

Warfare (Deut. 20)

If we are serious about studying Scripture, then we will undoubtedly come upon things which make us uncomfortable. Sometimes the subject matter is difficult for all people of all times. Sometimes the subject matter is difficult because of some aspect of our personal history. Sometimes the subject matter is difficult because we are living in such a different cultural moment. Our text this morning falls into this last category. We have read instructions for how the Israelites were to carry out warfare, and this is hard for some of us to hear. First, many of us simply have not nor will ever be soldiers. Without a military draft in almost fifty years, military service has become detached from the lives of many Americans. Second, for well over fifty years, we have had some very conflicted feelings in our country concerning warfare. There is at once a reverence for military service (as a country music fan, I can testify to this firsthand) and a real ambiguity towards the morality of war. Third, our political situation is vastly different from that of ancient Israel. As Americans we have no concept of a holy war waged under theocracy. As Christians we do not consider creating an army of believers and conducting our own combat. For all these reasons and more, we don't quite know what to make of Deut. 20. How does all this warfare talk serve our lives of discipleship to Jesus?

As we approach this passage, we must first recognize **two basic divisions in the text**. First, there are instructions for **preparing for war**. Second, there are instructions for **conducting war**. In both cases, I believe we find much that is instructive and points us to Christ.

Preparations for war. This section covers the first nine verses and may be broken down into four steps.

1. **Perspective.** No matter the size of the enemy army, the Israelites need to remember that God is with them. They are part of his divine plan to bring blessing to the nations.

2. **Priest.** The motivational speech comes from the priest, and the address is radically God-centered. The Lord is a divine warrior who will fight for his people.
3. **Permission.** Because God is the one who fights for his people, the officers are free to shrink the size of the army down. People who have just built a home, planted a vineyard, or become engaged are free to return home. Remember our category of inheritance. Claiming land, planting crops, and starting a family are necessary parts of God's people coming into their inheritance in the land. The acts of warfare serve the settling of the land and the experience of fruitfulness. Therefore, the people in these situations must be free to return. Fighting is pointless if the inheritance is spoiled. Moreover, the fearful are permitted to leave without judgment to keep up the morale of the army.
4. **Position.** It is only at this point that the commanders take up the work of arranging the troops.

Remember our **four categories for the study of Deuteronomy**. From these verses, we see that warfare only serves the purpose of **inheritance**, that God's goal is the blessing of the people that they might be a blessing. He will lead them to victory as they trust in him. To trust God's promises is to avoid **idolatry**. God has revealed himself as the God who dwells with Israel, makes promises, and keeps his word. We can **interpret** the outcome of Israel's wars according to the principle of fidelity to God. In the end, Israel will not win or lose because of strategy but because of doxology. Lastly, these are **inspiring** words. All believers can be encouraged by the truth that God fights for his people.

Waging war. Having covered the first nine verses, we shift to the actual prosecution of combat. It is at this point that many contemporary readers begin to feel uncomfortable. This section can be divided into three subsections.

1. **Foreign wars (10-15).** These stipulations apply to nations outside of the borders of Canaan. The first step is the offer of peace. If the offer is

accepted, then the town is to be claimed by Israel and the people subjected to forced labor. By the standards of ancient warfare, this is a merciful outcome. If peace is refused, then the male combatants are to be killed but non-combatants are spared. Israel then is free to claim the spoil for themselves. Remember that the God of Israel is a merciful God who saved his people from slavery and taught them his character and his ways. The Israelites are not free to treat forced labor, women, and children in any manner that they please. There are laws regulating the treatment of slaves and laws regulating the treatment of aliens, widows, and orphans. For example, Deuteronomy 24:21-22 states, “When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for **the alien, the orphan, and the widow**. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore, I am commanding you to do this.” So, the people were required to leave some of their crops for the good of the vulnerable who were among them. This is the provision that Ruth the Moabitess uses in the book of her name. She – a foreign widow – gleaned in the fields of Boaz. The Israelites knew, because God had told them, that human beings are made in the image of God. In all of this, we see an approach to warfare which is moral and measured.

2. **Domestic wars. (16-18).** But something different had to happen in the case of those nations within the borders of Canaan, the land of the inheritance. These nations were to be “devoted to destruction.” There are three things to consider. First, **God was bringing judgment** against the Canaanites in a just and timely manner. God had told Abraham that his descendants would dwell in Egypt for four hundred years because the sins of the Amorites (the people of the land) had not yet reached its full measure (Gen. 15:16). The idea here seems to be that God was watching the people of the land and knew precisely when they would reach a moral point of no return. This was a land of child sacrifice, temple prostitution, and bloodthirsty deities. God does not act against them until it is necessary and just to do so. Second, **“devoted to destruction” is a technical term** with a complex application. When an object or people was placed under “the ban,” they were to be dedicated to God completely through either full commitment or destruction. This does not mean that all placed under the ban were killed. Think of

Rahab and her family. As residents of Jericho, they were to be devoted to destruction. Yet they were spared by siding with the Israelites and housing the spies. Also, in the book of Joshua, we find the story of the Gibeonites, a neighboring people who make covenant with the Israelites. Consequently, they are not put to death but subjected to forced labor. I think it is reasonable to say that the call for peace applied to even those close nations, with the clear understanding that accepting the Israelites' terms meant throwing oneself upon the mercy of the Lord. Full destruction would only be permitted if the other outcome – full conversion - did not take place. We also know from the historical record that widescale application of these rules never took place, for other nations continued to dwell in the land. There are the further possibilities that these words are tinged with stock ancient Near Eastern rhetoric and mainly focused on military bases. Third, **this was a religious war** and not an ethnic cleansing. Notice again v.18. The purpose of devoting the people to destruction is “so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the LORD your God.” If the Israelites simply spared the Canaanites without the necessary requirement of full commitment to the Lord, then somehow, someday the remaining Canaanites would drag God's people into idolatry and immorality. And if God's people were dragged into the surrounding cultures, they would cease, then, to be the vehicles of blessing to the very same cultures. I think it is inappropriate to see these verses as justification of the Israelite killing of people who are different. It is mainly about the eradication of worthless idols which led people into terrible, dehumanizing sin.

3. **Treatment of the earth (19-20).** Finally, the last two verses point out that a war between armies is not a war with the earth. Only non-fruit bearing trees are to be used for siege-works. No scorched-earth policy is allowed. The Israelites, even in times of war, are to respect God's creation and provide for the future well-being of inhabitants of the land. There is something practical here. If you destroy the fruit-trees, then how can you enjoy your inheritance in the future?

These various divisions help us to comprehend the text, but we still have lingering questions. How do these things point us to Jesus? Three suggestions. First, **actual Christian warfare theorists can learn from these ideas** even when they do not copy them directly because of changing circumstances. Shouldn't war be engaged only if offers of peace have been denied? Shouldn't prisoners and refugees be treated with dignity according to the rule of law? Second, **these verses point us to the reality of full commitment to Jesus**. No compromise. Our holy war is not against flesh and blood but against the principalities and powers. And we cannot afford compromise. We must be serious about removing those things from our lives which hinder our growth into the image of Jesus. Third – and most important of all – **remember that Jesus came under judicial curse for the sake of his people**. In a surprising manner, Jesus also was “devoted to destruction.” He lived a life of full commitment to God. No divergence from the path. No disobedience. No idolatry. And yet he was placed upon a Roman cross to be killed according to Roman law. Moreover, he bore the consequence of human sinfulness upon himself. In a shocking expression, Paul writes in 2 Cor. 5:21, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin...” Made Jesus to be sin! Why would the sinless Son of God be made to be sin? Paul completes the thought, “...so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Brothers and sisters, this is the gospel. Let us believe it today.