

Deuteronomy 20:1-20 How the Sixth Commandment Applies With Regard to War

Introduction: The children of Israel were about to enter into Canaan to conquer the nations which were already in the land. Once they were in the land there would be war with every nation from time to time.

This would mean warfare and this means killing. The question is, “How does God intend for the sixth commandment to apply to them with regard to war?”

Moses is about to answer the question in this text.

I. An examination of the sixth commandment.

A. It is not difficult to understand what the letter of the law says.

1. It says, “Thou shalt not kill” and makes no exceptions.
2. Yet we have already seen that there are exceptions.
3. For instance, if one committed murder then the murderer must be put to death and somebody must do it. (Somebody must kill).

B. Yet when one looks not at the letter of the law but at the spirit of the law, we can see an underlying principle:

1. One principle is: human life is precious to God and great effort should be made to preserve it.
2. The other is that the wages of sin is death and sometimes it is necessary to take a human life in an effort to preserve the lives of others.
3. If we remember these two principles, it will help us to understand the instructions which God gave the Israelites through Moses showing how the sixth commandment would apply in the case of warfare.

II. The encouragement which God gave to the armies of Israel, v. 1-4.

A. Israel might see that the enemies army might be better equipped and be larger in number, v. 1a.

1. The armies of most nations would have horses and chariots. (This would seem to put Israel at a disadvantage.)
2. Many nations had armies that badly outnumbered the army of Israel. (This would also seem to put Israel at a disadvantage.)

B. Yet the Israelites were not to fear such enemy armies.

1. The forefathers had been frightened by the report of the spies that the enemy armies had giants.
2. How much more frightening a calvary and chariots might seem.

C. The reason they were not to fear was that the Israelite army had God with them, v. 1b.

D. The priests (the religious leaders) were to go before the Israelite army and challenge them to put their faith in the Lord to give them victory, v. 2-4.

III. Special instructions that were designed to save Israelite lives, v. 5-9.

A. Every soldier which had just built a new house was to be sent back home before the battle starts, v. 5.

1. This would prevent him from being killed in battle.
2. God thought this was better than some other man getting to live in the house that he had built for himself.
3. In effect God said, “Do not send this man off to war where he might be killed.”

- B. Every soldier who had just planted a vineyard was to be sent back home before the fighting started, v. 6. (God said, “Do not send him to war where he might be killed.”)
- C. Every soldier who had betrothed a wife but not yet married her was to be sent back home. v. 7. (God said, “Do not send him to war where he might be killed.”)
- D. Every soldier who was afraid was to be sent back home, v. 8. (God said, “Do not send him to war where he might be killed and where he might get some of his fellow soldiers killed.”)
- E. After weeding out these people, captains were to be appointed to lead the brave men who would fight, v. 9.

IV. Special instructions for besieging an enemy city, v. 10-20.

- A. How to besiege a city that is not of Canaan, v. 10-18.
 - 1. They were to first give the city an opportunity to surrender before attacking, v. 10-11. (If the city surrendered they are to be in submission to Israel — to serve and pay taxes.)
 - 2. If they choose not to surrender then they are to attack and capture the city v, 12.
 - 3. After they have captured the city they are to kill all males, (v. 13) and to keep the women, children, cattle and spoil of war, v. 14-15. (The men would pose a threat to Israel.)
- B. How to besiege a city that is within Canaan, v. 16-18.
 - 1. They were not to be given a chance to surrender, and they were to kill all that breathe, v. 16-17, (men, women, children).
 - 2. The reason for killing the woman and children is because of the danger that they would lead the Israelites away from true religion, (Physical life was not as important as eternal life.) v. 18.

V. Special instruction about trees when besieging a city, v. 19-20.

- A. They were not to use fruit trees to build bulwarks against the besieged city, v. 19. (Fruit trees are important to the preservation of life and it is important to God that the trees be left to sustain the life of the Israelite people, v. 19.)
- B. Only the trees which were known not to bear fruit could be used to build bulwarks against a city, v. 20.

Conclusion: The sixth commandment forbids murder and there is no deviation from this.

But killing in warfare was for the protection of lives of Israelite people. Even the killing of men who might later rebel and kill Israelite people. Even the killing of men who might later rebel and kill Israelite people. The killing of women and children of idolatrous people was permitted when they were a threat to true religion and thus a threat to the souls of Israelite people.

God is very interested in the preservation of human life but God is chiefly interested in men have eternal life. He was willing that His only begotten Son be killed in order to provide eternal life for men.