**A holy people living joyful generous lives**

Text: Deuteronomy 14-15

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**Scriptures:** 1 Peter 1:13-16; Deuteronomy 14-15

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL 122, 176, 469, 479, 106]

**Series:** Deuteronomy (#9)

**Theme:** Moses explains various laws to Israel which embody the ways in which the Lord loves His people through the principles of separation from the nations, generous care for the needy and vulnerable, and the giving of tithes and blood sacrifices to the Lord.

**Proposition:** The separate lifestyles, generous care for the needy and vulnerable, giving for the work of the church and reliance upon the completed work of Christ are hallmarks of God’s people.

**Introduction**

God gave His Law to His people through Moses to make them holy. True or false? Someone stops you and seeing that you have come out of a church building and asks if you are a holy person. How would you answer? Perhaps: “Well, I try to be”, “not as much as I’d like to be”, “some of the time”.

I want to present a better way for us to reply. By asking this question “what does it mean to be holy?”. It is possible that you might get the answer “to be set apart for God”. That’s good, but there’s more that needs to be said here. Another question is “How does a person become holy?” What would you say? There are two different parts to the answer here:

1. It is God who sets apart people (and in Old Testament times animals and objects) to be holy. God declares His people, both in the Old and Testaments, to be holy (Ex 19:6; 1 Pet 2:9). Here holiness is a **status** which God confers upon His people
2. Holiness also describes the pattern of life of a person who is called to live according to the holy status which God has graciously given to them. This is practical holiness – the way that God’s law calls His people to live.

As we come now to some detailed Old Testament laws in Deuteronomy chapters 13 and 14, we need to remember that the Law of God does not rescue people from slavery to sin and death. Only God’s grace does that. His good law works to teach people like us, who are lawbreakers, that we need Christ, the Law Keeper to be declared right and holy before God (Gal 3:24). To say you are holy means that you have been set apart by God's grace for His good purposes. It means that you are part of a holy people who live joyful generous lives. We’ll see this under three headings:

1. Holiness in mourning and eating
2. Generous care for the needy and vulnerable
3. Joyful worship with tithes and sacrifices
4. **Holiness in mourning and eating**

Over the years, I’ve led many thanksgiving services for Christian brothers and sisters who have died in the Lord. Sometimes funeral directors will talk to pallbearers and say something like “We’ll take ‘John’, or ‘Jane’ out now” as though the deceased person is still alive there in the coffin. Sometimes at non-Christian funeral services, people will say things about the deceased person which are simply not true, perhaps in an effort to make them seem a ‘better person’ than they actually were.

Funeral services for brothers and sisters in the Lord are different to non-Christian ones because: we know that in death a person’s soul is separated from their body, which has been left behind. We have confidence, based on their professed faith and life for Christ, that the deceased fellow believer is alive and at peace with the Lord and we rejoice in this reality. We do grieve over the loss of fellowship with someone we have loved, but we do so with firm hope in the coming general resurrection (1 Thess 4:13). All this to say that for God’s people, our mourning for the dead is different from those who do not know the Lord.

This is also the meaning of the first part of Deuteronomy chapter 14 (1-2): "*You are the sons of the LORD your God. You shall not cut yourselves or make any baldness on your foreheads for the dead. For you are a people holy to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth*”. It’s clear from this text that laceration (cutting or tearing of the skin or flesh) resulting in the flowing of blood from the living was part of their mourning for the dead of the pagan nations, together with a shaving of the head. The funeral practices of Old Testament Israel were to be different from those of the nations because they were ‘*a people holy to the Lord*’ (Ex 19:6). They had been declared by God to be a ‘*holy nation*’ (Ex 19:6) at Mt Sinai. Set apart from others as the Lord’s chosen people.

Many Old Testament laws detail what practical holiness – living like the holy people God made them to be – looks like in life. This included one of the most basic of activities - eating. Food is a common requirement for all human beings. Without sufficient nutrition we weaken and eventually die. This was as true for Jesus Christ in His incarnation as it is for each one of us (e.g. Matt 4:20).

Through Moses, the Lord had already given to His people His law which makes a distinction between ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’ foods, as revealed in Leviticus chapter 11. Here in Deuteronomy 14 we find detailed distinctions between ‘clean foods’ which could be eaten: the ox, the sheep, the goat, the deer, the gazelle, the roebuck, the wild goat, the ibex, the antelope, and the mountain sheep; every animal that parts the hoof and has the hoof cloven in two and chews the cud; whatever has fins and scales and lives in water and all clean birds.

‘Unclean foods’ which could **not** be eaten: the camel, the hare, and the rock badger, because they chew the cud but do not part the hoof; the pig, because it parts the hoof but does not chew the cud; the eagle, the bearded vulture, the black vulture, the kite, the falcon of any kind; every raven of any kind; the ostrich, the nighthawk, the sea gull, the hawk of any kind; the little owl and the short-eared owl, the barn owl and the tawny owl, the carrion vulture and the cormorant, the stork, the heron of any kind; the hoopoe and the bat; anything that has died naturally – an animal which had not had the blood drained from its body (12:16).

It is quite possible that there are hygiene and health aspects to many of these laws. There is some degree of correlation between the levels of toxicity in many of these creatures and their designation as ‘clean’ or ‘unclean’. However, the key reason given in the text is the same as for the distinctive mourning for the dead practices for Israel ‘*for you are a people holy to the Lord*’. Set apart from others as the Lord’s chosen people. That is why it was permissible for the meat of animals which had died naturally to eaten by non-Israelites – the sojourner and the foreigner (14:21). They were temporary residents in the land. The specific law not to boil a young goat in its mother's milk (14:21) most likely reflects a practice which was part of the Canaanite religion and therefore not to be practiced by holy Israel.

These practical holiness laws for Old Testament Israel do not apply for the New Testament church. Whilst being the continuing ‘holy nation’ of God’s people (1 Pet 2:9), we are not under the civil and ceremonial Mosaic laws as they were. We mourn the dead in Christ giving honour to their body, confident in their continued life with the Lord and grieving with hope in the resurrection to come. We can eat what we choose to eat (Acts 10:9-16; Col 2:16), mindful that we are to care for our bodies (1 Cor 6:19) so that we can continue to serve our Lord with the health that a wholesome balanced nutritious diet helps to provide. Like Old Testament Israel, in principle we are also called to generous care for the needy and vulnerable – which brings us to our second point.

1. **Generous care for the needy and vulnerable**

Intensive agriculture practices in New Zealand and in many other parts of the world have resulted in significant deterioration of our natural environment. This harm includes pollution of rivers and ground water, especially with nitrogen fertilisers, and also deforestation, loss of species diversity and damage to soil structure.

Traditional farming methods included: crop rotation to balance the possible accumulation of pests and diseases which can arise with repeatedly growing the same plants and also leaving the ground ‘fallow’ (Prov 13:23) without cultivation, in order to rest for a season and be replenished for future production.

Old Testament Biblical law regulated the resting of agricultural land from cultivation every seventh year (Ex 23:10-11). In the year that the land was left fallow, the poor and animals could eat any food which grew there naturally (Ex 20:11). The law in Deuteronomy 15 addresses the situation of those who had debts but could not make repayments during the year in which the land lay fallow. In the agricultural economy of Old Testament Israel, most people would not have income from their produce in the year when the land was rested. It is not clear whether a debt was to be completely forgiven every seventh ‘fallow year’, or whether it was just deferred for a year in what we might call a ‘mortgage holiday’ or a ‘no interest’ period today. Foreigners, who would not be land owners, were not included in this provision.

The key concept here is the care for the vulnerable; those who might become overburdened by debt without this provision. There’s a warning not to purposefully avoid lending money to the poor just before the year of release because then there would be a delay in getting a return (15:7-9). The principle of generous care for the vulnerable in society is expressed in these words “*You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and the poor, in your land*” (15:11).

The sabbatical year also required that any Hebrew slaves be set free and that their former owners ‘*furnish them liberally*’ so that they could make a fresh start on their own (15:13-14). This generous care reflected the gracious way in which the Lord had blessed His people when they were delivered from slavery in Egypt (Exo 12:36).

Every third year, instead of being taken to the central place of worship – The Tabernacle or the Temple – the tithes (a tenth of the produce from the land) were to be stored in the towns. The vulnerable; the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow could then come to ‘*eat and be filled*’ (14:29). This was ‘covenant community social welfare’ whereby generous care was to be provided for the needy and vulnerable. Such gracious provision reflected the bounty of the Lord’s giving to His people the prosperous Promised Land.

So blessed were the people to be by the Lord (if they strictly obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, being careful to do His commandments) that they would lend to many nations, but not borrow (15:6). They would have plenty for themselves and plenty to share with others. They would rule, but not be ruled over by the other people groups if they lived like the holy people God had declared them to be.

As 21st century disciples of Christ dwelling in a country with a comprehensive state funded social welfare system, what principles from our text in Deuteronomy 14-15 apply to us? As God’s holy people, we are called to be generous with what we have, especially giving to those within the church (Gal 6:10): “*But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?*” (1 John 3:17). “*Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God*” (Heb 13:16). “*Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you*" (Luke 6:38). “*You will be enriched in every way for all your generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God*” (2 Cor 9:11).

We are to especially care for the vulnerable, ensuring that they have sufficient material provision, but also giving of our time and fellowship (James 1:27). Why? Because the Lord has been generous and kind to the vulnerable. That’s all of us! Which brings us to our third point:

1. **Joyful worship with tithes and sacrifices**

Being the oldest child growing up in a family has some potential benefits: In a larger family you are likely to have more newer clothes than your younger siblings – who may receive your ‘hand me downs’. You have the benefits and freedoms which come with age and maturity before your younger brothers and sisters do. You won’t have an older sibling bossing you around! But there are also some downsides: You will likely have more responsibilities sooner. Your parents start their journey of learning parenting with you! You may grow up thinking that your parents are easier on your younger siblings than they were on you!

In Old Testament Israel, being the first-born male had special significance: the firstborn son would normally receive a double inheritance. He would also ordinarily inherit his father’s position as head of the family (exceptions include Jacob (Gen 25:21-26) and Ephraim (Gen 48:13-22).

When the Lord led His people out of slavery in Egypt, He called them to set apart/dedicate/ consecrate to him their firstborn sons and livestock (Ex 22:29-30). The Lord’s claim on the firstborn was symbolic of His ownership of all that the Israelites had. The willingness of the Israelites to part with what they might feel or think was theirs to do with as they pleased was part of their practical holiness before the Lord.

The setting apart of the firstborn of the herd and flock was a declaration that these animals were ceremonially holy. They were not to be used to carry loads or pull a plough, nor were the sheep to be shorn. They were to be sacrificed to the Lord as offerings and eaten ‘*before the Lord your God year by year at the place that the Lord will choose’* (15:20). The offering of the firstborn of the herd and flock was accompanied by the tithes of grain, wine, and oil.

For the Israelites who lived further away from the central place of worship in the Promised Land {firstly at Shiloh (Josh 18:1; Jer 7:12), then Gibeon (1 Chron 16:39), and finally at Jerusalem (1 Kings 6)} the journey was too long to carry their tithes and take their firstborn animals. In His gracious kindness for their situation the Lord’s law enabled them to sell this produce and then take the money with them as they travelled to worship together. When they got there, they could ‘*spend the money for whatever you desire- oxen or sheep or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves. And you shall eat there before the LORD your God and rejoice, you and your household*’.

As we saw from chapter 12 of Deuteronomy last week, the congregational worship of Israel was **joyful** because they were gathered in the presence of their Lord. The tithes and offerings brought were eaten as part of their celebration. It was a time of feasting with plenty of food and thanksgiving to the Lord for His bountiful gifts.

The fellowship of God’s people around the food which He graciously provides is a pattern throughout Scripture and instructs us that this is an important part of practical holiness for us. Whilst the New Testament church is not commanded to meet together to eat, apart from in the celebration of Lord’s Supper, regular congregational lunches should not be seen as unimportant for us, but as an extension of our joyful worship. Meeting together for fellowship and food at other times – perhaps after the evening service, or during the week – is also a possible 21st century application of the principles in our text today.

We do not tend to bring tithes of grain, wine and oil, or farm animals here. The fruits of our labours are often represented in money, as they were for those Israelites who travelled a long distance to the central place of worship. We are called to give willingly and generously for the work of the gospel in the church and churches (1 Cor 9:14) and for those in need (2 Cor 7-9).

The deacons in our church are tasked in the form of ordination with ‘helping the needy and afflicted, having pity on the weak, comforting and encouraging with material support and the Word of God, with prayer and good advice. They are also called to ‘encourage God’s people to carry each other’s burdens’.

The blood sacrifice of the firstborn of the flock and herd in our text from Deuteronomy points forward to Christ’s offering up of Himself, the preeminent, only begotten Son of God. He is the unblemished Lamb of God, the representative human being (Ro 5:18) who died, giving His life as a ransom for many (Matt 20:28). He is ‘*the firstborn from the dead*’ (Rev 1:5). He has conquered sin and death. He is the Living Risen Saviour whom we, brothers and sisters in Christ, joyfully and thankfully worship today.

If you do not believe in Jesus, the Son of God, as your Lord and Saviour then your status before God is ‘unholy’ – no matter how many ‘good’ things you do and say. So, come to Christ whilst you still have breath. “*Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved*” (Acts 2:21). Jesus is the ‘*Holy One of God*’ (Mark 1:24).

Brothers and sisters, we who trust in Christ as our Lord and Saviour, have been declared holy because He substituted His life for ours and because His righteousness has been credited to us. God now calls us to live joyful generous lives of holiness which reflect His grace in raising us to the exalted status of being sons and daughters of God. Three ways in which our practical holiness is to be shown are:

* In how we mourn the dead in Christ and in eating wisely so that we can best serve the Lord.
* In being generous and kind, especially to the vulnerable.
* In joyfully worshipping the Lord with our tithes and offerings trusting fully in the sacrifice of Christ, the Passover Lamb, whose blood was shed for many so that they could be part of the holy people of God who will live forever in the Paradise of the New Heavens and New Earth.

AMEN