

"You Shall Make Tassels on the Four Corners"

Today we resume our series through Deuteronomy. At this point of the book, we really are getting into a lot of miscellaneous laws. We just read quite a few. There will be many more to come. Now, I don't intend to speak on each and every law as we continue to study through Deuteronomy. Today, I actually want to focus most on verse 12 about the requirement for the Jews to wear tassels on their garments. That being said, today I want to make an exception to that. I intend to walk us through very briefly each of the miscellaneous laws today that we just read. I hope that will help you think about how to generally approach all these various laws in Deuteronomy, even for the ones we don't cover in detail in future weeks.

Since we're resuming our study today in Deuteronomy, let me remind you again that there are three categories of laws in the old covenant. The moral law, which is summarized in the Ten Commandments and is always binding on all people and all times. However, we've said that there are also civil laws and ceremonial laws. Civil laws aren't binding on other civil governments, as they given explicitly for Israel as God's chosen nation, and they expired when Israel ceased to exist as a nation. Yet, we can certainly learn various principles from them; they often contain various principles of justice and morality within them that we can learn from. The ceremonial laws aren't binding on us either; they were laws that found fulfillment in Jesus Christ. We should learn from them how they look forwarded to what Jesus did for us; that's how they apply to us. So civil and ceremonial laws aren't laws we have to try to reinstate today. And yet we can and should learn from them. They still have application to us, in other words. Well, in this passage, we find various civil and ceremonial laws for Israel. In other words, these laws aren't directly binding on us as Christians. We, for example, don't have to wear tassels anymore. However, we want to study and understand the principles behind these laws, because the principles are applicable to us.

Another helpful thing to note is that the Old Testament doesn't use the categories of moral, civil, and ceremonial laws explicitly. There are no headings that identify one law to be one type, and another law to be another type. Sometimes we clearly see the organization when we study a passage. Other times, they all seem lumped together. Some would say this threefold distinction, because it's not explicitly stated in the Bible, is therefore unbiblical. However, all we're doing is using the light of the New Testament to interpret the Old Testament. The New Testament shows us that some Old Testament laws don't apply to us in the church anymore in the same way. It also shows us that God's moral laws do continue to apply. So this threefold categorization is our interpretive method for approaching these laws based on how the New Testament handles them. What this generally means is that we say that the moral law is summarized in the Ten Commandments, and sometimes flushed out and explained in other verses. We recognize that the rest of the old covenant laws are going to fall into either civil or ceremonial categories, though often with moral aspects to them. Our interpretive challenge is to rightly understand and categorize these so we can apply them correctly. This will be our challenge as we study the miscellaneous laws in Deuteronomy.

Let's begin with verse 5. Verse 5 can be simply summarized as a prohibition against cross-dressing. Men should not make themselves out to be women, and vice versa. Now, whether this statute is to be strictly categorized as either a civil or ceremonial law is a point of discussion. And yet, there obviously is a moral principle behind this that is binding on Christians, nonetheless.

We're not told what motivated this law back then; scholars like to speculate, but the text doesn't tell us. Cross dressing could be an issue of deception, someone trying to pose as something they are not. It could also be an issue of contentment; someone not content with the gender that God gave them. In our own days we know that some people do cross dress. Some go beyond that even. Medical professional even offer surgeries to attempt to outwardly modify your gender. This passage would obviously speak against these things. As Christians, we need to reach out in love to those who for whatever reason are struggling with their gender and help them to work through these issues and embrace the gender in which God did create them. Of course the starting point would be the gospel for them.

The next law in verses 6-7 doesn't have much context given to it either. Essentially it says to not take a mother bird along with its young and eggs; this is in reference to taking them for food. You can take the young and the eggs, but you are to leave the mother. We're not told the reason for this. Given that we're not told the background for this, we have to be a bit cautious in our interpretation here. We are told that keeping this law would help things to go well for them, and that it would help prolong their days. Presumably then, this law has in mind wise stewardship of natural resources. It would preserve a continual food source for them. If you don't take the mother, then the mother can go off and have more young. On the other hand, the young or the eggs couldn't survive without the mother. For example, if you took the mother, and left just the eggs, you'd wipe out any possibility for that bird family's ongoing survival. So that's likely what's behind this law. That's certainly a principle that Scripture commends to us. That we need to have wise stewardship of the earth. This would be akin to some of our conservation laws and efforts in our government. Again, that's how you can use the civil laws of Israel. You can recognize the principles and find ways that they make sense to implement in our own society and situation. Laws, that for example, protect against overfishing, could find their root in this principle here in verses 6-7.

The next law in verse 8 required that you build a parapet on the roof of your house. A parapet, by the way, is basically some sort of wall or barrier on a roof to keep you from accidentally walking off the roof. Back then people would often hang out on their roofs a lot, kind of like a patio or deck. We might have balcony's where we do the same thing. Verse 8 says the concern is about bloodguiltiness. It's saying that if you didn't have this parapet and someone fell off your roof and died, that you'd share in the guilt for their shed blood. Obviously this is a civil application of the 6th commandment which is on murder.

The principle here is pretty clear. There's an obligation homeowners have to provide reasonable safety precautions in their homes. Today our government certainly has many laws to this effect. We could debate which ones we should or shouldn't have, based on this underlying principle. But this law shows that heads of houses should have a concern that life is preserved and protected on their property. In today's age, this is why most homeowners carry homeowners insurance, in the event someone is hurt on our property,

they are covered. But, of course, the principle of this law says we should go beyond just insurance. It's not enough to just protect our financial interests; we should be concerned to legitimately care for the lives of others. We should look out for our neighbor's safety; we should take reasonable safety precautions in our homes.

The next three laws are in verses 9-11, and they appear related. They all have in common one particular thing. They all forbid certain kinds of mixtures. Verse 9, don't mix certain kinds of seeds together. Verse 10, don't mix an ox and a donkey together when plowing. Verse 11, don't mix different fabrics together. Let me say, these are difficult laws to understand their purpose among Israel. We're not told why these laws were given. Were their practical matters for not mixing these things? Maybe, maybe not. Arguments have been given. Either way, these seem to fall into the category of ceremonial laws. We'll see in a moment that the next verse, verse 12, is a ceremonial law; that seems likely to see verses 9-11 as ceremonial laws as well.

Probably the most we can safely say about these verses is to compare them with a parallel set of laws in Leviticus. Leviticus 19:19 says, "You shall not let your livestock breed with another kind. You shall not sow your field with mixed seed. Nor shall a garment of mixed linen and wool come upon you." That's obviously very similar to our verses here, Leviticus compacts these same laws even more closely together. Seeing how these laws are grouped together so closely both here and in Leviticus draws out the similarity in these laws. The focus in both becomes the similarities of these laws. These laws forbid mixing different kinds of things. These things of two different kinds weren't to mix in Israel. That I think is probably the safest thing we can say of these verses here. For probably ceremonial reasons they prohibit certain mixtures of things that are different. Different kinds aren't to be mixed together. In terms of ceremonial value this would then be a visible expression of a deeper truth. God's people weren't to be mixed with those who are not God's people. For example, they weren't to marry pagans. We aren't to be unequally yoked either the New Testament says per 2 Corinthians 6:14, which is likely commenting on verse 10. God's people are to be set apart from those who aren't of God. These laws would outwardly represent this inward reality, like many of the other ceremonial laws. Without any further context, that's I think the most we can safely say about these verses. But that is an important principle for us.

The last command in this passage is in verse 12. Simply put, the Israelites were to make tassels on the four corners of their clothes. Orthodox Jews still wear these today; they are called *tzitzits*. Now if you've only read Deuteronomy, you'd probably have no idea why you should wear these tassels. The context for this practice is told to us in Numbers 15. Listen to Numbers 15:38-40.

Speak to the children of Israel: Tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a blue thread in the tassels of the corners. And you shall have the tassel, that you may look upon it and remember all the commandments of the LORD and do them, and that you may not follow the harlotry to which your own heart and your own eyes are inclined, and that you may remember and do all My commandments, and be holy for your God.

By the way, this is a helpful reminder that sometimes these miscellaneous laws in Deuteronomy expected the reader to already know the reason why they

were to do these commands. That should give us great humility when we think through these other laws we just mentioned. Scripture doesn't spell out the reason for each of these miscellaneous commands; but likely the original audience would have understood the reason. Just like they would have understood the reason for the tassels, even though this passage in Deuteronomy doesn't give the details. Thankfully we have Numbers 15 to explain it for us.

And so the reason to wear the tassels was pretty profound. They were reminders. They were to remind the people of all the commandments God gave them. When they looked down on their garments and saw these, they were to remember the commandments and strive to do them. They were kinda like tying a string on your finger to remember something. They were to remind the people of all the many commandments of God.

We see this practice was kept, in some regard, in the New Testament. Unfortunately, Jesus tells us that it was kept in the wrong spirit by many. Matthew 23:5 records Jesus criticizing the scribes and Pharisees for wearing long tassels. Jesus said they wore long tassels to be seen by men. In other words, they became an outward symbol of religiosity. It was a way for them to make themselves look extra religious and holy to others. But in reality, Jesus was saying they had missed the point. The tassels were to remind you to keep all God's laws. But the scribes and Pharisees weren't keeping all the laws with their long tassels. They were just showing off to others.

Now you might be realizing now why I wanted to go through all these miscellaneous laws in today's passage, and tie them together with this command about the tassels. There were so many laws in the old covenant. This passage is just a handful of them. By studying these several laws today we get a sense of the many laws in the old covenant. There were *613 laws* in the Torah, by one count. That's a lot of laws to keep track of and keep. The tassels were to be a visual reminder and inspiration to keep them all. And yet even with tassels, who could keep them all?

What I'd like to do now is to direct you to probably a generally overlooked detail in the gospels. It's in Luke 8:44. It's the account of the woman with the flow of blood for twelve years who was healed just by touching Jesus' garment. The NKJV says the woman touched the "border of his garment." Literally, in the Greek, it's the tassel of his garment. This is the same Greek word used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, to translate tassel here in verse 12. She touched the tassel of his garment and was healed. There are actually several passages and events in the gospels that record Jesus wearing tassels. Every single reference records that people were healed as they touched his tassels.

And so my point is that Jesus wore tassels. This shouldn't surprise us, of course. This is something that we could have just assumed since Jesus kept the law when he was here on earth. We should have just assumed that he wore tassels. And yet it's helpful to see that even the New Testament acknowledges that he did. Of course, for Jesus, these tassels had an even greater significance. Jesus did actually keep all the laws. Every single one of them. He remembered them all and kept them all. Numbers 15 tells us the real purpose of the tassels is to remind the person to keep all the laws so that they'd be holy before the Lord. Jesus then is the only one then who wore them in a way fully consistent with their purpose. Others wore them, but still forgot the laws from time to time and broke them from time to time. Jesus wore them, and actually did remember and keep all the laws. Jesus wore

them and really was holy before the Lord. These tassels really served their purpose with Jesus. When we see Jesus wearing them, we are reminded of his perfect righteousness.

And so this explains the miracles with his tassels, doesn't it? People were healed by touching his tassels. But think of what that really represents. It represents what we all need to reach out and touch. His tassels represent his perfect righteousness. His tassels remind us of his active obedience in our place. That's what we all need to reach out and touch. We need to reach out in faith and grab hold of his righteousness. His righteousness must become our righteousness. That brings healing to our inner souls.

Of course, this is what the New Testament teaches. The New Testament talks about the imputation of Christ's righteousness. His active obedience is imputed to us via faith. When we believe in Jesus, we not only look to him for forgiveness. We should also look to his righteousness. We should look in faith to see his righteousness to be credited to us. Romans 5:17, for example, talks about Christians receiving the free gift of righteousness. When we turn to Jesus in faith, we should not only believe that we receive forgiveness, which we do. We should also believe that we receive his righteousness as well. Forgiveness and righteousness both as free gifts from Christ, via faith.

Theologically, we call this an "alien righteousness." It means that when we become a Christian, God now sees us as righteous. Our justification means not only that we are forgiven, but that we are accounted as righteous. But this doesn't mean that we are actually righteous. It's instead like all the righteous deeds of Christ are wrapped around us like a robe. When God looks upon us, he doesn't see our filthy rags of lacking righteousness. He sees Christ's perfect righteousness. Christ's righteousness is accredited to us, as if we had done the deeds our self. That makes us able to go to heaven, even when we are not personally righteous. Alien righteousness is a good thing. Now Christ is also going to work actual righteousness in us over time. That's our sanctification. But that's different than our justification. That's a gradual process that's not completed this side of heaven. But our justification happens when we first become a Christian. Right away we receive the free gift of alien righteousness. Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith (Phil 3:9).

And so verse 12 of our passage reminds us of the function of the tassels. They remind us God's requirement on us for righteousness. They remind us of how God demands us to keep all his holy laws. We didn't do that. We fell short. But these tassels also remind us that Jesus kept them all for us. Now we can understand why people were healed by touching Jesus' tassels. His tassels represent his righteousness. We all need to reach out and grab through faith Christ's righteousness.

Brothers and sisters, today we've thought about several laws in the old covenant, but we've especially been reminded of the gospel. The tassels in the old covenant were reminders for righteousness. In the new covenant, we also have reminders. The tassels were God-given reminders in the old covenant for God's people. In the new covenant, we also have God-given reminders. God thought it was important in the old covenant for the people to have these tassels as reminders. In the new covenant, God thinks it's important for us to have reminders as well. I have three God-given reminders

to tell us about today for Christians. These are reminders to both the gospel and to our growth in righteousness

A first reminder we have in the new covenant is the Holy Spirit. John 14:26, Jesus said, "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you." Jesus said that he has poured out the Holy Spirit on us in the new covenant as a reminder to both righteousness and the gospel. The Holy Spirit reminds us of everything Jesus taught us. Jesus of course taught about both the gospel and God's laws. The Spirit brings understanding in our hearts to Christ's teaching, and all God's Word as we study it. And so the Holy Spirit works in our hearts to remind us of both the gospel and righteousness. Much more than a piece of clothing that we can take off, the Holy Spirit lives inside us as a constant reminder to our spirits of these important things.

A second reminder we have from God as Christians is the Lord's Supper. Luke 22:19,

"And he [Jesus] took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.'" The Supper is a sacramental reminder to us. It reminds us of the gospel, in what Christ did for us on the cross to pay for our sins. And it reminds us of our ongoing call for righteousness. Every time we take of the Supper, we examine ourselves and our godliness. We repent of our sins, and look again to grow in real righteousness. We remember again how God would have us to pursue by his grace godly living. This sacramental reminder outwardly engages our senses through the bread and wine, while internally is used by the Holy Spirit to spiritually bring us into fellowship with Christ.

The last reminder I'd like to bring to our attention today is the Word; specifically, through the reading and preaching of the Word. That might seem a bit obvious to us. It might sound like I'm saying that the Word of God reminds us of the Word of God. But what I'm really emphasizing is the mode of preaching and teaching of the Word. You see the New Testament is full of places where the preaching of the Word is described in terms of a reminder. Titus 3:1, Paul calls Titus to remind the people to various acts of godly living. 2 Timothy 2:14, Paul calls Timothy to remind the people of the gospel. 2 Peter 1:12-15, Peter says three times that he intends to remind the people always of the fundamentals of our faith. These passages record authorized messengers of God preaching the Word in such a way as to remind the people of the gospel and of the call to live righteously. God could just give us a Bible and leave it up to us individually to read it. But he has authorized the reading and preaching of the Word by pastors to be a regular reminder of the gospel and of righteousness. Every week when we gather together and the Word is read and proclaimed, it's God's verbal reminder to us.

What I love about these reminders in the new covenant is they emphasize God's grace. The old covenant tassels are something you had to put on your garment and wear. The focus became on your being proactive to wear your tassels. But in these new covenant reminders, the focus is on God's initiative. Christ poured out the Holy Spirit upon us. God sends his ordained servants to the church to administer the Supper and to preach his Word. All of these things especially remind us not just of God's laws we're called to keep, but of the gospel that says Christ has kept these laws for us.

We need reminders. God knows it. We need to be reminded of what a godly response to God's grace looks like. And we especially need to be reminded of God's great grace to us in Christ. You're going to be reminded of the gospel every time we gather here on Sundays. The Spirit will remind you all the time throughout the week. Let's keep coming back to these reminders. Let's eagerly and regularly receive these reminders of grace, each and every Sunday. I know I need these reminders of his grace. I thank God that he gives us all these reminders. Praise God who knows us and our needs! Amen.

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