

"For You Are a Holy People"

If you are a tiger trainer, and you get violently mauled by the tiger, we probably find that tragic, but frankly not *too* surprising. If you play with a wild animal like a tiger and it attacks you like a wild animal usually does, we're not that surprised. There's nothing unexpected about a tiger attacking someone. Tigers are dangerous wild animals. In the wild, they don't even live with other tigers. You see, *that's* why people go to places like a circus to see a trained tiger. Because *that* is unexpected. You don't expect to see a tiger well trained, and so when you do, *that's* amazing.

Well, my analogy to start us off is this. If you are a tiger, you're expected to be wild and dangerous. Who and what are you, dictates what you'll be like. Well, in this passage, *that's* the case with Israel. Look at verse 6. "For you are a holy people to the LORD your God." All the things being commanded in this passage find their rationale right here. Because the people are a holy people, therefore they should live and act like this. Notice it doesn't put it the other direction. It doesn't say, in order to be a holy people, live in this way. It says because they are a holy people, they are therefore to live in this way.

And so that's what I want us to look at today. I wanted us to look at the holiness of Israel and how that's related to what God is commanding them to do here. And so our three points today will be this. First we'll look at the holiness of Israel. Second, we'll look at the ramifications of this for their living. Third, we'll apply all of this to our new covenant context as Christians.

So let's look first at the holiness of Israel. For anyone or anything to be holy, it's because of a relationship to God. God is the holy one. What makes someone holy is because the all-holy God has come into a special relationship with them. When we define holy, we often define it as to be "set apart." You're set apart in a special relationship to God. And that's exactly what we see in this passage. You see, verses 6-8 have some pretty profound statements to say about Israel. The things it says about Israel here are actually flushing out what it means for Israel to be holy. And so let's how God describes a holy people in this passage.

First it says that they are a *chosen* people, verse 6. It goes on to say in verse 7 that they weren't chosen because of their size. It's not like they were some grand and glorious nation that God chose them. Actually God chose them in part to make them into a great nation, blessed more than all the other peoples according to verse 14. But this is part of being "holy." God didn't choose all the other nations in this way. But he chose Israel. That was part of how they were set apart unto God.

The next way God describes them as holy is in verse 6. They are a *treasured* people, it says. It says that God chose them, "To be a people for himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth." Wow. To be God's treasure as a people. To be God's very own people, in a way that distinguished them from everyone else. That's part of being "holy," set apart.

Next God describes Israel as holy in verses 7 and 8 in terms of love. They are a *loved* people. Notice how this is described. In verse 7, it says that God set or attached his love to them. The idea is that there is a special way in which God loves his chosen people that's distinct from the rest of the nations. This must be talking about his saving love. That's another thing that makes them holy; they are set apart by God's special love for them.

Last, notice how God describes them at the end of verse 8. God says they are a *redeemed* people. God had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt. The idea of redemption in this context is about purchasing someone out of slavery. And so Israel was bought with a price. They belong to God.

And so for Israel to be a holy people, God says here that they are a chosen people, a treasured people, a loved people, and a redeemed people. They are holy because of this special relationship to God. They have a special relationship with God, reaching all the way back to when God made a covenant with their forefathers. And God has honored that covenant. Verse 9 reminds us about this God. He is the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. In other words, their relationship to this amazing all-holy God is the source of their holiness. They are holy because this holy God has chosen them in love to be his special redeemed possession. That's what makes them holy.

And so since Israel is a holy people, that has certain ramifications for how they live their life. You can imagine a king telling a young prince about royal etiquette and protocol. A young prince will have great privilege as a prince, but he will also have certain responsibilities. Here with Israel that is no less. Their holy status has ramifications for how they live. This passage describes some of those ramifications. The first major ramification described in this passage has to do with the people coming into the Promised Land. The second major ramification in this passage has to do with how the people live once they are in the Land.

Let's look first at this ramification for coming into the Promised Land. This is a major theme throughout this passage, beginning in verse 1. When the people come into the Land, they have to prepare it for its holy use. It's going to be a holy land for a holy people. And so it needs to be purified first. God is going to be the one to purify it, but he is going to do it through Israel. And so verse 1 right away begins by telling them about the nations that are going to come under judgment as a part of the purification of this land. Verse 1 lists seven nations. This list of nations represents those peoples living specifically in the geographical area that made up the land God had promised years before to Abraham. God had marked out long before to remove these people in judgment because of their sins, and to instead give this land to Abraham's offspring. Actually, way back in Noah's time this fate for these people had already begun. One of Noah's sons, Ham, the great grandfather of all the Canaanites was cursed by Noah, after Ham sinned against him. You can read about that in Genesis 9. And yet we read later in Genesis 15 that God was delaying judgment against these peoples in the Promised Land, for their sins had not yet come to their full measure. But now the time had come for judgment against these nations, and God would use Israel to do this. God would judge these seven nations while at the same time purify the Promised Land and give it to Israel.

And so that's the background to these first few verses here that talk about how Israel is to interact with these nations inhabiting the Promised Land. Look at what God forbids them to do here. Verse 2. They are not to make a

covenant with them or show them mercy. Verse 3. They are not to intermarry with them. Both of these actions would be in conflict with Israel's holy status. These seven pagan nations were under God's judgment. It was not for Israel to make some peace treaty with them, because God was going to use them to do away with these wicked nations. It also didn't make sense for them to marry them. The number one most practical reason is listed right in verse 4. If they marry one of these other peoples, there's a good chance they would lure them away from the one true God. This whole chapter here in Deuteronomy is talking about the dangers of the false gods and idols of these pagan nations. Well, here, one of the ways that you could bring those idols into your house, is by marrying someone who is devoted to those idols. And so God's saying it's not fitting for the holy people of Israel to marry unholy people. It would bring the temptation to apostasy into their homes. No, God's people should not be unequally yoked. They are a holy people, and even their marriages should reflect that.

So that's what God's *forbidding* here with their interaction with these seven nations. What God is *requiring* is listed in verse 2. They were to conquer them and utterly destroy them. This word for "utter destruction" is the word for *cherem* warfare in the Hebrew; that's the biblical idea of holy war. I talked about that in detail on a sermon on August 2nd. You can listen to that online at our church website if you'd like to refresh yourself. But basically I said how this was a very unique thing where God was bringing final judgment on these nations ahead of time. I say ahead of time, because we know that God will one day come back to bring final judgment on all humanity. But there are places in the Bible where he brings final judgment for some ahead of time. That's what happened at the flood; with Sodom and Gomorrah, and that's what he's planning for here with these nations in the Promised Land. It should remind us of this final judgment to come, and cause us to be thankful that we have found salvation from that judgment in Christ. I also mentioned in that sermon that God has not called for any more final judgments to come ahead of time. In other words there's no more previews like this to be done. No more physical holy wars can be justified. Instead we await the one last final judgment to come when Christ returns.

And so God was going to use Israel as his holy people to purify the Promised Land. He'd use them as his arm of judgment against these seven nations. That means, they were commanded here to utterly destroy them. They were not to make peace with them. Verse 24 says that they were to destroy the names of their kings from under heaven. In other words, they were to literally wipe these people out of existence. If they did it properly, it would be done in a way that no one would even remember them anymore. God's judgment should be scary.

We can appreciate this all the more when you see the religious direction that this judgment takes in verses such as verses 5 and 25. They were to destroy all the religious paraphernalia of these nations. Everything they used to worship their false gods were to be destroyed. Their altars, and their sacred pillars, their wooden images, their carved images - they all had to be destroyed. None of it should be left to stand. Certainly none of it was to be used in worshipping the one true God. Even the silver and gold that was on the idols should be destroyed and thrown out, according to verse 25. They weren't to covet these things because they have been tainted by their pagan use. It goes on to say that these things are an abomination to the LORD. To bring them into your home would make you yourself subject to the same sort of utter destruction. If something is an abomination to the Lord, it means it's displeasing in his site; it offends him. It's an appalling thing to him.

Certainly holy people should not have anything to do with things that are offensive to God. And so God is not only calling them to destroy the people in holy war, but even to completely destroy all the things these people used to worship their false gods.

And so this is the first major ramification described in this passage. Since Israel is a holy people, God's telling them the process for coming into the Promised Land. They had to first purify the land. The second major ramification in this passage has to do with how the people live in the Promised Land. In other words, since Israel is a holy people, once they get into the Promised Land, they need to live in a certain way.

This way of life is described in verse 11. "Therefore you shall keep the commandment, the statutes, and the judgments which I command you today, to observe them." God had just said in verse 9 that because of their special relationship to him, that he would be faithful to them. God would keep the covenant toward them. They didn't have to worry about God changing his mind one day about how he would treat them. But God did call for them to be faithful to the covenant in return. He did call for them to respond in love, in a love that shows forth obedience to the terms of the covenant. The fact that they were a holy people, loved and chosen by God, demanded that they respond in obedience.

And if they did, they would be richly blessed. That's what verses 12-15 list. They talk about all the blessings God would give the people. And these are talking about blessings in the Promised Land. First the people are called to purify the land, to make it holy. Then God promises as they continue to live purified lives in this holy land, that they'd be richly blessed. Just look at these blessings. They'd have fruitful wombs, fruitful land, fruitful livestock. They'd not have sicknesses. Instead they'd be blessed above all the other peoples. This sort of language was very typical in covenants back then. The greater party would promise all sorts of blessings to the lesser party, if the lesser party was faithful to the terms of the covenant. Well, here God promises some very amazing blessings.

And so I hope you see what's going on here in the old covenant. Here you have a holy people. You have a land that's been purified from the wicked in final judgment; so then you have a holy land. Then these holy people are called to live in holy ways. The result will be a wonderful life in a wonderful land, free from the troubles of the world. All of this is an amazing picture. It's an amazing picture of heaven. It's a sort of foretaste of heaven. Just like the holy war was a foretaste of final judgment, life in the Promised Land held out the potential to be a foretaste of heaven. Now it certainly would never be as good as heaven, but it was painting a picture of what heaven will look like. That's why the book of Revelation will revisit some of these themes when describing our final state of blessing. It will describe the new heavens and the new earth, with the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. Then there will be no more sickness and death, only blessed eternal life.

Well, I'd like to turn now to specifically apply this passage to us who live in a different context in redemptive history. We don't live in the Promised Land. We are not the ethnic people of Israel. We are from the "nations," Gentiles. The Bible puts it pretty blunt for us in Ephesians 2. It says that we were at one point excluded from citizenship in Israel, foreigners to the covenants of the promise, and separate from Christ. We were without hope

and without God in the world. Think of the justice described in this passage. This holy war utter destruction is what each of us deserved.

But now, this God who is rich in mercy, has instead extended his love even to us. We who are in Christ, have been chosen by God. We, like Israel of old, are now a holy people. For in Christ Jesus we who once were far off from God's covenants of promise, have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

Think of all the wonderful ways Israel is described in this passage. They are a holy people; a chosen people; a treasured people; a loved people; a redeemed people. Brothers and sisters, that is now what you are in Christ. That's what Peter tells us in 1 Peter 2:9. He says, "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people." Paul says in 1 Cor 6:20 that we were bought with a price. And so we're God's redeemed people. We belong to him. His own special people; his treasured possession.

And so let me say it clearly saints of God. You are a holy people; you are a chosen people; you are a treasured people; you are a loved people; you are a redeemed people. You are a holy people. That is who you are through faith in Jesus Christ. And it's only possible through Jesus Christ. Think about it in contrast to Israel's holiness. Israel is said here that they are a holy people. But then you have a book like Leviticus that describes how this holy people was to be seen as holy. Through sacrifice upon sacrifice. God saw them as a holy people, but that meant they had to cover up their sins to come before God as a holy people. And yet we know that there is no number of slain bulls and goats that can really cover up man's sin. No, those animal sacrifices looked forward to the one sacrifice to come. Jesus Christ died on the cross as the ultimate, once for all, sacrifice. He's the one who really made the people in the old covenant holy. He's the one who makes us holy. We are seen as holy only because the blood of Jesus has washed us clean. Our judgment has been satisfied in Christ. We are now joined with the holy people of God under the old covenant, to make one complete family of God.

Well, since this is the case, that we now are holy people, it means that there are ramifications for how we live as Christians. Just as the fact that Israel was holy had ramifications for how they lived, so our holiness has ramifications for how we live. Those ramifications are many and manifold. But they are not exactly identical with those we see here for Israel. We live in a different context. The context of the new covenant affects how we live as God's holy people. That means we must take the principles here in this passage for how Israel was to live in the old covenant and rightly apply them in our own context. Let's do that with three specific things from this passage.

First, let's think about this command here to Israel in verse 3. They weren't to marry people from these other nations or enter into covenants with them. The principle here is that holy people should not marry unholy people, lest they be led astray from the faith. Well, as Christians, that's certainly true for us as well. 2 Corinthians 6:14 says that we shouldn't be yoked together with unbelievers. 1 Corinthians 7 specifically tells us that we should only look to marry fellow believers. Now, of course, the Bible recognizes that sometimes we find ourselves married to a non-Christian. The Bible says we should not divorce them in that case. Many good things can still come from such a marriage. But that doesn't get rid of the danger. There's a danger and threat to marry a non-Christian. You could be led

astray. We shouldn't limit this application just to marriage though. We should really ask ourselves in what ways are we putting ourselves into dangerous entanglements with unbelievers. For example, in business. If you enter into a partnership with an unbeliever, that can often be a lot like a marriage. That situation can lead you into a compromising situation, say if they start to pressure you to do some immoral business practice. So the point is that as Christians, our holiness means we should pursue holy relationships with others; and we need to be aware of the dangers if we don't.

Now that doesn't mean of course that you can't or shouldn't have relationships with unbelievers. In fact, it's the next point of application that I'd like to make that tells us we should. You see this passage calls Israel to holy war because of their holiness. Now I mentioned that they were used by God to bring final judgment ahead of time on these seven nations. I mentioned that we are not called to any more such physical holy wars. We await final judgment to come when Christ returns. But as holy people, we're still called to one sort of holy war. It's a spiritual holy war. Paul talks about this in Ephesians 6 for example, where he tells us that we don't wrestle against flesh and blood but against spiritual forces of evil. The idea of a physical holy war is completely foreign to the new covenant. Instead we're called to engage unbelievers with the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. We don't kill pagans with a physical sword, we look to slay their rebellion from God with the Word of God. We're not called to conquer the nations militarily to advance the holy kingdom of God. We're called to make disciples of the nations to spiritually advance the holy kingdom of God on earth. And so obviously, this will require us to have relationships with unbelievers. And so this is a tension for believers in the new covenant. On the one hand, as holy people, we're only to marry fellow believers. We're to beware unholy entanglements with unbelievers. And yet we are still to be involved in the lives of unbelievers as we bring them the gospel. There's a way to engage unbelievers without becoming engaged to them, so to speak. And so as Christians, our holiness means that we must engage in a spiritual battle of bringing the gospel to the unholy world around us.

A related application to this spiritual battle, means that we need to be aware of the pagan influences around us that would look to lead us astray from God. If Israel was called to destroy all the religious paraphernalia of the pagan nations, we need to have a similar spiritual equivalent. We don't go around blowing up mosques. But we should fight against their teachings in the pulpit, in their conversations, etc. We certainly shouldn't bring false teachings or practices from other religions into the church and try to incorporate them into the Christian faith. That'd be the new covenant equivalent of what's forbidden in verse 26. Just as in the old covenant you shouldn't bring an idol into your home. In the new covenant, you shouldn't try to bring the teachings or practices of false religions into your home or church and incorporate them into your faith. No, we fight against these things with the truth of God's Word. That's part of this spiritual holy war in which we are involved.

The last application I'd like to make for us comes from Israel's call for obedience here. Israel's holiness meant they had to keep God's covenant and if so, they'd be blessed abundantly in the land. Well, we are called to obedience as well. And we look forward to blessings as well, blessings of eternal life in heaven, as we mentioned earlier. And yet here again we think of the wonderful work of Christ. Israel showed their own shortcomings here. They didn't live up to the old covenant. They pursued it by works and fell

short. They needed to look for God's grace to really receive these blessings. Well, that grace has come in Jesus. That's why we're told in Ephesians 1:3 that as Christians we've been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. Blessings that are not conditioned on our obedience. But blessings that have been earned by the perfect obedience of Christ. Obedience done for us and for our sake. And so as Christians, we now live in light of what Christ has earned for us. We do strive to live according to God's laws. That's fitting for the holy people of God. But we don't do it in order to try to secure some mere earthly blessings. And in fact we don't do it in order to secure heavenly blessings. No we do it because we have been already given these heavenly blessings. It's these blessings that have made us holy and are making us holy, more and more, day by day.

And so in closing; tigers normally act like tigers. We are God's holy people. Let's strive to live by his grace as holy people. Think about this week what that means in your life. This passage just raises a few ramifications of what holy living under the new covenant looks like. Let's keep looking to grow in holy living in light of this great privilege of being God's holy people. Amen.

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