s settling of the land of Canaan?
* K. Lawson Younger has noted that exaggeration is a standard feature of conquest accounts in the ancient Near East. It should not surprise us therefore that this would be true of both the rhetoric of Deuteronomy 7 as well as that of the Book of Joshua. One great example is the Merneptah Stele in which Pharaoh Merneptah claims to have annihilated Israel.
* A question that must be addressed is why Canaan was singled out for such harsh treatment. Surely they were not the most wicked people on the planet! Indeed they were not. They were, however, the most ideally situated to influence the Mediterranean world. The land bridge they occupied was the veritable Grand Central Station of the ancient Near East and from that position they exported their idolatrous and oppressive Canaanite culture all over the Mediterranean basin. In fact, Canaanite artifacts have been found as far away as Carthage. The two great highways connecting Mesopotamia to Africa passed right through Canaanite territory – the Via Maris and the King’s Highway. YHWH is seeking to displace this negative, but rapidly spreading influence with the positive influence of a people centered around his holy presence. While some may view texts about Canaanite wickedness composed by Hebrews suspiciously as propagandistic justification for Canaanite annihilation or displacement, it is also true that the Hebrew Bible does not hesitate to portray Israel and Judah in a very negative light. This may lend more credence to the claims of texts like Leviticus 18.
* Exceptions like Rahab are important to note in order to balance our picture of how at least some Canaanites fared in the wake of Israel’s emergence in Canaan. One may also think of the testimony of Adoni-bezek in Judges 1:5-7 which seems to admit to the justice of his defeat and the defeat of other Canaanites like himself. According to Psalm 47, the day will come when all nations will rejoice over YHWH’s subjugation of the nations through his covenant relationship with Israel. The psalm insists that a telos is in view that is so great that it ultimately lays all objections to rest but we must wait for it.
* Passages like Ephesians 6 and 2 Cor 10:3-5 suggest that Christian should read these texts metaphorically which is not to suggest that the events they describe did not really happen but rather that their significance for us is in applying the same kind of zeal witnessed in the herem texts of the OT against our own sin, our own “flesh,” and the spiritual forces that perpetuate oppression, injustice, and evil in our own time. Israel’s lack of knowledge or awareness of these spiritual forces may help explain why these texts are so focused on human combatants. As biblical revelation offers greater clarity of the spiritual realm and the true nature of our enemy, the nature of our warfare drastically changes as well.

Text: Deuteronomy 9:1-12

Title: The Meek Who Inherit the Land

Focus Statement: One of the greatest and most frequently recurring spiritual dangers that we face as God’s people is pride in our piety, our tendency to misinterpret divine blessing as an indication of our personal virtue and worthiness. Divine grace should humble us, reminding us that God’s gifts come in spite of, rather than because of, us.

Function Statement: To humble Christians through careful recollection and celebration of God’s grace rather than of our achievements.

Illustration/opening: Several years ago I ran across a book with the intriguing title “Cat and Dog Theology: Rethinking our Relationship with our Master” (by Bob Sjogren and Gerald Robison). Naturally, I just had to get the book and read it. Basically, the book contrasts two radically different attitudes, one typically embodied by cats and the other by dogs. Dogs tend to reason in the following way: “You feed me, you shelter me, you care for me. You must be god!” Cats on the other hand tend to reason differently. They think, “You feed me, you shelter me, you care for me. I must be god!” Their point is that the same experience can be interpreted in two radically different ways and Moses in Deuteronomy 9 is deeply concerned that we not misinterpret the divine care and blessings that we receive.

Textual Summary: Moses warns Israel not to misinterpret the victories YHWH is about to grant them over the Canaanites nor the abundance they will experience in their new lives in the land. These blessings are not a result of their righteousness or their superiority to the Canaanites. It is strictly a matter of God’s grace and judgment: his grace for Israel and his judgment against Canaan. Recalling Israel’s recent past, Moses reminds Israel of her own stubbornness and rebellion against YHWH in the wilderness as a means of encouraging humility before God and the world.

Key Ideas to Emphasize:

* Though the OT in general and Deuteronomy in particular is seldom associated with the doctrine of divine grace, grace certainly receives a remarkable emphasis in Deuteronomy. Nowhere is this more evident than in these first few verses of Deuteronomy 9. Grace is not an invention of the New Testament nor a newly minted divine attribute arising from the incarnation of God in Christ. The incarnation is a REVELATION of who YHWH has always been and the New Testament is a continuation and a completion of the theological emphases first stressed in the OT.
* An unexpected feature of Deuteronomy 9 is the relationship it draws between divine grace and divine judgment. These are typically viewed as mutually exclusive aspects of God’s nature and activity, almost as opposites. Deuteronomy 9, however, suggests that YHWH’s judgment is also a kind of grace, a severe mercy for the sake of creation’s continued well-being.
* The appropriate human response to divine grace is humility and gratitude. In fact, the words “human” and “humility” derive from the same Latin root – *humus* meaning “earth” or “ground.” To be humble is to be grounded in the truth, grounded in a sober assessment of ourselves instead of deluded by an inflated assessment of our virtues or importance.
* Jesus’ beatitude “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth” is actually a quotation of Psalm 37:11a which in turn is largely inspired by Moses’ words in Deuteronomy 9. Of course, Jesus is likely expanding the scope of the promised inheritance to include not only Canaan but the entire new creation – an even greater blessing necessitating even greater humility and gratitude.

Text: Deuteronomy 13:1-18

Title: Institutional Idolatry

Focus Statement: Idolatry is the sneakiest and deadliest of sins often disguising itself as institutions vying for our ultimate allegiance.

Function Statement: To alert believers to the deceptiveness and dangers of institutional idolatry

Illustration/Opening: Calvin once said, “The human mind is a perpetual idol forge.” What he meant by this is that we are always finding new ways to commit idolatry often without even realizing that that is what we are doing. In our contemporary world, in my opinion, the greatest idols are our institutions which, while good in and of themselves, easily claim our ultimate allegiance and become focused on self-preservation rather than service. Moses in Deuteronomy identifies three institutions that, if we are not careful, can drag us into idolatry: religious institutions, the family, and the state.

Textual Summary: Moses prescribes capital punishment to any prophet or family member who attempts to seduce an Israelite into idolatry. Even if one’s own spouse or child proposes worshipping an idol one’s response should be to instantly hand them over to the authorities for trial and execution. Similarly, if an Israelite town goes astray, then the entire town is to be annihilated just like the Canaanite city-states of Deuteronomy 7.

Key Ideas to Emphasize:

* Religious institutions, like the institution of prophecy, are validated not by their apparent success or their awesome deeds but by their singular, total submission to YHWH. When they take on a life and authority of their own, they become exceedingly dangerous and should be dismantled.
* Families are important and deserve a considerable amount of loyalty but our ultimate allegiance belongs to YHWH alone. The enemy of our souls is experienced and adept at using our family ties to erode our first love, our love of God (e.g. Solomon’s foreign wives 1 Kgs 11:1-3). The prescription of capital punishment for family members guilty of promoting idolatry is shocking and disturbing. The idea is that the same sacred ban (the herem) that was applied to Canaanites is applied to anyone else who follows their ways without discrimination or prejudice. This at least shows that the prescription for the Canaanites has nothing to do with ethnicity. This penalty is replaced in the new covenant by excommunication as YHWH ceases working through a theocratic state defined in geopolitical terms. Nonetheless, Jesus retains the Deuteronomic insistence that loyalty to God outweighs loyalty to one’s family (Matt 10:34; Lk 14:26).
* The municipality is another institution that easily morphs into idolatry whether by explicitly encouraging the worship of other gods or simply by demanding the ultimate allegiance that belongs to YHWH alone. Towns in ancient Israel that defected from pure YHWH worship were to suffer the same fate as Canaanite city-states. In our own context, the salient point is how easily patriotism at any level – municipal, provincial, or federal – morphs into idolatry. We are to avidly guard against this not by destroying towns or revolting against governments but by peaceful civil disobedience even to the point of suffering imprisonment or martyrdom (See how the Book of Revelation in particular adapts the Deuteronomic code for the new covenant situation of the church).

Text: Deuteronomy 17:14-20

Title: A King Unlike the Other Nations

Focus Statement: Power is radically redefined in Deuteronomy in terms of trust in YHWH and adherence to his word resulting in an extremely counter cultural kingdom.

Function Statement: To cure believers of addiction to worldly power and attraction to worldly models of power.

Illustration/Opening: Hans Christian Andersen’s delightful children’s tale “The Emperor’s New Clothes” is a remarkable expose of the pretensions of worldly power.

Textual Summary: Moses anticipates Israel’s request for a king and outlines strict guidelines to prevent the institution of monarchy from abusing power and competing with YHWH.

Key Ideas to Emphasize

* The prohibition against amassing many horses is about rejecting military might as a hallmark of royal power. Israel’s king is not to rely on military might for the exercise of his power.
* The prohibition against acquiring a large harem is aimed at two features of ancient Near Eastern kingship. The first is machismo, the idea that a king’s power is directly proportional to his appetites – a toxic masculinity that persists to this day. The second is the idea of dynastic succession and the primary mode of extending one’s power indefinitely – a key function of a royal herem. In the OT dynastic succession gradually breaks down to be replaced in the NT by Jesus’ indestructible life (Heb. 7:16).
* The prohibition against hording wealth is obviously aimed at the typical fusion of wealth and power.
* Finally, and most remarkably, Israel’s king is to produce his own copy of the book of Deuteronomy as his guide for ruling. It was unheard of in the ancient Near East for a king to serve as his own scribe. This emphasizes that YHWH is suzerain and Israel’s human king is YHWH’s vassal.

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