

Deut 20:1–20 Rules for Warfare

Many of us have probably heard of the Geneva Conventions of War. These are a series of international treaties that seek to impose rules and limits on warfare. These rules are meant to reduce the brutality and inhumanity of war. All the countries signing on to the Geneva Conventions were supposed to abide by these rules.

The idea of limited warfare is far older than the Geneva Conventions. Moses gives Israel a series of rules or limits to the warfare Israel was about begin in the PL. Deut 20 pertains to rules of war. But these rules have far wider implications.

These were rules for Israel 3500 years ago. Are there any timeless principles here that apply to us?

We have to admit that most of the material here has primary application to a particular part of Israel's history. This whole section pertains to Israel, not directly to us. However, I think if we are careful, we can find some general principles that we can apply to ourselves in the midst of these exhortations that Moses gave to Israel.

[One thing we want to avoid is spiritualization or allegorization of the text. We don't want to spiritualize this chapter and make it talk about spiritual battles that we face today. This is not a set of guidelines for spiritual warfare. These are not primarily spiritual principles. These regulations pertained to Israel in its conquest of the PL. We should not seek to allegorize or spiritualize this text.]

We are not preparing for war like Israel was, but we are living in a hostile world. And the principles we find here help us live a godly life as we face our daily challenges.

Let's then consider some of the timeless principles in view in this chapter.

I. Trust in God. .1

Probably the main idea in this entire chapter is to trust God. Israel must not be frightened by its enemies. The Lord is present with them, and they should trust in him to give them the victory over stronger armies.

- A. .1 Israel will be going out to war against her enemies. They will be entering the PL and beginning the conquest.

B. They will encounter the military might of the Canaanites. They'll draw up to battle against various enemies, horses, chariots and numerous people.

C. .1b The command is "do not be afraid of them." Moses gives two reasons not to be afraid:

1. The Lord your God is with you. I.e., the creator of the world is on your side. Moses uses God's covenant name Yahweh here. Israel is in covenant with Yahweh, and Yahweh has promised to give the land to Israel. Cf. .4

Deuteronomy 3:22 You must not fear them, for the LORD your God Himself fights for you.

2. The Lord brought you up out of Egypt. He reminds the people about what God has already done for them.

One of the greatest displays of God's power was the exodus of Israel out of Egypt. God sent incredible plagues to the Egyptians, and then he opened the Red Sea for Israel to cross over on dry ground. God provided for them and protected them all during their wilderness wanderings through many miracles. If God can do all of that, he can certainly cause Israel to defeat her foes.

App: If we are God's people, we also can trust in him.

Why do we trust in God? If you are saved, God is with you as well. If you are fearful, you can take comfort in the fact that God will never leave you nor forsake you. "I am with you always." "If God be for us, who can be against us?" "Be not afraid." When we are fearful, we must remember that God is always present with us.

And we should recall the things that God has done for us previously. Maybe God has not intervened in our lives miraculously, but most of us can testify that God has been very good to us. If God has provided for us in the past, we can trust him to do that again in the present and future.

Trans: As we face the difficulties and challenges of life, the first thing to do is to trust God. He is with us, and he will provide for us.

II. Listen to God's representatives. .2

- A. Before the battle starts, "the priests will approach and speak to the people."

- B. The priests exhort the people not to be afraid, faint, or terrified because of their enemies. Moses reminds them that Yahweh their Elohim is with them in this battle.
- C. Vss. 5-9 mention various officers speaking to the people. These were civil or military officials who tell the soldiers what to do.
- D. So on the verge of battle, when people would naturally be fearful, faint, and even terrified, they should listen to God's representatives—the priests and the officers. Listen to their exhortations and instructions.

App: In the church, we don't have priests or military officials, but we do have pastors and deacons. Pastors are responsible to exhort the people toward faith and obedience. In a certain sense, pastors are God's representatives, God's spokesmen. We encourage people to obey God and serve him.

Our deacons could give you good advice. It would be beneficial to listen to them.

It's in the best interests of the people to listen to their leaders. I'm repeatedly amazed at how often the people I talk to refuse to take my advice.

The job of the priests and the officers was to communicate a message to the people, and the people would find benefit in listening to these messengers. Likewise, when I'm exhorting the congregation or giving out biblical advice privately, it's to the benefit of the people to listen to what I'm saying. It's not good advice because I'm saying it; it's good advice because I'm telling you what God has said in the Bible. We ought to listen to biblical counsel.

Trans: In this troubled world, we will find benefit in listening to God's spokesmen; that's a timeless principle.

III. Recognize proper priorities. .5f

- A. The officers here give permission for various categories of people to exempt themselves from the battle. Moses wanted men in the army who were ready and willing to fight, not those afraid or distracted. Fearful and distracted soldiers weaken the entire army, so it would be better for them not to participate.
- B. He mentions three categories of people that may be exempt from military service:
 - 1. One who has built a new house but not dedicated it. .5
 - 2. One who has planted a vineyard and not eaten from it. .6
 - 3. One who is engaged to a woman and not yet married her. .7

So this would pertain mostly to young men who are just starting their adult lives. They had not yet experienced the fulness of human life—a home, a spouse, and meaningful work.

- C. Notice that after each one of these, Moses relates the possibility that a man could “die in the battle” and someone else take his place—others would live in his home, eat of his vineyard, and marry his fiancé.
- D. These three things—having a house, having a vineyard/farm, having a wife—represent the basic elements of life—a home, a job, and a family. It suggests that these are very important parts of life, because those who have begun these and not enjoyed them are exempt from the battle.
- E. It’s interesting that Moses makes these exemptions for those who have *begun* these processes but have not completed them. Those who already have a house, and job, and a wife are not exempt. They’ve already experienced such things. They’ve had the basic human experiences—home, career, marriage. They are *not* exempt.

But those who have *not* experienced these things but have begun them, they are exempt. Moses does not want them to die without having these basic human experiences. It would be tragic to begin these things and not finish them or enjoy them.

Quote: The intention of these instructions was to avoid depriving any member of the covenant nation of his enjoyment of the good things of this life bestowed upon him by the Lord.¹

App: I think that tells us that we ought to prioritize some things in life. The most important parts of life are home, marriage, and career. And we should experience and enjoy these elements of life.

Pr 5:18 *Let thy fountain be blessed: and rejoice with the wife of thy youth.*

We should enjoy life—our family, our home, and even our job/career. These things ought to have priority in life. These things give life meaning and purpose and joy. These are good and important goals—get married, set up a home, and begin a career. Young men in particular should have these goals.

This also demonstrates God’s care and concern for his people. God cared about these soldiers. He did not want them to miss out on the joys of life, especially the joys associated with home, marriage, and career. God wants us to enjoy a meaningful life, and we find meaning and purpose in these areas.

¹ Keil and Delitzsch OT Commentary

Personal joy in life ultimately comes from God and from fulfilling the purposes that God has for our lives.

IV. An organization may be stronger without certain people. .8

Moses has already exempted three categories of people. Those exemptions benefitted individuals. The next exemption is for the benefit of the army as fighting force.

- A. The other category of exempt people is those who are “fearful and fainthearted.” Moses exempts them lest they make others fearful and fainthearted. I.e., this fearful attitude could easily spread to others. To prevent that, it’s best if the fearful and fainthearted do not participate. Retain the people who are ready to fight and let the fearful go home.

Warfare at this time was often fought at close quarters. Soldiers fought with swords and spears. If one soldier ran away from the battle, he could easily influence others to do the same. Israel needed bold, strong, confident people in the battle, not fearful and fainthearted ones.

Quote: a frightened soldier is an enemy, not an ally, for his timidity is contagious and can put a whole army in retreat.²

- B. In an upcoming battle, the *quality* of soldiers was more important than the *quantity* of soldiers. The right kind of soldiers is more important than the right number of soldiers. It would be better to have fewer soldiers who were focused and committed rather than more soldiers, some of whom were scared and weak.
- C. Perhaps Moses wanted to trim the number of soldiers in the battle to demonstrate that it was not military strength that would win battles but the presence and power of the Lord.

App: In the church, that principle is also true—people with a bad attitude are a drag on the whole operation. We want to engage as many people as possible in our ministry. However, sometimes a church is better off without those who are spreading a bad attitude. Churches may become more healthy when people leave—“back door revival.”

² Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 284.

Quality is often more important than *quantity*. This is probably true for almost any organization. It would be better to have quality people with the right attitude than to have a larger quantity of people with a bad attitude.

I'm not saying that we want to get rid of fearful and fainthearted people. No, we want to transform them into bold, confident soldiers. We want to remind them that God is with us. "Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world." "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." "Be steadfast, unmoveable, ..." If you are fearful and fainthearted, remember the first point—the Lord is with you, and he will provide for you. We can trust God. "Be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might."

Having the right attitude is half the battle. Negative attitudes can drag down a whole organization. It would be better to excuse the fearful and fainthearted so that they don't spread that fear to the others in the battle.

We should make sure that we are not the kind of people who would hinder the entire operation. We should not cause discouragement in others. We should not be spreading a bad attitude to others. We should be strengthening others—edifying them, building them up, not weakening them or discouraging them in the work of the Lord.

If you are fearful and fainthearted, you need to encourage yourself in the Lord. Remind yourself about God's promises and trust in him to provide for you and protect you.

V. Pursue peace when possible. .10f

A. We should really start this section by consulting verse 15; this section pertains to "cities which are very far from you," not the cities of Canaan, not "these nations." Vs. 16 states that the nations of Canaan are to be utterly destroyed. But Israel need not utterly destroy other cities outside the area God had given to Israel.

B. Vs. 10 describes a situation where Israel approaches a city to fight against it. In this case, the Israelites offer the city the option of a peace treaty—lit. "to call to it for peace," i.e., call the city to surrender and submit to Israel. If they were willing to be at peace, Israel would not attack the city; it could enjoy peace and security if it surrendered.

After making a peace treaty, the surrendered city would then be a vassal of Israel, a client city, loyal to Israel and under its protection. The city would have to serve Israel in various ways.

This kind of arrangement was very common in the ancient world. A weaker city would make a treaty with a powerful nation and would agree to send them tax money and not fight against them. The more powerful nation would guarantee the security of the vassal city, and the vassal city would pledge loyalty to the stronger nation.

Submission to a more powerful force would be a better option than total destruction. It would be better to be laborers for Israel than to be dead. So Israel was to give such a city that option.

- C. .12-14 If the city did not want to surrender to Israel, they could fight. Israel would then besiege the city and overcome it. If that happens...
1. .13b Kill all the males—killing the males would mean that they cannot muster an army. The city would be no threat without any men.
 2. .14 Keep the women, children, and livestock as spoil/plunder.
 - a) If the men are all gone, what would happen to the women and children? They would likely starve to death or become slaves of some other nation.
 - b) Israel took responsibility for providing for the women and the children of a conquered city.

They could have just left them there in that destroyed city with no men to provide for them or protect them, but instead they brought them into the nation and cared for them.
 3. .14b Eat the enemy's food. I.e., use all the resources of the city for yourself. All the spoils of war would be for their own use.

App: Finding a direct parallel here is difficult. We are not conquering cities or demanding that anyone surrender to us. The church makes progress through preaching and convincing people of the truth of the Gospel. We must not coerce or force anyone to do anything. We don't make threats.

However, the larger principle of peace is an important one. Israel wanted to live in peace with its neighbors. Likewise, we should pursue peace. Peace *within* the church among the members should be a high value. Peace *among* churches is beneficial. Peace between the church and the community is valuable. We should be striving for peace in all of our relationships.

That does not mean peace at any cost. Sometimes, there can be no peace. We are at war with our enemies—the world, the flesh, and the devil. We are at war with various immoral ideas and practices in our society. We are enemies of God’s enemies. We dare not seek peace with those who are at war with God and with the church.

Which leads to the next principle...

VI. Employ total war when necessary. .16f

- A. God’s plan for the land of Canaan required that Israel totally destroy the Canaanite nations. “Nothing that breathes” may “remain alive.”
- B. We have to understand these commands in the larger context. God was destroying these Canaanite nations because of their utter depravity.

The Canaanites were a morally degraded group of idolaters. Their religion required child sacrifice and other morally perverse actions. God had given them time and opportunity to change their behavior, but they had refused. So now their time had come; God was intent on destroying them through the Israelite conquest of the land.

- C. .17 “You shall utterly destroy them.” This is the word *herem* that we encountered before. *Herem* is total destruction, total war.
- D. .17b The Canaanite nations under *herem* were the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanite, Perizzite, Hivite, Jebusite. These nations occupied the PL, and Israel’s task was to destroy them.
- E. .18 Note the reason – “lest they teach you to do according to all their abominations which they have done for their gods, and you sin against the Lord your God.”
 - 1. The religious practices of these people were detestable. They had been burning their children in the fire. Their religion required all kinds of immoral and debased behaviors.
 - 2. The danger in allowing these nations to remain or survive is that they would tempt Israel toward idolatry, immorality, and occultism. God wanted to purge the land of this paganism.
 - 3. God’s plan for these nations is total annihilation. Nothing that breathes is to remain of them.
 - 4. God has the right to judge people according to his own purposes. God is holy; he has the right to judge. We cannot stand in judgment of God and declare his actions to be inappropriate.

Remember that...

- a) God destroyed almost the entire population of the world through Noah's flood.
- b) God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah through fire falling from the sky.
- c) God destroyed many of the Egyptians through the 10 plagues.
- d) Likewise, God intended to destroy the Canaanites. According to God, the Canaanites deserved to be destroyed. God was planning to use the Israelites to do this job.

App: Obviously, the church does not have any kind of mandate to kill anyone. We try to persuade and convince people; we don't use force. And we trust that people will voluntarily turn to Christ because of the work of the HSp in their lives, not because we forced anything upon them.

However, as I've mentioned before, there is a biblical sense in which we are trying to destroy ideas and claims that are contrary to God and the Bible.

2 Corinthians 10:5 casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ,

We are, in a sense, at total war with our spiritual enemies—the world, the flesh, and the devil. We are at war with false theology and false religion. We are in a spiritual battle against the cults and against theological error. Our aim should be that true Christianity prevails against all other truth claims. We want to purge the land of paganism and spread genuine faith in Jesus.

Part of the apologetic task is to expose the errors of non-Christian religions. We want all anti-Christian religions to fail and become defunct.

And we do that through preaching the Gospel and exhorting people to be saved. We do it through discussion and persuasion, not through force.

And we maintain our belief that God is the ultimate judge. He lifts up nations and he destroys nations. If God wills that a nation be destroyed, he can use various means to carry out its destruction.

Trans: God's enemies should be our enemies. We don't give in to evil; we overcome evil with good.

VII. .19-20 Value long-term benefit over immediate need. Or, Use your common sense.

- A. After all this talk of destruction, Moses mentions that Israel ought to spare certain kinds of trees. This may seem a little out of place here, but it's a detail that Moses thinks is important.
- B. Moses prohibits Israel from cutting down trees that they could eat from in the coming battles. If they are building siege works against a city, they should use trees that do not produce fruit or anything edible. Keep fruit trees to feed yourself.

A siege against a city might last for months, so it's important that Israel has a source of food during that time. If they chop down all the fruit trees, they'll be needlessly destroying a good source of food.

- C. That would seem to be common sense—don't cut down a tree that can feed you. Don't destroy what could be a valuable resource for the future. Don't spend in the present what you might need in the future.
- D. Use your common sense and retain what is valuable and beneficial.
- E. [We should note that the end of vs. 19 is rather cryptic (**read**).

- 1. The text says very literally “for man's [is] the tree of the field to go in at thy presence in the siege.” Hard to see the meaning.
- 2. Some translations render this as a question.

NASB has “For is the tree of the field a man, that it should be besieged by you?”

K&D suggest that “This is evidently the only suitable interpretation of [these] difficult words.”

The statement seems to emphasize the difference between plants and humans. Humans are made in the image of God and are subject to divine judgment. That's what's happening to the wicked Canaanites—they are under siege as a matter of divine judgment. But the trees are innocent; they have no moral capacities. The valuable trees should be spared from the judgment that's falling on the Canaanites. Let them live and eat from their fruit.]

The general principle here is that we value the long-term over the short-term. If you spend all your resources now, you'll have nothing for the future. Think ahead and conserve what you might need for the future.

These were Israel's rules for warfare; this was their Geneva Conventions. God imposed rules and regulations on their methods for warfare.

We can be thankful that we are not engaged in actual warfare where cities are being destroyed and people killed. But within these rules for warfare, we do find some principles that still apply to us today. As we face the difficulties of life, we should keep them in mind.

1. We trust in God. He has promised to be with us, to never leave us nor forsake us. Instead of being fearful and fainthearted, we should trust that God will provide for us like he has in the past.
2. We should listen to God's representatives, those who speak God's word to us. When we hear biblical advice, we should take it.
3. We should recognize proper priorities. Some things are more important than others. Young adults especially should focus on home, spouse, and career. The joys of a meaningful life come from these things.
4. We should check our own attitude to make sure that we are not having a bad effect on others. We don't want to pick up bad attitudes from others, and we certainly don't want to spread our bad attitudes to others.
5. We should pursue peace when possible. We should see the value of peaceful relationships. Sometimes peace is not possible, but we should still pursue it.
6. We should recognize that we are at war with the enemies of God—the world, the flesh, and the devil. We are in a spiritual battle, and we want to be victorious over all things that exalt themselves against God.
7. We should use the common sense that God gave us. Don't spend resources that could be valuable in the future. Save now for later.

On first reading, it might seem like this chapter in Deut applies only to Israel as it conquers the PL. But these timeless principles still pertain to us today. The primary lesson is to trust God. He'll be with us and provide for us. Instead of being fearful and fainthearted, we must be faithful and obedient.