

YOU ARE A PEOPLE HOLY TO THE LORD

Deuteronomy 14:1-16:17

Key Verse: 14:2

“...for you are a people holy to the Lord your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession.”

In today's passage, Moses reminds the Israelites that they are a people holy to the Lord God. This was their identity. They were to live as a holy nation people, just as soldiers must live a life that is consistent with their identity as soldiers. As God's people, they had to live a life that was different from that of the pagans. Their lives must be different in all areas of life, including eating food, offering tithes, canceling debts, freeing servants, and observing major festivals. Let us think about how these teachings can be applied to us today.

I. LIVE AS A HOLY NATION PEOPLE (14:1-21)

Let us read verses 1-2. *You are the children of the Lord your God. Do not cut yourselves or shave the front of your heads for the dead, for you are a people holy to the Lord your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession.* God told his people not to follow the funeral customs of the Canaanites who apparently cut themselves for the dead or shaved the front of their heads. Even today, people do strange things for the dead such as cutting their body for the dead, following their religious practices. These customs are more than a culture. They show the spiritual aspects of their life—who and what they believe here now and after life.

God told his people not to follow these pagan customs. They were the children of God. They were chosen to be a people holy to the Lord. They were his treasured possession. Their identity was a holy nation people. This meant that they should not follow the lifestyles of the pagans. Their life should reveal the glory of God. This is true for us today. We have been adopted into God's family by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who died on the cross to take away our sins. We are a holy nation people based on the new covenant through the blood of Jesus. As such, we should not follow the godless culture or popular trend of this world. We have been set apart to be a holy people (The Greek word for holy is ἅγιος (hagios) which also means set apart. It appears 229 times in the New Testament). We should not be influenced by this world; rather we should have a good spiritual influence on them through living as a holy nation people. St. Paul says in Romans 12:1-2: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

In verses 3-21, we find a long list of foods that the Israelites could and shouldn't eat. For example, they were allowed to eat ox, sheep, goat, deer, and gazelle. But they should not eat camel, rabbit, pig, eagle, vulture, raven, owl, osprey, stork or bat. Moses said, “Do not eat any detestable thing” (3). He told them not to eat any unclean animals such as roadkill (8,21) or flying insects (19). So why all these dietary restrictions? Eating is one of the most basic instincts of humans. Everybody has to

eat. But God's people should be different from the pagans even in eating. God told them to eat selectively rather than eating anything and everything based on their desires or pagan customs.

How can we apply these teachings to us today? There is a saying, "We are what we eat." This is literally true. Foods we eat everyday provide the foundation of our body from our skin and hair to bones and muscles. So we should not eat ramen noodles or French fries everyday just because we like them. On the other hand, Jesus declared all foods clean (Mk 7:19). Jewish leaders in Jesus' time thought that they were clean and holy because they ate kosher food. But Jesus told them their hearts could not remain clean just because they ate good food. Only the blood of Jesus through repentance can cleanse our hearts. Still, there is a spiritual meaning behind the dietary laws: God wants us to live a holy nation people, meaning, we should be different from the unbelieving people of the world. We should be troubled if our life is no different from theirs. As God's children, we should have a different value system, different way of thinking and different lifestyle. Our life should show that we are a people holy to the Lord. Don't eat junk food just because it tastes good or everyone else eats it. It is bad for your health. Many people of the world enjoy the culture of drinking, smoking, one-night stand, and so on. Should we follow them just because we are no longer bound by the Old Testament laws? Look at verse 21b: "But you are a people holy to the Lord your God." Let us remember these words when we are tempted to follow the popular culture of this world: "But you are a people holy to the Lord your God!"

II. TITHES, DEBTS, AND SERVANTS (14:22-15:23)

The Israelites were about to enter and possess the land of Canaan which was steeped in idol-worshipping culture. In what other areas were they to differentiate themselves from the Canaanites in order to live as a holy nation people? Moses addresses three areas here: tithes and offerings, forgiving debts, and freeing slaves.

First, tithes and offerings (14:22-29; 15:19-23). Look at verse 22. *Be sure to set aside a tenth of all that your fields produce each year.* The Israelites were told to set aside 10% of their harvest each year to be dedicated to the Lord. Leviticus 27:30 says: "A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord." Abraham was the first person in the Bible who gave a tithe. He offered 10% of his war spoils to a priest out of his thankful heart (Ge 14:18-20). A holy nation people should express their thankful hearts to the Lord, acknowledging that all blessings come from God. The Israelites were to express their thanksgiving by bringing the tithe of their grain, new wine and olive oil and the firstborn of their animals. So how were the tithes and offerings used after they were collected? Actually, different tithes were used for different purposes. The tithes were primarily used to support the Levites who had no allotment or inheritance of their own (27; Nu 18:21). But they were also used for the fellowship meals for all Israelites at the place of worship (23-26). Then there were the tithes that were offered every three years. They were used to support the poor (including orphans and widows) along with the Levites and the foreigners (28-29).

So how should we view tithing today? Some people argue that we don't have to tithe. But if we are truly thankful to God for his grace of salvation and all other

blessings, we want to bring our thanksgiving offerings to God without being told to do so. We do it because we want to show our thankful hearts to the Lord who loves us. Jesus said, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” (Mk 12:17). Malachi 3:8 says the following: “Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, ‘How are we robbing you?’ In tithes and offerings.” It is a privilege for us to be able to bring a tithe to God. If we view our material possessions as something God gave us by his grace, we have no problem in bringing a tenth of it to him. In addition, offering can help us to overcome our desires for money in this world. In this sense, offering to God is for our own benefits. Even the Levites were to bring their tithes to the Lord.

Second, forgiving debts (15:1-11). God told the Israelites to cancel debts every seven years. Any money borrowed from fellow Israelites would be forgiven, though foreigners were obligated to pay their debts. God promised that there would be no poor in the Promised Land as long as they obeyed his words, as he would richly bless them (4-5). But he knew that they would always have poor among them (Mt 26:11), and he wanted them to care for each other. He told them to be generous towards the poor. He said, “Do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them” (7). “Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need” (8). He also said, “Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to” (10).

In our society, if you borrow money and don’t pay back, you will be turned over to a debt collection agency. Your wages may be garnished and your credit score will plummet, making your life very difficult. The people of this world are often tightfisted. But God’s people should be different. We must remember the grace of God who sent his one and only Son Jesus to save us. Jesus compared canceling debts to forgiving sins (Mt 18:21-35). In the Lord’s prayers, he told us to pray: “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Mt 6:12).

Third, freeing slaves (15:12-18). God knew that some Israelites would go into heavy debts that they could never pay back. Their only option would be selling themselves as indentured servants. To prevent their permanent enslavement, God told his people to set their slaves free every seven years. They were to let them go free with liberal provisions. Look at verse 14-15. *Supply them liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to them as the Lord your God has blessed you. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today.* What if a servant didn’t want to leave them, saying, “I love you and your family. I am well off with you”? Then they should accept him as a servant for life. This would happen only when they treated the servant very well as if he were their own family member. God told his people to treat each other well, promising to bless them in everything they did.

III. CELEBRATE FESTIVALS AS A HOLY PEOPLE (16:1-17)

In Chapter 16, Moses taught his people how to celebrate three major festivals: the Passover (1-8), the Festival of Weeks (9-12), and the Festival of Tabernacles (13-15). God’s people should celebrate major festivals differently from the pagans. The Canaanites celebrated their festivals to honor their agricultural gods, as theirs was an agrarian society. The Israelites were also farmers, but their thanksgiving must be

directed to the Lord God. Their celebration was to be spiritual. Three times a year all Israelite men must come before the Lord at the place of worship to celebrate the major festivals. No one should appear before the Lord empty-handed. Each must bring a gift in proportion to the way the Lord God blessed them (16-17).

The **Passover** was celebrated to remember the grace of God who delivered them from their slavery in Egypt. The angel of death killed all first-born males in Egypt, but passed over the homes of the Israelites as their doorposts were smeared with the blood of the lamb. They ate unleavened bread (“the bread of affliction”) for six days (which is why the Passover is also called the Festival of Unleavened Bread (16)) to remember how they had to leave Egypt in haste (3). On the seventh day they held an assembly to the Lord (7). The key point of the Passover celebration was that they should remember the time of their departure from Egypt all the days of their life (3). Likewise, we should also remember our own personal Passover when we were saved from eternal condemnation by accepting Jesus as our Savior who shed his blood on the cross for us.

The **Festival of Weeks** was to be celebrated seven weeks after the Feast of Firstfruits (which was a celebration of the beginning of the harvest). It was one of the harvest feasts. They were required to present an offering of new grain to the Lord (Lev 23:16-17). We must be thankful to the Lord for his provisions. In our calendar, this feast falls on late May or early June. Interestingly, on the 50th day from the Feast of Firstfruits on which our Lord Jesus rose from the dead, God sent the Holy Spirit to his disciples. This is, of course, known as Pentecost (Ac 2:1) which means 50.

The **Festival of Tabernacles** was celebrated for seven days after they gathered the produce of their threshing floor and winepress (13). They were to assemble together joyfully at the place of worship to thank God for blessing them with their harvest. This festival took place 5 days after the Day of Atonement (which was celebrated 10 days after the Feast of Trumpets that signaled the end of the harvest and celebrated on the first day of the 7th month). On the Day of Atonement, the high priest entered the Holy of Holies to make an offering for the sins of Israel. The Feast of Tabernacles was also a reminder of how they lived in the booths during their sojourn in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land (Lev 23:43).

In our society today, it seems that our celebration of major holidays such as Christmas and Easter is becoming more and more secular each year. We are told to say, “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas.” Santa Clause and shopping have taken over our celebration of the birth of our Lord. Similarly, children associate bunnies, eggs and chocolate more with Easter than the resurrection of our Lord Jesus. I pray that we may study the word of God faithfully and diligently so that we may remember the true meaning of these holidays and also help our Bible students and our children to celebrate them with the truth of God.

In conclusion, we the children of God are a holy nation people. We are set apart from this world, meaning that we should be different from this world in all aspects of our life, including funeral, food, money, relationship with one another, and holiday celebrations. Our life should have the aroma of Christ. We should constantly ask ourselves the question: Is my life sufficiently different from that of the world? Does my life honor the name of the Lord?