

JUSTICE AND FAIRNESS

DEVOTIONAL READING: Exodus 23:1-12

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Exodus 23

TODAY'S SCRIPTURE: Exodus 23:1-12

I. Justice in Court and Home

Exodus 23:1-8

1 Thou shalt not raise a false report: put not thine hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness.

2 Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil; neither shalt thou speak in a cause to decline after many to wrest judgment:

3 Neither shalt thou countenance a poor man in his cause.

4 If thou meet thine enemy's ox or his ass going astray, thou shalt surely bring it back to him again.

5 If thou see the ass of him that hateth thee lying under his burden, and wouldest forbear to help him, thou shalt surely help with him.

6 Thou shalt not wrest the judgment of thy poor in his cause.

7 Keep thee far from a false matter; and the innocent and righteous slay thou not: for I will not justify the wicked.

8 And thou shalt take no gift: for the gift blindeth the wise, and perverteth the words of the righteous.

1. The first law in the chain prohibits giving a *false report* in court. The first clause of the verse offers a general command against lying such as would harm another person while the second clause addresses a subset of the first clause in forbidding conspiracy

to commit perjury. Cooperating with others to harm a third party undermines any justice system and leads to societal conflict and violence. When a legal system is corrupt, everyone eventually suffers.

2. The first clause states a general requirement: an ancient Israelite was not to determine correct behavior by what everyone else was doing. The specific reference may be to mob action; at the least it refers to a crowd mentality that perpetuated common prejudices that denied the divinely determined rights of others.

The meaning of the second clause is more obscure. The Hebrew verb translated *decline* occurs a second time, translated *wrest*, to create a memorable play on words that is difficult for translators.

3. The law forbids bending the legal system, even when it seems to level the playing field. Judges must decide cases solely on the evidence.

4. This verse and the next assume that people have enemies. In envisioning ideals, the law is also practical. Even when a person is hated, Israelites were not to hate and be vindictive in return. Jesus' call to pray for enemies and resist repaying evil for evil (Matthew 5:43-48) makes a general statement about a principle that was already in the law.

In agricultural societies like that of ancient Israel, beasts of burden provided la-

bor for plowing and threshing, dung for fuel, transportation for family members, etc. For a poor farming family, the loss of one such animal would create a major financial hardship. On the other hand, rustling allowed poor people to add to their assets at the expense of others.

5. The law depicted four phases of a decision-making process: (1) spotting an animal in difficulty, (2) realizing that it belonged to an enemy, (3) checking one's own motives, and (4) deciding to help despite the underlying personal relationship. The law did not state how the animal's owner might be identified as such. Was the owner present? Or did living in close quarters in the village make the identification possible? The law exhibited no concern for that detail; the law made an absolute demand on the Israelites. No matter how sorely tempted one was to avoid helping an enemy, concerns for the animal's welfare, societal harmony, and honoring God dictated giving assistance.

The last part of the verse can be interpreted in several ways. One interpretation might be "you shall *surely* leave [it] with him." The line implies that the person obedient to the law was not to take advantage of the animal's (and the enemy's) distress.

Jesus later built on this and similar laws in His disputes about doing good on the Sabbath. If Jesus' opponents would rescue a trapped animal on the Sabbath, how much more should they help a fellow human being (Matthew 12:9-14)?

6. While Exodus 23:3 banned the Israelites' favoring a *poor* person in legal proceedings merely because of his or her poverty, the verse before us forbids the opposite. Considered alongside Leviticus 19:15, God's rule is clear: that anyone involved in a dispute, especially a witness or a judge, must decide fairly without regard to external factors such as the socioeconomic status of the persons involved.

7a. People are often inclined to get as close as possible to the line separating truth telling from lying without actually crossing that line. Think of how often we have heard (and voiced) half-truths, or quotes of others out of context. And what about a lack of being forthcoming when questioned! But the command here broadly required an Israelite to stay *far* away *from* deception.

7b. This part of the verse moves from deceptive speaking to murder of those undeserving of death. By setting the two forbidden actions side by side, the verse reminds readers of the potential for abusive situations to escalate.

7c. This declaration offers a reason to keep God's laws. He had extended mercy to Israel by delivering them from heartless Egyptian slavery. Thus the Israelites dare not become a heartless society themselves. God will not cheapen His gift of redemption by turning a blind eye on wickedness.

8. Like intimidating witnesses or lying in open court, bribery can negatively affect the outcome of any dispute. The word translated *gift* appears 26 times across 24 verses in the Old Testament that results in injustice against an innocent party. Centuries later, prophets would complain often and loudly about judicial corruption traceable to bribery (Isaiah 1:23; Amos 5:12; etc.). Bribery can be thought of as purchasing a certain outcome in court. Such a "purchase" may go as far as ensuring the slaying of an innocent person. Thus these bribery texts imply the threat that this corrupt practice posed to the entire social structure of ancient Israel.

The verse before us is unusual, however, in its reason for avoiding bribery: such an action corrupts the very character of the ones involved. A judge receiving a bribe abandons the very qualification for being a judge: wisdom. A temporary advantage, gained to the detriment of others, can

corrode the very soul of the person gaining that advantage, as well as harming many others.

II. Justice in Economic Matters

Exodus 23:9-12

9 Also thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.

10 And six years thou shalt sow thy land, and shalt gather in the fruits thereof:

11 But the seventh year thou shalt let it rest and lie still; that the poor of thy people may eat: and what they leave the beasts of the field shall eat. In like manner thou shalt deal with thy vineyard, and with thy oliveyard.

12 Six days thou shalt do thy work, and on the seventh day thou shalt rest: that thine ox and thine ass may rest, and the son of thy handmaid, and the stranger, may be refreshed.

9a. The word *stranger* refers to someone who lives away from his or her homeland. In ancient Israel, as in most nations before modern times, the extended family was the basic unit of social organization. The migrant might have no support system.

9b. For this analogy to make sense, the hypothetical *stranger* in the first clause must be a non-Israelite. Many migrants must have been refugees, given the many wars in the history of the Middle East. Because Israel's collective memory centered around its experiences in Egyptian bondage, the core story of the Israelites—individually and collectively—had to show empathy toward similarly vulnerable people, honoring their divinely given rights.

Laws protecting foreigners appear several times in Exodus. The Ten Commandments protected them during the

observance of the Sabbath, when they also may rest (Exodus 20:10). Exodus 22:21-24 links them with widows and orphans as vulnerable people lacking family ties and, therefore, social protection.

10-11. It is unclear whether this law required all land to lie fallow in *the seventh year*, or if a rotation of crops should occur. Nor is it clear whether allowing the land to *rest* means not harvesting the field in addition to not even planting it.

The owners of the *land* should have stored a year's worth of food for their families, allowing any surpluses to go to *poor*, landless *people*. These three major food sources (for bread, wine, and olive oil), constituted the core of the Israelite diet, and so the law aimed at comprehensiveness. Relying on God's generosity for large parts of the food supply would allow those keeping the law to live in solidarity with each other regardless of income. They all must trust in God's care for them.

12. *Six days* here echoes the six years of verse 10. The law of the Sabbath Day (*the seventh day*) here returns to the theme of helping domesticated animals. In this instance, the help is *rest* rather than some other active intervention.

This text differs from the Sabbath laws in the Ten Commandments in two ways. First, the verse before us does not give a warrant for the law. And second, it does not command the recipient's family to rest. That latter point went without saying, while the former points to the fact that the Ten Commandments, despite their brevity, richly develop important details.

This version of the Sabbath law does name those members of the household most vulnerable to self-centered action on the part of the family head. So, *the son of a secondary wife* as well as *the stranger* living with the family had the right to rest just as much as did the citizens.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

JUSTICE AND FAIRNESS

Into the Lesson

Brainstorm six ways that people justify their actions by saying, “Everybody does it!” Then rank-order them from least to most harmful and give reasons.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

As we consider the challenge to be countercultural in honoring God, let’s stay alert to how that challenge may be broken down into issues of *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how*.

Into the Word

Look up the following references and write the commands in Exodus 23:1-12 that relate to the reference. Then provide scriptural examples of the law being obeyed or disregarded and what resulted from those attitudes and actions.

Exodus 20:8 _____

Exodus 20:13 _____

Exodus 20:15 _____

Exodus 20:16 _____

Leviticus 19:18 _____

Who and/or what benefits from the command to rest?

Is the issue of sabbath rest still valid in the new covenant era? Why, or why not?

If still valid, what forms would be appropriate for honoring it?

Would two half-days of rest be the same as one full day? Why, or why not?

Into Life

Which sins listed in today’s passage seem to trouble Christians the most? Why do you think that is?

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Drawing near to God requires caring for others.