

THE WARNINGS AGAINST SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS AND DISOBEDIENCE: WARNINGS THAT MUST BE HEEDED TO INHERIT THE PROMISED LAND DEUTERONOMY 09:01–21

Introduction

Is one race of people of more value than another race? Is there a nationality of people who has more merit, more worth than any other nationality? Is there a group of people any place who has more qualities within them that makes them more valuable than any other group of people? Within the human heart — the inner recesses of human nature — is there any person any place who has more worth, value, goodness, importance, merit, purity, righteousness than any other person?

Not to God. But tragically, some people think so. It is this kind of false reasoning that gives rise to prejudice, discrimination and atrocities. It is this kind of deceptive philosophy that has given rise to worldwide movements such as the *super-human race* of Nazism, the abuse of the worker by some leaders of capitalism, and the abuse of liberty and freedom by Communism.

When it comes to human nature, no person has any more merit or worth, goodness or righteousness than any other person. We all stand equal before God. God shows no favouritism nor partiality to any person. For a person to think that he is better than someone else, that he has more value and worth than another person, that he is more acceptable and useful to God than others, that God favours him and blesses him more than others — is the height of self-righteousness.

The danger of self-righteousness was of critical concern to Moses. The Israelites were soon to cross the Jordan River and begin their conquest of the promised land. As they conquered their enemies, there was the danger that thoughts of self-sufficiency might begin to arise in their minds. They might begin to think that they had defeated the enemy by *the arm of the flesh*, by their own power — that God had favoured them with victory because they were a better people than the enemy, because they were of more value and worth than the enemy. Thoughts of being better and of meriting and deserving God's blessing could begin to penetrate their hearts. A spirit of vanity could consume them. And if vanity consumed them, they would begin to disobey every commandment of God. Contrary to being a righteous people, they were a stiff-necked and stubborn people who continually disobeyed God. A warning was desperately needed, a warning against self-righteousness and disobedience. This is the subject of this important passage of Scripture: *The Warnings Against Self-righteousness and Disobedience: Warnings That Must Be Heeded to Inherit the Promised Land*, Deuteronomy 9:1-10:11.

- I. The warning against self-righteousness (vv. 9:1-6).
- II. The warning against disobedience, against provoking God to anger and judgment (vv. 9:7-21).
- III. The warning against continued disobedience and rebellion, against provoking God time and again (vv. 9:22-10:11).

I. *Deuteronomy 09:01–06 The Warning Against Self-Righteousness*

There is the warning against self-righteousness. As the Israelites conquered the promised land, there was the very real danger that they might become self-righteous. Formidable enemies lay ahead. Once they were victorious, the Israelites might begin to think that *the arm of the flesh* had given them the victory, that they had conquered...

- because of their own strength
- because of their own strategy
- because they were more valuable in the eyes of God
- because they merited the favour of God
- because they were a special people in the eyes of God
- because God showed them partiality, favouritism over other people
- because they were a better people, more righteous than other people

Such thoughts are anathema to God, hated and despised by Him. Moses knew this and somehow he had to drive the point home to the people.

1. The enemies to be faced by God's people were far greater and stronger than the Israelites (vv. 1-2). They lived in large cities, behind fortified walls that seemed to rise up into the clouds of the sky. But this was not all: the people were as large as giants and very strong. They were so strong that a saying had been coined about them: "Who can stand up against the Anakites (giants)?"
2. Nevertheless, victory was assured. God's people would be victorious over this formidable enemy (v. 3). But note, victory would not come by the arm of the flesh. Not by the strength of the Israelites. True, they had a part to play in the victory, but so did the LORD. Victory would come both by the LORD's action and the people's action. The LORD would go ahead of His people like a devouring fire, destroying and subduing the enemy. But He would use the Israelites as His instruments to achieve victory. The people's action would be to drive out and conquer the enemy quickly. The LORD's part would be to give the victory — but through the instrument of His people. His people were the instrument through which God Himself would conquer the enemies of the promised land. But note this fact: the people had to march forth trusting God in order to conquer the promised land. They would conquer as they marched forth. By the power of God, the victory was to be achieved as they marched forth.

3. But note another important point: the strong, strong warning against self-righteousness. The warning is stated three forceful times for emphasis (vv. 4-6). Moses drives the point home: he wants to make absolutely sure the people grasp the warning.

a. Moses emphatically declares, “It is not because of your righteousness that you will receive the promised land. You do not receive the promised land because of some merit or value within yourselves. Not because of your own strength and power. It will be God who destroys the enemies of the promised land, and it is because of their wickedness that He destroys them” (v. 4).

It is critical to note this fact: the enemies of the promised land are destroyed because of their wickedness. They are evil and the “cup of their iniquity” has been filled to the brim. They are now beyond repentance, beyond correction. Their evil must be stopped before any more people are influenced and destroyed. Because of their wickedness, they are to be destroyed, not because of any merit, worth or value within the Israelites. (See notes, Deut 20:16-18.)

b. Again, Moses declares to the people of God: “It is not because of any personal righteousness within you, not because you have pure hearts, that you inherit the promised land (v. 5). The enemies of the land are to be conquered and destroyed for two reasons:

=> “Because of their wickedness and because they are an evil people; their ‘cup of iniquity’ is full.

=> “Because God is faithful; He fulfils His promise to the forefathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God has promised to give the promised land to their descendants, to all those down through the centuries who believe His Word, His promises.”

c. For a third time, Moses warns the people: “Understand this warning: it is not because of your righteousness that God gives you the promised land. On the contrary, you are a stiff-necked, stubborn people (v. 6). You are a sinful people. You have no righteousness within yourselves that merits God’s favour. Your hearts are not upright nor pure enough to make God accept you and give you victory over the enemies of the promised land. You are a stiff-necked, stubborn people.”

Thought 1. Self-righteousness is a dangerous attitude. It blinds a person and condemns him to be separated forever from God’s presence. It prevents a person from ever entering the promised land of heaven. God does not accept or bless a person because of some personal merit, value or worth. Our righteousness is as filthy rags in the sight of God (Isa 64:6). There is no excuse for any person thinking he is better than others, that he has some merit or value or worth that is superior to any other person. God accepts no man’s person (Gal 2:6). Scripture is clear: self-righteousness is a terrible evil..

Mat 6:5 “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.”

Luke 18:11 “The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men — robbers, evildoers, adulterers — or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’”

John 9:41 Jesus said, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.”

2 Cor 10:12 We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.

Rev 3:16-17 So, because you are lukewarm — neither hot nor cold — I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.

Psa 10:2 In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak, who are caught in the schemes he devises.

Psa 119:21 You rebuke the arrogant, who are accursed, those who stray from your commands.

Prov 16:2 All a man’s ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the LORD.

Prov 20:6 Many claim to have unfailing love, but a faithful man who can find?

Prov 21:2 All a man’s ways seem right to him, but the LORD weighs the heart.

Prov 30:12 Those who are pure in their own eyes and yet are not cleansed of their filth.

Isa 64:6 All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.

Isa 65:5 [Religionists] who say, ‘Keep away; don’t come near me, for I am too sacred for you!’ Such people are smoke in my nostrils, a fire that keeps burning all day.

Job 9:20 Even if I were innocent, my mouth would condemn me; if I were blameless, it would pronounce me guilty.

Job 35:2 Do you think this is just? You say, ‘I will be cleared by God’.

II. Deuteronomy 09:07–21 The Warning Against Disobedience, Against Provoking God to Anger and Judgment

There was the warning against disobedience and rebellion, against provoking God to anger and judgment. This point highlights just how stubborn and stiff-necked the Israelites were. Moses warned the people: they must remember how the first generation so miserably failed God. In particular, they must remember the golden calf incident, for it is a compelling example, showing just how stiff-necked and stubborn the people really were.

1. Moses gave a strong charge: remember the brazen, shameful disobedience and rebellion that took place at Mt. Sinai. Remember that terrible day and never forget it (vv. 7-8). God was provoked to anger against the Israelites because of their repeated disobedience and rebellion. In fact, His anger was aroused enough to destroy His people right there at Mt. Sinai (Mt. Horeb).
2. Moses challenged the people to remember the wonderful gift of God at Sinai: the Ten Commandments, the covenant He had made with His people (vv. 9-11). The LORD had kept Moses on Mt. Sinai for forty days and nights. During that time, he was fasting, praying and receiving the Ten Commandments. He ate no bread and drank no water during the forty days (v. 9).

The LORD had given Moses the commandments on two stone tablets (v. 10). Note that the commandments had been written by the finger of God Himself. They were then given to Moses at the end of the forty-day fast (v. 11).

3. Then, all of a sudden, a shocking announcement was made by God (vv. 12-13). God told Moses to go down to the people, for He was disowning them. God levelled several charges against the people. He charged them...

- with being corrupt
- with being quick to disobey
- with being false worshippers
- with being stiff-necked

The seriousness of the charges lay in this fact: the people had already accepted the covenant with God, some six weeks earlier, already agreed to the terms of the covenant. But here they were already disobeying God. As God says, being quick to disobey. Remember the covenant, the contract they had made with God:

Exo 19:5-6 Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.

Imagine the emotions, the utter shock of Moses. For forty days and nights he had been in the presence of God, communing and fellowshiping with God. Then all of a sudden, as though out of nowhere, God made this shocking announcement to Moses: He was disowning the Israelites. Why? Because they were at that very moment corrupting themselves, proving to be a stiff-necked, stubborn people.

4. Moses reminded the second generation of believers standing there before him as he preached, the righteous judgment of God was aroused (v. 14). God even announced that he was going to destroy the people. He was going to raise up a new people through Moses' descendants. Keep in mind that God could easily have done this, for the descendants of Moses would have still been the descendants of Abraham. God could still have fulfilled His covenant or promise to Abraham and his descendants.

5. Moses informed the second generations that he was personally filled with a righteous anger against the terrible sin (vv. 15-17). Immediately after God's shocking announcement to him, Moses had turned and gone down the mountain carrying the Ten Commandments with him (v. 15). What Moses saw shocked him:

=> He saw the idol of the golden calf and the false worship of the people.

=> He saw how quickly the people had turned away from their covenant with the LORD, turned away from obeying the LORD's commandments.

A righteous, justified anger surged up within his body, and he cast the two stone tablets down and broke them before their very eyes (v. 17). The fact that Moses broke the tablets in their presence shows that this was a deliberate act. In fact, this was a custom in the ancient Near East when treaties were broken. It was a visual picture of extreme displeasure over the people's disobedience, of their disobeying the commandments of God. It was a symbol that the covenant with God had been broken.

Note this fact: the people could never make the claim of self-righteousness. They had disobeyed God and broken His commandments on the very day that the commandments were to be delivered to them. However, keep this fact in mind: the commandments had already been given them by the voice of God Himself. From the very midst of the burning fire that symbolized His presence, the voice of God had proclaimed the Ten Commandments to the people (see notes, Exo 20:19; Deut 5:2-5). The people were without excuse; they were guilty before God. They had disobeyed God. Without question, they were a stiff-necked, stubborn people.

6. After breaking the tablets of the commandments, Moses shared that he got alone with God and began to intercede for the terrible sinners. Note that he once again prayed and fasted for forty days and nights (vv. 18-20). He fell prostrate before the LORD for three reasons:

=> because of the people's terrible sin and evil that had provoked him to anger.

=> because the LORD was angry enough to destroy the people (v. 19). But note: the LORD heard the prayer of Moses.

=> because the LORD was angry enough with Aaron to destroy him (v. 20). It was only the prayer of Moses that kept God from executing Aaron.

The second generation of believers standing before Moses needed to learn this lesson. It was intercessory prayer that had saved the people and Aaron. It was not because they were righteous and pure in the eyes of God, not because of some personal merit or value or worth. On the contrary, they were guilty of terrible sin and evil. They were a disobedient people, a stiff-necked, stubborn people. It was intercessory prayer and intercessory prayer alone that had saved them. God had mercy upon them only because of the intercessory prayer of Moses.

7. After praying for the people, Moses then destroyed the sinful things of the people: he burned the idol of the golden calf, ground it into powder and threw it into the stream that flowed down the mountain (v. 21).

Thought 1. The golden calf incident must be remembered by all generations of believers. The Israelites broke God’s commandments. They disobeyed and rebelled against God. They aroused God’s anger, stirred Him to pronounce judgment upon them. This is a strong lesson for us: we must not break the commandments of God. We must not disobey God lest we arouse His anger and judgment against us.

Rom 2:5 *But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.*

Eph 5:6 *Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God’s wrath comes on those who are disobedient.*

2 Th 1:7-9 *And give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our LORD Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.*

Heb 2:2-3 *For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him.*

Deut 11:28 *“The curse if you disobey the commandments of the LORD your God and turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods, which you have not known.”*

Prov 29:1 *A man who remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be destroyed — without remedy. ■*