

The unfolding of your words gives light.

When Wrath Is Right

Deuteronomy 13

What would it take to make you angry? I'm not talking about your run-of-the-mill angry moments that show you have a discontented heart and result in tense moments or unkind words. I'm talking about anger that makes you tip over furniture. What would make you reach the critical mass necessary to fly into a rage?

One Protestant preacher in my hometown reportedly said Jesus was a sinner like us because he became angry and overturned tables in the Temple. Is there a difference between selfish anger and righteous indignation?

Our trouble is that we are used to being angry over such petty things that we fail to consider things that are worthy of a fight. Because of the text we're covering today I am talking about displaying a wrath that is zealous for the glory of God. This kind of anger drove Moses to pronounce God's judgments on Egypt. It is the wrath Elijah showed when he called down fire from heaven on over 100 soldiers of wicked King Ahaziah. It is the anger Jesus displayed when he entered the temple, drove out the money changers and scattered their wares.

Moses gave the people of Israel three different categories of false teachers in Deuteronomy 13 who qualified for the death penalty in Israel. Here are three verses to summarize:

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, "let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them"... Deuteronomy 13:1-2

If your brother, your mother's son, or your son or daughter, or the wife you cherish, or your friend who is as your own soul, entice you secretly, saying, "Let us go and serve other gods"... Deuteronomy 13:6

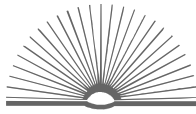
If you hear in one of your cities, which the Lord your God is giving you to live in, anyone saying that some worthless men have gone out from among you and have seduced the inhabitants of the city, saying, "Let us go and serve other gods"... Deuteronomy 13:12-13

In each of these instances the penalty had nothing to do with out-of-control emotions. Even as parents we often discipline more harshly based on our moods rather than a desire to mete out actual justice. At issue here was not how annoying the deceivers were. Quite the opposite was true. The false teachers would be persuasive preachers that dazzled crowds, cherished family members or whole cities that offered economic benefit to the nation.

I will pause and issue a disclaimer here, since the laws of retaliation are greatly misunderstood. There are certain things you need to understand about the death penalties commanded here.

- Individuals are not permitted to carry out vigilante justice. That is not what this text commands. The "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" attitude the Lord Jesus countered was not the scriptural command but the human distortion of the scriptural command.
- Individual groups of believers do not have the right to apply this command. Certainly we do not have the authority to kill all the false prophets and idolaters around us even if it would make the threat of church discipline more persuasive. These laws applied in Israel when Torah was the law of the land and ultimately

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when Messiah rules on the earth. This chapter does, however, identify the enemies of God.

At the end of the previous chapter the Lord had warned the people (12:32), "Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it." If this God really was all he claimed to be, then no amount of entertainment, sentimental feelings or economic interests should turn his people away from him. Observe that none of the three categories of people to be judged in this text would be easy to destroy. Some of the greatest sources of negative persuasion in our lives are those that entertain us, provide companionship or offer economic benefit. It's not easy to reject something like that out of a love for your Lord. Consider each of the three categories.

Persuasive Preachers

Moses warned the people that upon entering the promised land there would be false prophets. This danger is repeatedly mentioned in Scripture because we are easily swayed by good-sounding arguments and beautiful people.

In our day we tend to call into question the validity of supposed signs and wonders performed by contemporary "prophets." Torah reveals an issue more important than the legitimacy of a miracle. The real issue was whether or not the prophet was calling people to reject what God had revealed in the Scripture.

The Lord Jesus repeatedly called his generation to turn from their sins and follow him. He was called upon to give a sign to demonstrate his authority as a prophet (Matthew 12:38-42). This test from the Jews was not wrong. The problem was that they were questioning things God had already said. If they rejected propositional truth from the mouth of God the Son, no miracle would persuade them (cf. Luke 16:31).

Rebellious Relatives

Moses commands the death penalty for those who secretly entice their families away from the Lord. He is not saying that the biblical standards of justice were not to be met. Parents did not simply pick up rocks and throw them at their pagan teenagers. He is saying that fathers are responsible to maintain spiritual order in their homes. Trouble for the people of God at large always starts in places where there is no public access.

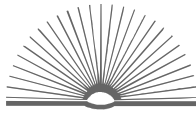
Note again that this justice was to be no different based on how much they loved the family members. Even if it was "the wife you cherish" or a friend "who is as your own soul," the threat was the same—perhaps worse.

The call of the Lord throughout Torah is to reveal himself as Israel's One and Only. The Lord Jesus did the same thing when he asked people to love him more than family (Matthew 10:34-39).

Corrupt Communities

Sometimes entire towns were sucked into rebelling against the Lord. Note that verse 14 says "you shall investigate and search out and inquire thoroughly." Rumors were not sufficient evidence to muster the army and destroy a city in Israel. However, corrupt cities were to be taken seriously because of the damage they can do. Case in point: Sodom and Gomorrah. After investigation the nation's army was to be mustered and sent to destroy the errant city.

Not only was the city to be destroyed, its wealth was to be burnt as an offering to the God who could supply much more than anything the corrupt city had to offer.



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We would be misapplying this text to suggest that the way to obey these commands is a public policy issue. There are, however, serious lessons to be learned from this text. Consider three of them:

1. Judge every prophet by the message he carries. For example, gullible people choose entertainment solely on the basis of how it makes them feel. If the movie makes me laugh, the music makes me move or the book leaves me with a warm feeling, it must be good. God's test, however, is whether or not the message squares with the one he has already given.
2. Love God more than you love your family. This means you do not take a vote about family devotions. It means you do not cave in to whining or manipulation about things that matter to God. It means the children do not decide where the family goes to church or if the family goes to church.
3. Refuse to profit from the things God hates. This means you may have to decide someday if working for a certain employer is aiding and abetting the enemy. You may have to evaluate your investment portfolio to find out if you are profiting from those things for which Jesus died. It also means, very simply, that it is better to honor God with your business dealings and remain poor than to compromise for short-term gain.

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