

Long Live the King
Deuteronomy 17:14-20
Series: Loving God in Every Way

Introduction: Take your Bible and turn with me to Deuteronomy 17, Deuteronomy chapter 17.

In the 1800's William Schuffler planned to go to Constantinople to preach the Gospel. As he made preparations he was warned by the Russian ambassador who said, "My imperial master, the Czar, will never allow Protestantism to set foot in Turkey."

Dr. Schuffler calmly answered him, "The kingdom of Christ, who is my Master, will never ask the Emperor of Russia where it may set its foot."¹

Herein lies the danger of human kings and governments – they easily forget who's really in charge of all things. And so the Christian journey is one of always living under the authority of human government, while never forgetting that God is ultimately King of kings and Lord of lords. This would be an especially dangerous snare for the children of Israel as they entered into the Promised Land. As God's people who would grow into a thriving nation in their own land, they would naturally want a king. As we'll see from our text this morning, that desire will be shaped by what they see around them in the other nations. But it is also an inherent desire in humanity to be ruled over by someone powerful, glorious, righteous, and just. And so, God anticipates that desire in his people, and in our text in Deuteronomy 17 he gives them the law which must guide the king. Let's read verses 14-20.

This section about the king is smack dab in the middle of a longer section about Israel's leadership. Last week we looked at the office of judge, and next week we will consider the offices of Priest and Prophet. In these four offices of leadership, the Lord was dividing up the responsibilities and the authority over his people. And each office is directed by God's Law as to how they should fill their role in righteousness and justice. If they did this, and if the people followed their leadership well, then God's people would be well on their way to loving God in every way like they are supposed to. Remember that the key truth in Deuteronomy is – "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." And the key commandment given in light of that key truth is for them to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, and strength. So, these commands in chapter 17 are for the purpose of helping them along the path of loving God with all they are and all they have and all they do.

To guide our study of this text this morning I want to point you to three truths about this law governing the appointment and the practice of the king in the Promised Land.

I. It's Protective

¹ Ron Prosis, *Preaching Illustrations from Church History*, pg. 99.

- a. The first truth about this law is that it is protective. If they follow the Lord's words here, they will be protected from conformity and from corruption. And these are the great dangers of this office of king – to be conformed to the world around them, and to be corrupted by the sinful desires of the king himself.
- b. *From Conformity – vs. 14-15*
 - i. And so, in verses 14-15 we see this tension between the Israelites' future desire to have a king and God's permitting them to have a king. If you were to read ahead into the book of Judges you would see a couple hundred years where the nation floundered in sinful rebellion – teetering on the edge of being cast out of the land. But then God would send a judge who would rescue them and rule over them for a while. But, do you remember that refrain in the book of Judges – everyone did what was right in his own eyes? That was a condemning statement about the heart of the Israelites. But attached to that phrase throughout the book is the statement that there was no king in Israel in those days. So, part of the problem related to the nation's fidelity to the Lord was that they did not have a king. And so, as you get into the book of 1 Samuel, you read of how they finally requested a king. And in chapters 8-10 Samuel is greatly bothered by the request because he knows they are rejecting God as their ultimate king. But God had made provision for this request already in the text we are studying this morning.
 - ii. And if they would have continued to follow the prescriptions of this text they would have been protected as a nation from conformity and corruption. The danger of conformity is that they will look to the nations around them for the pattern and purpose of having a king. We are told by scholars of world history that in the ancient Near East kings would normally fill 3 primary roles for the nation. They would function as the chief warrior who would lead in protecting the nation from outside threats. And the king would function as a judge who would make laws and govern the keeping of the laws so as to secure justice in the land. And the king would function as the worship leader. He would represent the nation's deity, or deities, to the people and lead them in proper worship of that god.
 - iii. What God says preemptively in this text is that the king I appoint must not function like those kings. He is not the chief warrior, or the supreme judge or the high priest. Rather, as we will see, he is to be the main example to all people of what submissive, humble obedience to the Lord should look like.
 - iv. This law, in verse 15 would also protect them from conformity in that this future king must be someone from among them – a brother Israelite – and not a foreigner. He must be one of God's chosen people to be put in this uniquely chosen position. And this would protect them from the conforming pressure of pagan ideas being pressed upon them by their foreign king.

c. *From Corruption – vs. 16-17*

- i. Not only would they be protected from conformity by this law, but also from corruption. Once that king is chosen he must follow the prohibitions of verses 16-17. It's worth noting that once the king is in office, it will be incredibly difficult for him to be removed if he doesn't stay in line with this text. By requesting a king they were placing themselves at the mercy of his leadership. If he would follow these commands he would be kept from corruption. If he didn't follow these commands, then the whole nation would suffer from his corrupt ways.
- ii. This corruption arises from three main sources – the military strength afforded through horses, the acquiring of many wives, and the amassing of great wealth. Horses were the quickest way to military prowess in that day. If you had horses and chariots you could make quick work of an army that was all on foot. Like a hot knife through butter the horses and chariots couldn't be stopped by men with mere swords and spears. But the king is not to acquire many horses.
- iii. He is also not to acquire many wives. Daughters of kings were used as peace pact guarantees. A king with a large harem of wives was a king who was well-respected and well-protected in his alliance with many other nations.
- iv. And he is also not to acquire excessive silver and gold. This is one of the first things we think of when we think of royalty – lots of wealth! Through the taxing of others and through the conquest of rival nations the king would amass to himself large amounts of silver and gold.
- v. So, why should Israel's future king not do these three things? Why are they prohibited? This is what the kings of the other nations did. In fact, this is how you became king. You amassed military might to yourself and you conquered others and in conquering others you gathered more women and more money and if you were the meanest and strongest then you would survive and maybe even thrive, as king over others.
- vi. But God says no! This is not how his king is going to get power, and this is not how he is going to rule over others. Did you notice the phrase “for himself” in these verses? It is listed 3 times – once after each of the things he would be tempted to acquire. This is the key to understanding the prohibition. The authority and rule and power of a king is like a laundry chute from the top floor of respect to the basement of selfish desires. The unbridled authority lends itself to unbridled expression of sin. And so, their amassing of horses and wives and wealth might look like it is for the good of the nation, but in reality it is all about the king – it is “for himself.”
- vii. God's law, if followed, would create a counter intuitive system of dependence on Him. Instead of the king of the land creating a system in which he becomes the chief warrior and the chief justice and the high priest, he is to refuse the gain that often follows with royalty. He is not to go down to Egypt to buy the best horses around. Which by the way, did

them a lot of good when they were chasing the Israelites to the Red Sea. As Moses himself so famously penned in Exodus 15 – I will sing unto the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously, the horse and rider thrown into the sea! When you have God as your Defense Department you don't need horses because they will just feed the king's self-sufficient spirit.

- viii. He is not to amass a harem of wives because they will lead his heart away from unbreakable trust in Yahweh. As they bring with them the worship of other gods, they will slowly lure him into false worship.
- ix. He is not to amass great wealth for himself because this will create a trust in silver and gold that is meant to be placed in the King of kings alone. In other words, all three of these prohibitions is meant to keep the king from the corruption of his own heart.

II. It's Prescriptive

- a. Not only is it protective, but this law for kings is also prescriptive. The negative commands of verses 14-17 are followed by the positive prescription of how the king is to follow the Law. The realm of this prescriptive command in verse 18 is when the king sits on the throne of his kingdom. That doesn't mean that the rest of his life is lawless, but it means that as the king on his throne he is to be especially mindful of God's law. His rule and reign must be shaped by God's Word.
- b. And for that to be the case, the command is given here that he is to write for himself a copy of this law. This is where the name for the book of Deuteronomy comes from – that phrase in the Septuagint copy of the law – *deuteronomos* – second law. Whether the king was only supposed to copy this book or the whole 5 books of the Law is unclear here, but it certainly wasn't less than the whole book of Deuteronomy. And did you notice that phrase again, “for himself”? He is not to acquire horses, wives, and wealth for himself, but he is to copy the Scripture for himself. And he was supposed to do this from the official copy which was kept under the watchful protection of the priests – so this was a spiritual activity done in the presence of God at the direction of God's official worship leaders.
- c. And once he has that personal copy of the Law he is to have it with him and he is to read in it all the days of his life. This is not a one-time operation, but it is to be this ongoing consumption of truth to guide the king. The connotation of the word for read is that he would read it out loud. So, I might be reaching a bit here, but I think the idea is that every day the throne room of Israel was to be filled with the voice of their chief political officer reading the Law of God out loud. This would then make everyone aware that they are not answering to the king in front of them, but to the King who occupies the Highest and Holiest of thrones – the High King of Heaven!
- d. This should be done by the king for four reasons given in verses 19-20. The first is to teach him.
- e. *To Teach Him – vs. 19*

- i. This copying of the law and daily reading of the law would teach the king to fear the Lord as he kept the words of the law. This God-ordained rhythm of daily reading God's Word would teach the king what is right and what is wrong. It will build up his knowledge of truth so that in the context of ruling the land he will have it always available to him to guide his every step. It will remind him of the greatness of his God and the smallness of himself. It will put him daily in his place and put God daily on the throne of his heart.
 - ii. But this reading must not be merely academic or legalistic. This is not a reading for a reading's sake. But rather, this is a reading for the sake of following. This is a humble submission to the authoritative words of the Great King which are to guide the day's activities of Israel's king.
 - iii. And this obedience would produce in the king a love for God and for His Law as he found God's way to be right and good. Daily submission fueled by daily exposure which produces daily obedience will produce daily worship of the God of the Word. This is why the greatest of human kings that Israel would ever have would pen words like this:
 - 1. Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. (Ps. 1:1-3)
 - 2. Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD! Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways! (Ps. 119:1-3)
 - 3. In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. (Ps. 119:14)
 - 4. The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces. (Ps. 119:72)
 - 5. Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day. Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation. (Ps. 119:97-99)
 - iv. David was a man after God's own heart because he was a man who was trained to fear the Lord through constant submission to the Word of the Lord.
- f. *To Humble Him – vs. 20a*
- i. The second purpose for the command to have the king copy and read the Law was to humble him. This is at the beginning of verse 20. Though he is the king, and would therefore tend to think that he is more exalted and more worthy and more glorious than his other Israelites, the reading of the Law would put him back in place. The words of the Law read in his

throne room would remind him, and everyone else, that he is under the same King everyone else is under. He will answer to the same Lord and he will bow the knee before the same authority that everyone else in Israel will.

- ii. This is the great and glorious effect of the Word of God on the people of God. As it teaches us to fear God it humbles us before one another. As we hear more of God's glory and goodness and greatness from His Word then we forget human distinctions and we are humbled to the same plane before the thrice holy God of the Word. We all need this, but those who are elevated in positions of leadership especially need this.

g. *To Keep Him – vs. 20b*

- i. And this is coupled with the third reason for daily and publicly reading the Word – to keep him so that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left. The Word would always shoot straight with the king and would always point him on the path straight ahead. It would keep him from turning aside to human wisdom or to human strength. It would keep him from turning to false gods or to false hopes or to false worship. It would keep him from turning to wrong ways and wrong actions and wrong paths. Reading and heeding the Word would keep him.

h. *To Preserve Him – vs. 20c*

- i. And it would also preserve him. It would guarantee for him long life in the kingdom God had given him. It is not rocket science. Obey God. Fear God. Heed God's Word. Do it God's way and you will be guaranteed a long and successful reign. The guarantee in verse 20 even goes beyond the king to the king's children. This is obviously hinting at the potential for a long dynasty of one kingly family. And that promise is dependent upon the king's submission to God through obedience to His Word.

III. It's Prophetic

- a. So, how did the future kings of Israel do? Did they submit themselves to this relatively simple Law for kings? Did they come under the protective and prescriptive aspects of God's word to them? Well, there are glimpses of this throughout the history of Israel's kings, but the overwhelming answer is – no, they didn't. This means that this text is not just protective and prescriptive, but it is also prophetic. It is prophetic in the sense that it lays out the ideal of a king who would submit to every word from the Lord and who would not turn from it to the right or to the left. It is prophetic in that it will stand as the judge over every king Israel would ever have and make the nation long for the perfect King.
- b. In 1 Kings 10 we read of the clearest offense of this text in Deuteronomy 17, and it comes just one generation after David. It is Solomon, who looked so promising and who followed the Lord in so many ways. But by the end of his life we read of how he had amassed to himself 40,000 horses – many of them from Egypt – and 1400 chariots and 12,000 horsemen. He had 700 wives and 300 concubines, and

these foreign women turned his heart away from the Lord to worship other gods. So, at the height of Israel's international glory and in the greatest expression they would know of a king, the law of God was spurned and forgotten. And this pattern continued for hundreds of years as one descendant of David's after another lived as a law unto themselves. There were notable exceptions along the way, but the trajectory was set. And so finally in the days of Jeremiah the prophet, the nation is told they will be heading into captivity because they have much wealth and they have returned to Egypt for horses, and their kings have failed to be faithful and submissive to the Lord. And this leaves God's people with a burning hope that some day God will provide the perfect king. And this hope is fueled by God's own promises. Promises like what he says in Jeremiah 23:

- i. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.' – Jer. 23:5-6
- c. If it were left to human ingenuity to plan the accomplishment of that prophecy, we would plan for a grand entry for this king into the world. We would prepare the way with much fanfare and planning. We would proclaim his coming birth throughout the world to all who were important and privileged. We would alert the highest courts in the world that the King of all kings was coming to Earth. We would plan for his entry into the world to be filled with expressions of wealth, power, and majesty. We would plan for his quick ascendancy to the highest throne in the land. We would expect to see great displays of his inherent power and authority, and we would plan for his powerful annihilation of all of his enemies.
- d. But God! God's promised King would come in 2 comings. The first was to accomplish our redemption, and the second would be to bring the fullness of justice and righteousness to the world in the conquering of his enemies. He came in the lowly humility of humanity. He emptied himself by taking the form of a servant and he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even the cross kind of death. He displayed glimpses of the power of his kingdom and he declared the ethics of his kingly reign. But in the end he was despised and rejected. He was lauded not with cheers, but with taunts of crucify Him, crucify Him! He was crowned, not with a diadems set in a crown of gold, but with thorns twisted around his brow and beaten into his scalp. He was hailed as king of the Jews in mockery, and he was left to die a criminal's death.
- e. But unlike every other king who has ever lived – his death was not the end. Every other earthly king has risen to their heights of glory and then died, only to be memorialized in history, but replaced in reality. But Jesus was raised from the dead and ascended into Heaven, to the right hand of His Father. And he told his disciples before he left that he was returning. And he gave them a message to carry to the world as his ambassadors – his representatives. It is a message of sin and righteousness. It is a message of separation between God and man. It is a

message of reconciliation with God made possible through the death of the King. It is a message of repentance and readiness – repent before the great Day of the Lord comes upon you. It is a message of faith and trust – believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. It is a message of humble submission to this High King. It is a message of eternal hope – He is coming again to fully and finally conquer sin and death and hell. If you are in His kingdom by faith in the sacrifice of the King, then you will forever dwell with Him in his eternal kingdom. It is a message he has entrusted to us, his subjects, to bear to the world! The King has come to give his life as a ransom for many. The King is returning any minute now to conquer the ungodly and to gather His own into His Kingdom. Do you know Him? Are you His subject? Is He your eternal King? Are you ready for His return?

Conclusion: The following lines were found on the body of a dead airman during World War II:

Those who are called by an earthly king
And are bidden to meet with the great,
Who are asked to dine at the Royal Court
In earthly splendor and state,
They come from his presence with face alight,
With a proud and a lifted head,
They are eager to tell what they saw and heard
And repeat what the great one said.

But we who have supped with the King of kings
And have eaten the heavenly bread,
Are we eager to say what we saw and heard
And tell what the King hath said?
Are we proud that the King has called us 'Friends'
And bidden us seek His face?
Do we tell the world of His matchless love?
Do we speak of His wondrous grace?