

The Book of Deuteronomy, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 7: Not by Your Righteousness

Deuteronomy 9:1–10:22

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this lesson stands on one of the clearest grace-not-merit passages in all the Law. Deuteronomy 9:4–6 forbids Israel from reading the gift of the land as a reward for their goodness and names the true grounds: the wickedness of the nations being judged and the oath God swore to the fathers. This guards us from the ancient and ever-present error of treating God's blessings as wages we have earned. Righteousness, the text insists, is not Israel's achievement; their standing rests on God's promise and mercy. We carry that principle forward, careful not to read New Testament details back into Israel, yet hearing the timeless truth that no one stands before God on the strength of his own record (Titus 3:4–7; Ephesians 2:8–9).

The lesson also presses the heart toward honesty and humility. Moses will not let Israel forget the golden calf or the long string of rebellions; he calls them plainly “a stubborn people”. Spiritual formation begins where self-flattery ends. When we stop rehearsing our imagined righteousness and face our actual record, mercy stops being an abstraction and becomes the very air we breathe.

Finally, the lesson aims at love and obedience that flow from gratitude. The same chapters that demolish self-righteousness call Israel to fear the Lord, walk in His ways, love Him, serve Him, and circumcise their hearts. Grace does not make obedience optional; it gives it a new motive. We obey not to earn what we have but in glad response to mercy already received.

Question 1

Student Question:

According to Deuteronomy 9:1–3, what does Moses say about the nations Israel is about to dispossess, and who does he say will go before Israel to subdue them?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Moses opens chapter 9 by magnifying the obstacle before he magnifies the deliverer. “Hear, O Israel: you are to cross over the Jordan today, to go in to dispossess nations greater and mightier than you, cities great and fortified up to heaven” (9:1). He even names the Anakim, the very giants whose report had once paralyzed the previous generation (Numbers 13:33). The point is not to terrify but to make plain that this conquest is beyond Israel's natural strength.

Then comes the hinge in verse 3: “Know therefore today that he who goes over before you as a consuming fire is the Lord your God. He will destroy them and subdue them before you.” The

victory is the Lord's. Israel will march and fight, yet the One going ahead as a consuming fire is the real conqueror. Human effort and divine power are not rivals here; Israel acts, but God secures the outcome.

This sets the table for the whole sermon. By insisting that the nations are greater and the cities higher than Israel can reach, Moses removes any room for Israel to later say the win was self-made. The bigness of the enemy is the backdrop against which grace will shine. What Israel cannot do for itself, God will do for them and through them.

For us this guards a vital truth about God's character: He delights to accomplish what His people could never accomplish alone, so that the glory returns to Him. Paul echoes the logic when he says God chose what is weak and low so that no human being might boast before Him (1 Corinthians 1:27-29). The pattern is old, and it runs straight through Scripture.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God as the true conqueror who goes before His people
- The danger of crediting victory to human strength
- Honest reckoning with obstacles beyond our ability
- Glory belonging to God, not to His instruments
- Continuity of God's pattern of working through the weak

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Moses stress that the nations are greater and mightier than Israel?
- What does the image of God as a consuming fire going before them teach you?
- How does naming the giants connect this generation to the failure at Kadesh?

Question 2

Student Question:

Moses warns Israel not to say in their hearts "because of my righteousness the Lord has brought me in" (9:4). Where in your own thinking do you catch yourself crediting your standing with God to your own goodness?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Moses anticipates a thought that would surface only after the victory, when the danger is past and pride creeps in: "Do not say in your heart... it is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in" (9:4). Notice it is a thought of the heart, the quiet self-talk we rarely say out loud. God cares about the sentence we whisper to ourselves about why life has gone well.

We are all fluent in this inner accounting. When things go well we are tempted to tally our discipline, our churchgoing, our moral effort, and conclude that we have earned the good we

enjoy. The reasoning feels reasonable and even humble on the surface, yet it quietly displaces grace and puts self at the center.

The cure is not to despise the good we do but to refuse to make it the foundation of our standing. Examining the heart here means asking honestly: do I come to God as one who has earned His favor, or as one who has received His mercy? The answer shapes everything about how we pray, how we serve, and how we treat others who are struggling.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The hidden self-talk of the heart
- Subtle pride disguised as gratitude
- Crediting blessings to personal merit
- Coming to God as earner versus receiver
- How self-righteousness hardens us toward others

Discussion Prompts

- What does the phrase “say in your heart” reveal about where pride hides?
- When have you caught yourself tallying your goodness before God?
- How would resting in mercy change the way you treat strugglers?

Question 3

Student Question:

In 9:4–6 Moses gives the real reasons Israel receives the land. What two reasons does he name, and what does he repeatedly insist is NOT the reason?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 4 through 6 form the doctrinal heart of the chapter, and Moses states the two real reasons with unmistakable clarity. First, “it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is driving them out before you” (9:4–5). The conquest is in part an act of divine justice on nations whose iniquity, long warned of, had come to full measure (Genesis 15:16).

Second, the land comes “that he may confirm the word that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob” (9:5). God is keeping a promise He freely made generations earlier. The inheritance flows from covenant faithfulness, from God’s own oath, not from Israel’s performance.

Against these two reasons Moses sets what is emphatically NOT the reason. Three times he hammers it: “not because of your righteousness” (9:4), “not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart” (9:5), “Know, therefore, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people” (9:6). The repetition is deliberate and total.

Here the Old Testament itself teaches grace. Long before Paul wrote Romans, Moses had already insisted that God's gifts rest on His mercy and His promise rather than on human merit. This is the seedbed of the gospel truth that we are justified as a gift by His grace (Romans 3:24). Scripture is one story, and its melody of grace was sounding here at the Jordan.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Two stated reasons: judgment on wickedness and the oath to the fathers
- The threefold denial of human righteousness as the reason
- Covenant promise as the ground of the inheritance
- Divine justice and divine faithfulness working together
- The unity of grace across Old and New Testaments

Discussion Prompts

- What are the two reasons Moses gives for the gift of the land?
- Why does Moses repeat "not because of your righteousness" three times?
- How does this passage prepare the way for the gospel of grace?

Question 4

Student Question:

Moses calls Israel "a stubborn people" (9:6) and rehearses their rebellions. How does honestly facing your own record, rather than your imagined record, change the way you approach God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Moses does not flatter his audience. "Know, therefore, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land... for you are a stubborn people" (9:6). Then he proves it with a litany: Horeb, Taberah, Massah, Kibroth-hattaavah, Kadesh-barnea. "You have been rebellious against the Lord from the day that I knew you" (9:24). This is not Israel's imagined record but its actual one.

We tend to carry an edited resume of ourselves, one that highlights our best moments and quietly files away the rest. Spiritual growth requires trading that flattering portrait for the truthful one. As long as we live by the imagined record, mercy feels optional; once we see the real record, mercy becomes everything.

Facing our actual history with God is not meant to crush us into despair but to free us from pretense. The same God who names Israel stubborn is the God who keeps His oath to them. Honesty about ourselves and confidence in His mercy are meant to grow together, not cancel each other out.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The edited self-portrait versus the true record

- Honest confession as the doorway to grace
- Stubbornness named plainly rather than excused
- Truth about self leading to dependence on mercy
- Repentance as a lifelong posture

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between your imagined record and your actual one?
- Why does honesty about sin make mercy feel precious rather than optional?
- How can facing your record free you from pretense before God?

Question 5

Student Question:

Trace the account of the golden calf in 9:8–21. What were the people doing while Moses was on the mountain receiving the covenant, and what did Moses do with the tablets and the calf?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Moses retells the golden calf with painful detail. While he was on the mountain receiving the tablets “written with the finger of God”, the people had “turned aside quickly out of the way” and made a metal image (9:10–12,16). At the very moment God was binding Himself to them in covenant, they were breaking it at the foot of the mountain.

Moses’ response is dramatic. He took the two tablets and “threw them out of my two hands and broke them before your eyes” (9:17), a visible enactment that the covenant had already been shattered by their sin. Then he took the calf, “burned it with fire and crushed it, grinding it very small”, and scattered the dust on the water (9:21). The idol was utterly destroyed.

Between these acts stands Moses’ intercession: forty days and forty nights fallen before the Lord, pleading, “lest the Lord destroy you” (9:18–19,25). The account is a portrait of sin’s seriousness and of mercy’s reach. Israel deserved destruction; Moses stood in the gap; God relented.

This rehearsal serves the chapter’s main point. The very people about to cross the Jordan are the people who made the calf. Their record disqualifies any claim to righteousness and magnifies the mercy that carries them forward. We see here both how grievous idolatry is to God and how patiently He bears with a covenant people for His name’s sake.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Covenant broken at the moment it was being given
- The seriousness of idolatry before a holy God
- Moses breaking the tablets as a visible sign
- The total destruction of the idol

- Intercession standing between sin and judgment

Discussion Prompts

- What were the people doing while Moses received the covenant?
- Why did Moses break the tablets rather than simply set them down?
- What does the destruction of the calf teach about dealing with sin?

Question 6

Student Question:

Moses fell before the Lord forty days and forty nights, eating no bread and drinking no water, interceding for the people (9:18,25). When have you carried someone before God like that, and whom might He be calling you to plead for now?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Twice Moses describes prostrating himself before the Lord forty days and forty nights, “I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all the sin that you had committed” (9:18,25). This is intercession with the whole self poured out, a man laying his own comfort aside to plead for people who had wronged God deeply.

Most of us pray for others in passing, but Moses shows a costlier kind of prayer, the kind that fasts, that lingers, that refuses to give up. He even offers to be blotted out himself rather than see the people destroyed (Exodus 32:32). Such love for the undeserving foreshadows the heart of the great Intercessor to come.

The invitation here is personal. Whom are you carrying before God? Is there a wandering child, a hardened friend, a divided family, a struggling congregation that the Lord is laying on your heart? Intercession is one of the deepest forms of love, and it is open to every believer who will give the time and the tears.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Costly, sustained intercession
- Praying for those who do not deserve it
- Self-sacrifice in love for others
- Foreshadowing of Christ’s intercession
- The believer’s calling to bear others before God

Discussion Prompts

- What made Moses’ intercession costly rather than casual?
- Whom is God laying on your heart to plead for right now?
- How does Moses’ love for a rebellious people point us to Christ?

Question 7

Student Question:

What do Moses' intercessory prayers in 9:26–29 and 10:10 reveal about the grounds on which he appeals to God, and what does that teach us about how God deals with His people?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Moses recounts the very words of his prayer: “O Lord God, do not destroy your people and your heritage, whom you have redeemed through your greatness, whom you have brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (9:26–27). He does not appeal to Israel's worthiness. He appeals to what God has already done and to the promise God has already made.

He even anticipates what the nations would say if God destroyed Israel: “Because the Lord was not able to bring them into the land... he has brought them out to put them to death in the wilderness” (9:28). Moses pleads for the honor of God's own name. And in 10:10 he records that “the Lord listened to me that time also; the Lord was unwilling to destroy you”.

This teaches us how God deals with His people. The grounds of His mercy lie in His redemption, His promise, and His name, not in the merit of those He spares. Mercy is not earned upward by the people; it flows downward from the character of God. That is steady ground, because it does not shift with our performance.

The same pattern runs to the cross. We are forgiven for His name's sake (1 John 2:12) and held by His faithfulness, not our flawless record. Moses' prayer is a window into the unchanging way God saves: by remembering His covenant and acting for His glory and His people's good.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Appeal to God's redemption rather than human merit
- The promise to the fathers as the ground of mercy
- Concern for the honor of God's name
- Mercy flowing from God's character
- The steadiness of grace that does not depend on us

Discussion Prompts

- On what grounds does Moses appeal to God in his prayer?
- Why does Moses mention what the nations would say?
- How does it steady you that mercy rests on God's name, not your record?

Question 8

Student Question:

In 10:12–13 Moses asks what the Lord requires: to fear Him, walk in His ways, love Him, and serve Him with all the heart. Which of these is hardest for you right now, and why?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

After the long account of sin and mercy, Moses turns to the heart of the matter: “And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (10:12–13). Fear, walk, love, serve. These are not four separate religions but one whole-hearted life turned toward God.

It is worth pausing on each. To fear is to hold God in reverent awe. To walk in His ways is daily obedience. To love is affection that delights in Him. To serve with all the heart is wholehearted devotion, not divided or grudging. Together they describe a life given over to God rather than rationed out to Him.

Honesty helps here. Most of us find one of these harder than the others. Some struggle to feel love and reduce faith to duty; others love the idea of God but resist daily obedience; others fear Him but withhold the heart. Naming which is hardest is the first step toward asking God to grow it in us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Fear, walking, love, and service as one whole life
- Reverent awe toward God
- Daily obedience as walking in His ways
- Wholehearted rather than divided devotion
- Naming our particular area of resistance

Discussion Prompts

- Which of the four, fear, walk, love, serve, is hardest for you?
- How are these four meant to work together as one life?
- What would wholehearted service look like in your week?

Question 9

Student Question:

In 10:16 Moses commands, “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn”, set within a passage that grounds Israel’s standing in God’s oath and mercy rather than their merit (9:4–6; 10:14–15). What does this whole section teach about righteousness as God’s gift rather than human achievement, and how is that truth carried forward in Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question gathers the whole lesson, because the command in 10:16, “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn”, sits inside a passage that has already settled the question of standing. Back in 9:4–6 Moses denied three times that Israel possessed the land by their righteousness, naming instead the wickedness of the nations and the oath to the fathers. Then in 10:14–15 he widens the lens: “Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heavens of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. Yet the Lord set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them”. The God who owns everything needed nothing from Israel; He set His love on them freely. Standing, therefore, is gift from first to last.

Notice carefully what this does and does not mean. It does not mean Israel was passive or that obedience did not matter; the very next breath calls them to circumcise their hearts, fear the Lord, love Him, and care for the sojourner (10:16–19). Grace and obedience are not enemies. But the order is everything: mercy comes first and obedience answers it. Israel does not obey in order to earn a standing; they obey because God has already, by sheer grace, made them His. To reverse that order is to fall back into the very self-righteousness 9:4–6 forbids.

Righteousness here is revealed as God’s gift rather than human achievement, and the circumcised heart is the inward reality God Himself works in His people. Strikingly, Deuteronomy later promises that “the Lord your God will circumcise your heart” (30:6), so that even the obedience God commands is finally something He enables. Human merit is excluded as the basis of acceptance; what God requires, He also graciously works. This is the consistent witness of Scripture, that no one is justified before God by his own record (Psalm 143:2; Romans 3:20).

Carried forward into Christ, this truth becomes the gospel itself. Paul writes that God “saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy” (Titus 3:5), and that we are saved by grace through faith, “not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9). The true circumcision is now of the heart, “by the Spirit, not by the letter” (Romans 2:28–29; Philippians 3:3). We must be careful not to read the later details of life in Christ back into Israel’s day; yet the principle blazes across both covenants unchanged: God receives sinners by His mercy and promise, never as wages owed to human goodness.

And lest grace be mistaken for license, remember that this same grace summons a response and can be spurned. The God who freely chose Israel still called them to circumcise their hearts and warned that stubborn rebellion brings ruin. The New Testament likewise insists that those received by grace must hold fast and not fall away (Hebrews 3:12–14; Galatians 5:4). Grace is not a transaction we complete and forget; it is a relationship of mercy received and faithfully kept. We rest in His mercy, and precisely because we rest there, we love and obey Him with all our heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Righteousness as God’s gift, not human achievement (9:4–6)
- God owning all yet freely setting His love on Israel (10:14–15)
- The right order: mercy first, obedience in response

- The circumcised heart as inward reality God works (30:6)
- Fulfillment in Christ: saved by mercy and grace, not works (Titus 3:5; Ephesians 2:8–9)
- True circumcision of the heart by the Spirit (Romans 2:28–29)
- Grace summons a faithful response and can be spurned (Hebrews 3:12–14)

Discussion Prompts

- How do 9:4–6 and 10:14–15 establish that Israel's standing was gift, not merit?
- Why is the order of mercy first and obedience second so important?
- How is the circumcised heart fulfilled in Christ and worked by the Spirit?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back across Deuteronomy 9 and 10, name one specific way the Lord is using this passage to form humility in you and to teach you to rest in His mercy rather than your own record.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

These two chapters move from a warning against self-righteousness, through the wreckage of the golden calf, to a tender call to fear, love, and serve the Lord and to love the sojourner because Israel themselves were once sojourners (10:19). The thread that holds it all together is mercy: undeserved, promised, and life-changing.

The Lord uses this passage to form humility in us. When we stop reading our blessings as wages and start receiving them as gifts, pride loosens its grip and gratitude takes its place. We come to God with empty, open hands rather than an invoice, and that posture changes how we pray, how we serve, and how we treat the struggling people around us.

Jesus is the one in whom all of this comes home. He is the true Intercessor who pleaded for sinners, the one through whom righteousness becomes a gift, the one who circumcises hearts by His Spirit. As you close this lesson, name one concrete way He is teaching you to rest in His mercy rather than your record, and let that rest spill over into love for someone who has not earned it from you.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Mercy as the unifying thread of the passage
- Humility replacing the accounting of merit
- Gratitude reshaping prayer and service
- Love for the outsider rooted in remembered mercy
- Christ as Intercessor and giver of righteousness

Discussion Prompts

- What one truth from these chapters do you most need to carry forward?
- How is Jesus teaching you to rest in mercy rather than record?
- Whom can you love this week the way mercy has loved you?