

## Strange Diets for Strange People! Deuteronomy 14:1-21

**Introduction:** Take your Bible and turn with me to Deuteronomy 14, Deuteronomy chapter 14.

In his classic book called *Holiness*, pastor J.C. Ryle said this: "He who wishes to attain right views about Christian holiness must begin by examining the vast and solemn subject of sin. He must dig down very low if he would build high. A mistake here is most mischievous. Wrong views about holiness are generally traceable to wrong views about human corruption." (J.C. Ryle, *Holiness*, pg. 19)

Last week we dug down deep into the depths of human depravity as we considered the apostate and their error. And now, the text in Deuteronomy leads us up out of that pit and calls us to construct the high tower of holiness as the children of God.

Holiness is not exactly a popular topic for most in the church today. We carry conceptions of holiness being about some external code of taboos. So, if we don't drink and chew and smoke and go with girls who do, then we are holy. Or we don't talk about holiness because we don't want to come across as judgmental and focused on externals. Or we don't want to confuse the Gospel indicatives with Gospel imperatives – what Christ has done with what we should now do. So, we just focus on what Christ has done and let the rest take care of itself.

But the Scriptures give much space and emphasis to the pursuit of personal holiness. And this is the focus of these next 21 verses in Deuteronomy 14. Moses moves from the drastic consequences of apostasy to the need for holiness in the daily lives of the Israelites. And this is such a crucial message from Scripture on the importance of the personal pursuit of daily obedience to the Lord as the Lord's people. If we intend to not be the apostate of chapter 13, then by God's grace we must make the daily habit of putting all things under His Lordship in our lives and live all of life in obedience to him. It is when we start compartmentalizing and making excuses for dropped habits and pursuits that we put ourselves in the place of risk of proving that we were never really one of God's children from the beginning. We will see in chapter 14 that this pursuit is not based upon anything we are or have done, but completely upon the great grace of God. But it is a pursuit we must make nonetheless.

Holiness in the life of the Christian is obviously a huge topic. One that is found in every book of the Bible and that will come up in every sermon series. So, I want to focus our attention on what this chapter adds to our understanding about being a holy people before our gracious God. And that will limit us to pointing out two truths about holiness. The first is that holiness is

positionally assured and the second is that holiness is practically applied. Let's read Deuteronomy 14:1-21.

To our 21<sup>st</sup> century eyes this is a strange set of commands for what most certainly was supposed to be a strange people. And nobody wants to be different and stand out from everyone else. Okay, well, maybe there are the one or two attention hogs who enjoy that, but most of us enjoy being a lot like everyone else. But in this part of his sermon Moses calls this generation of Israelites to enter into the Promised Land and to strictly obey the commands of God. But he does not just brow beat them with the regulations and tell them to fall in line. Rather, like a good pastor, he exhorts them to holiness by pointing them to their position before the Lord by His mercy and grace. They are a people holy to the Lord, therefore they are to seek to practically apply that holiness in every aspect of life.

In every other religious expression this truth is flipped on its head. People are told that they need to be holy, or set apart, or righteous, so that they can be pleasing and acceptable to God. It is only in Biblical Christianity that the truth about this is told. That it is only by God's grace that we can be redeemed from our sin and declared right with Him, and then, based upon that new relationship with him we are to live in holiness in every area of life. The holiness is not to secure the relationship, but the holiness is to be the evidence of the security of the relationship.

#### **1. Holiness is Positionally Assured - 1a, 2, 21b**

- a. And that is the first truth from this text that we need to look at this morning. Stated another way – holiness is positionally assured. In other words, their holiness was a fact that was a product of the Lord's work. The opposite of that would be that holiness was something they had to produce in order to secure God's work in their lives. Moses is clear – the work is done by God to make them holy. They are holy to the Lord. And this is by the Lord's doing and for the Lord's delight.
- b. *By the Lord's Doing*
  - i. It is by the Lord's doing in that it was God's sovereign election which made them His people. So, Moses says in verse 1 that they are sons of the Lord your God. This is not a description of the Old Testament Israelites which is used often, to call them sons of the Lord. But the nature of the chapter is going to focus upon issues of normal everyday life in the home. And it is here, in the home that they need to be especially aware of their unique relationship to the Lord as His children. Not only is He ultimately their King and their Master, but he is also their Heavenly Father.
  - ii. We know this relationship is unique because in verse 2 Moses tells them that they are a people holy to the Lord. They are set apart unto Him. They are chosen out from all the peoples of the Earth to be God's special and unique people. As God's children they are given a privileged status as chosen and holy. And this is all his doing, as we already saw in chapter 7. He has chosen them because he loves them. And he does not love them because there is something uniquely or innately lovely in them. Rather, in

spite of their stubborn unbelief, God loves them because He has chosen to love them. In the exercise of his sovereign will He has chosen them to be his people and this has set them apart from all other peoples. And this is because He has chosen to do this. It is all his doing.

- iii. Beloved, this is so important to your Christian journey. As long as you cling to some fraction of self-attainment in becoming a Christian you will be stifled in your love for God and in your holiness before God. As humans we want to take at least some credit for choosing to believe in the Gospel or for coming to faith in Christ. We want to own at least one small percentile of the credit for why we are a Christian. But the sooner you can come to grips with the clear teaching of Scripture that you are in Christ only because God has sovereignly and graciously chosen you and redeemed you and made you his own – then the sooner you will flourish in your love for the Lord and in your submissive obedience to the Lord. That is what Moses is saying to the Israelites in this book. You are holy because you have been made holy by God. It is all his work.

c. *For the Lord's Delight*

- i. And then notice that it is for His delight. They are called God's treasured possession in verse 2. They have been chosen out from all the other peoples on the face of the earth to be God's people. And this is for his own good pleasure. He delights in them. They are the apple of His eye. He has made them his own out of his own sovereign will and for his own good pleasure.
- ii. As his treasured possession then, they are to be holy in that they are to not eat any abomination. These practices are to be shaped by their position before the Lord. Their holiness is positionally assured. It is unchanging. They are holy to the Lord because they have been chosen by the Lord to be his people. Therefore, they must seek to be holy in their practice.
- iii. When this is flipped on its head then the pursuit of personal and practical holiness becomes dependent upon human initiative and human resolve so as to gain a good standing with God. But when this is kept in its proper perspective then the flames of zeal burn hot as they are fed by the unending fuel of God's great love for us. And that is what Moses is seeking to do here – to enflame their desire to obey God by pouring the fuel of the truth about their settled relationship with God on their hearts.
- iv. This is not just true for the Israelites. As the purposes and plans of God expanded to show mercy to all the nations of the world through the seed of the woman, then more and more were adopted into God's family by God's initiative and by God's doing. So, whereas this sonship in Deuteronomy 14 is based upon their identity with Abraham as their father, the sonship offered in the Gospel of grace is through faith in Christ.
  - 1. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian,  
<sup>26</sup> for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. <sup>27</sup> For as

many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

<sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

<sup>29</sup> And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:25-29)

- v. This unique relationship to God then is true of all of those who are in Christ through faith. And this sonship is evidence of God's great love for us. That is why John says in 1 John 3, "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called the children of God!"
- vi. So, how does this relate to holiness? In many ways, but in particular to Deuteronomy 14 I think it relates in combating the push for conformity from the ungodly around them and in compelling this push for purity based on our treasured status. The lure for the nation of Israel upon entering the land was to be pressured by the nations around them to be just like them so that they would fit in with everyone else. But the truth of this text is meant to compel them to combat that conforming pressure with the truth that they already belong. They don't need the approval of those nations. They don't need to fit in with them. They fit in with God, and that is all that matters. He has made them His people and in that they have the greatest security anyone could need. So, their assured standing with the Lord helps them resist the pressure of the world around them seeking to conform them to their ways and their ideas.
- vii. But it also will help compel them to constantly pursue greater purity and holiness. So, there is a negative resistance to the world's pressure and there is a positive push for more holiness that is produced by their relationship with the Lord. For example, just think of that idea that they are God's treasured possession. He has made them his Bride, His chosen people, His elect nation, His promise bearers. This privileged relationship should compel them to pursue living up to the reality of that relationship. So, for instance, when we prize and value a human relationship, we are most overjoyed when the behavior within the relationship on all sides builds further into the relationship. But when there is strife and when one person resents the other or mistreats the other, then there is the greatest of pain in these most treasured of human relationships. So, when a husband and wife's relationship is thriving in peace and love then there is no sweeter joy in the human experience. But when that relationship is full of strife and mistreatment and thoughtless hurting of one another, then there is no greater pain in human relationships. So, the husband and the wife, as those who have this treasured possession of a spouse, they should invest themselves in building into that relationship and doing all they can to lovingly bless the other as they fill their God-designed role.
- viii. That is but a shadow of the motivating truth that is to be found in the relationship between God and his people. If we should be motivated to love our spouse or our parents or our children because they are a special

possession to us and we to them – then how much more should we as God’s children seek to function in ways which would please the God who has made us his own at such a high cost?

- ix. So, that is the negative and the positive result of this truth in our pursuit of holiness. It calls us to fight the pressure of the world to conform and it pushes us to pursue greater holiness because of our privileged standing as God’s children. This holiness is secured by the Lord and it is made so for the ultimate delight of the Lord. Our holiness is positionally assured.

## 2. Holiness is Practically Applied

- a. The second truth about holiness that we learn from this text is that holiness is practically applied. That is what this chapter is about in its application. Moses is calling them to observe with great care the dietary restrictions of the Mosaic Law. There is a more detailed list of laws given in Leviticus, but here Moses gives an abbreviated list as he calls them to be careful to work out this holiness that is already true of them because of their standing before the Lord as His chosen people. In other words, this holy standing they have before the Lord is now to be worked out in the context of everyday life.
- b. But what are we to make of these commands to them about how they are to be holy? So, in verse 1 they are not to cut themselves or make themselves bald when they mourn for the dead. And then in verses 3-21 they are given specific commands about what they are not to eat and of what they can eat. So, are these commands still in force for the Christian today? If not, is there anything of value here for us?
- c. Well, to answer the first question, no, we are not under the specifics of these commands as New Testament believers. That answer is based solidly on two key texts in our New Testament, which represent so many others we could turn to for the same answer. Do you remember how during Jesus’ ministry there was constant friction between him and the religious leaders over issues relating to food and to how he and his disciples didn’t follow the Pharisaical system perfectly? Well, this came to a head in Mark 7 as Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees about his disciples not following their rules and Jesus told them that they had a fine way of making the traditions of men stand in authority over the Law of God. Then Jesus taught his disciples that it is not what enters into a man’s stomach that defiles him, but the things that come out from the man’s heart are what defile him. And the text says in Mark 7:19 that by this statement Jesus declared all foods clean – meaning that the restrictions of Mosaic Law were fully met in Christ and were not to be continued after Christ. And then this is played out in more detail in Peter’s life in Acts 10 where he has the vision of the clean and unclean animals coming down to him and the Lord tells him to arise and kill and eat. And Peter protests to the Lord in the vision and tells him that he has never eaten anything that is common and unclean. And the Lord replies in Acts 10:15 with the answer “What God has made clean, do not call common.”
- d. So, because Christ has fulfilled the Law as the perfectly sinless Jew, He now makes clear that Jew and Gentile are no longer under those restrictions of eating. Okay, so that means we are done here and can just go home? Well, of course not.

There are 3 key aspects of holiness as it is worked out in the practice of life that these commands help us understand. And these three aspects are true in the life of the Church just as they were true for the Old Testament people of God. Those three aspects are non-conformity, zeal, and witness.

e. *Non-Conformity*

- i. Moses is concerned to communicate to them that their holy standing must be worked out in practical ways in everyday life. And this is true because the world around them will seek to pressure them to become like them rather than to obey and follow the Lord. And their responsibility before the Lord as his people is to be non-conforming to the world's way of thinking and living. In particular, the emphasis in this chapter is on their tables and their bodies. Which before we get into that, just think of how mundane and normal this is. Holiness is not a robe we put on our life to cover up our blemishes. Rather, holiness of standing is like a soap which must be vigorously applied to every daily and mundane aspect of life. Your standing in Christ should make a difference on what you put in your mouth and on what you do with your body. And in particular, this standing in Christ should be the main concern in these categories and not the culture around you.
- ii. So, Moses' concern for them in this chapter is that they do not mutilate their bodies when there is a tragic death in their lives, like the heathen around them will do. They are not to learn how to grieve the loss of a loved one by looking to culture. They are not to harm themselves and the image of God that they have been entrusted with out of grief over the loss of a loved one. This is still happening in cultures today by the way. Some third-world cultures are still practicing this bodily mutilation in the face of great loss. But, even in our culture this is happening. When a tragic loss happens and those who don't know Christ have no hope in their grief they tend to turn to substances like alcohol and drugs to help them cope. Or they throw themselves into their work or into some project to keep their minds off of the pain they are experiencing. And in the process, they bring great harm to themselves. Well, the mourning process for the Christian is a great place for us to show the world that we have a hope they do not have. In fact, that is part of the reason the Lord ordains tragedy in the life of believers, so that they can be a testimony of Gospel hope in the face of great loss to a lost and dying world.
- iii. But he is also concerned with what they eat, and how that should be different from the world around them. So, the bulk of the chapter is this listing of clean and unclean animals. And then the chapter ends with the instruction about not eating an animal that has died naturally. There has been a lot of ink used in the history of the church to try to understand the logic behind the clean and unclean distinctions. Some have said that the distinctions are for health reasons, that God declared unclean those things that would be prone to carry disease and so he is protecting his people

here with these laws. Others have said that some of these unclean animals have idolatrous associations in the cultures around them, so God was removing any connection between his people and those animals. And others have said that the distinctions are completely arbitrary, and that God is just choosing based on his own sovereign will.

- iv. So, which one is right you ask? Well, all three of them have validity and may be right to some degree, but all three of those explanations miss the larger point. The larger point being made by this distinction of clean and unclean animals is that God is giving his people a daily and tangible way to show their unique and holy standing before him. God has, by his own sovereign good pleasure, taken this people and set them apart from all the other peoples of the world and declared that they will be clean before him. And now, for those people, he takes certain animals and says these animals will be clean and these will be unclean for them to eat. In other words, they will have the daily and tangible reminder that they are unique before the Lord. Their holy standing matters even in what they eat for every meal. In other words, they are a strange and peculiar people with this strange diet so that they and everyone around them will know that they are unique to the Lord.
- v. But this will depend upon them obeying the Lord and following His Law given to them. And this is the truth we are being confronted with in this chapter. The concern of holiness is the application of a holy standing which has been given to us by a gracious and merciful God. This is why, to just take one text as an example here, this is why in the book of Romans we are called to this pursuit of holiness as Christians based upon our settled standing in Christ by his great mercy. The same is true in all of the New Testament epistles. The call for holy living, to not be conformed to the world around us, is made in the context of our settled standing in Christ. And the working out of that holiness into every practice of life is not about keeping an external code of laws, but it is about being transformed to look more and more like Christ from the inside out. And so, Christ himself becomes the standard for the Christian. As we look to him and see him more clearly, we are changed by God's Spirit to be more like Christ in every aspect of life and practice.
- vi. But this is in contrast to the world around you which is seeking to constantly press you into its mold. The world is putting unrelenting pressure upon you to be like it – to think and act and love and speak and work and live like it does. And if you are not constantly aware of this and heeding the call of holiness to be more like Christ, then you will be squeezed into the mold of the world's way of thinking and living.
- vii. All of us are affected by our culture. Think of this struggle for holiness like a stream and we are all fish swimming in this stream. The stream is culture and it is ever rushing in one direction. Most of the fish are being slowly carried along by the stream of culture. But our call is to swim

against the current. We are still living in the culture and so we will be wet with it in so many ways. But we cannot mindlessly and numbly float along with its every push. We are God's fish called to swim upstream and not be conformed to culture's push.

f. *Zeal*

- i. So, this aspect of non-conformity is a major concern of holiness. Another aspect being put forward in this chapter is zeal in holiness. These restrictions require great effort to be applied in the life of the Jew. For their standing to be worked out in real time they must zealously apply themselves to love God in that way. Remember that these commands about food laws are given with the reminder about the great love they have been shown by God. They are his children and his treasured possession. Therefore, they can be sure that these laws are for their best. He is not going to give arbitrary and meaningless commands to those he loves so dearly.
- ii. Therefore, they are to zealously pursue the keeping of these commands because they are confident that this is what is best for them as given by a loving God. And the same is true for us as those in Christ. Titus 2:11-14 – one of my most valued New Testament texts:
  1. For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people,<sup>12</sup> training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age,<sup>13</sup> waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,<sup>14</sup> who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.  
(Titus 2:11-14 ESV)

g. *Witness*

- i. And then, the last aspect of holiness which is being emphasized here is the aspect of witness. Because they are to be non-conforming to the world around them, they are to stand out then as witnesses to the lost. They are to be a bright and shining light of a different God who is love and light and truth. The expectation of the text in verse 21 is that there will be outsiders among them, and they can sell the meat of the animals who have died naturally to them. And the section ends with this strange command about not boiling a young goat in its mother's milk. There are several options here of what that might mean, but the best we can make of it is that there was some kind of practice in the pagan nations around them of taking a newly born goat and boiling it in its mother's milk. This prohibition is repeated two times in the book of Exodus, and it appears there in the context of the feasts they are to celebrate. So, the thought is that this is something the ungodly would do at their festivals as an expression of worship or as an expression of sacrifice to try to appease the

fertility god to give them children as they sacrifice the young goat in the very substance that is supposed to sustain its life. God says – don't do that.

- ii. And the idea here is that they are to be different, not just for difference sake, but for testimony's sake. They are to have a reputation of being set apart by God and set apart to God. They are to be key aspects of their everyday living that make them living parables to the world around them that they are a strange people.
  - i. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:9 ESV)
- iii. Howard Hendricks once told the story of a terrible flying experience he had with American Airlines. The flight was delayed significantly, and everyone was irritable and rude. The flight attendants were rude, and the passengers were irritable and gruff. But there was one flight attendant who was polite and pleasant the whole time. She kept her composure and maintained her sweet spirit even in the face of the rudeness of others. When the flight was over, he approached that particular flight attendant and asked for her name because he intended to write to American Airlines and tell them how wonderful she had been in the face of such adversity. And she replied by saying, "well, I don't work for American Airlines, I work for God!" And there was the difference in her behavior. She was a bold witness for Christ through her transformed life in world filled with sinful rebellion against God.

Conclusion: So, as we close, let me ask you, do you have this standing before God of being holy in Christ? If you do, are you seeking to work out that holy standing in everyday living? Is that pursuit marked by non-conformity and zeal and a desire to be a witness for our Lord? Let's pray.