

JUSTICE, JUDGES, AND PRIESTS

DEVOTIONAL READING: Deuteronomy 16:18-21; 17:8-13

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Deuteronomy 16:18-20; 17:8-13; 19:15-21

TODAY'S SCRIPTURE: Deuteronomy 16:18-20; 17:8-13

I. General Goals

Deuteronomy 16:18-20

18 Judges and officers shalt thou make thee in all thy gates, which the LORD thy God giveth thee, throughout thy tribes: and they shall judge the people with just judgment.

19 Thou shalt not wrest judgment; thou shalt not respect persons, neither take a gift: for a gift doth blind the eyes of the wise, and pervert the words of the righteous.

20 That which is altogether just shalt thou follow, that thou mayest live, and inherit the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.

18. Moses prescribed two groups of leaders for the community. The *judges* were those leaders tasked with exacting decisions of justice for the people. These individuals were considered leaders of the community and, as such, were often mentioned alongside the priests and the elders.

Officers served the people of Israel in a different fashion than judges. These individuals assisted the judges in providing leadership and just decision making for the people of God as they presented themselves before God.

Legal proceedings often took place at the *gates* of every town. These gates served as the center of the town's public life and

constituted the location where significant administrative and legal decisions were made. In essence, the gates were a public forum in which accountability to God's law was acknowledged by all.

19a. To *wrest* refers to the act of twisting, skewing, withholding, or distorting. In this case, it affects one's ability to practice right and fair judgment. Later texts describe individuals who withhold justice as being "cursed" (Deuteronomy 27:19).

The act of perverting justice was quite concerning for the needy individuals in the land, especially the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow.

19b. Administrators of justice were *not* to show undue partiality, or *respect* for *persons*, based on the social standing of those individuals. Scripture declares that all people are equal before God and, therefore, He does not show partiality, or favoritism (Deuteronomy 10:17; etc.). Therefore, the people of God are to demonstrate a life committed to showing impartial justice.

19c. Finally, administrators of justice must be wary of accepting a bribe, or a *gift*, lest their judgment become clouded. This is not the only instance where the people of God are called to avoid bribes. Moses warned Israel that a gift "blindeth *the wise*" and "perverteth *the words of the righteous*" (Exodus 23:8). Bribes and influencing gifts distorted the leader's

ability to judge rightly in the manner God required. When this occurred, justice became a commodity that could be bought and sold. Such individuals were called “wicked” as they “pervert the ways of judgment” (Proverbs 17:23).

Years later, the sons of Samuel would be appointed as Israel’s leaders (1 Samuel 8:1). However, the sons were more interested in receiving personal gain from the position than in exacting justice among the people (8:3).

20. The Hebrew words behind the phrase *that which is altogether just* read as the repetition of the Hebrew word for “just.” Repetition of a single word in this manner signifies the word’s magnitude and its importance for the reader or hearer. As a result, complete and absolute justice with no compromise must be the passion for all God’s people.

As Israel and its leaders made efforts to *follow* the just living that God required, a positive consequence would be their continued residence in *the land* given to them by God. Their ability to *live* in and *inherit* the promised land had nothing to do with their own virtue; it was a matter of making the Lord’s priorities *their* priorities. As Israel made justice a priority, God’s priorities for justice became Israel’s top priority.

II. Specific Challenges

Deuteronomy 17:8-13

8 If there arise a matter too hard for thee in judgment, between blood and blood, between plea and plea, and between stroke and stroke, being matters of controversy within thy gates: then shalt thou arise, and get thee up into the place which the LORD thy God shall choose;

9 And thou shalt come unto the priests the Levites, and unto the judge that shall be in those days, and enquire; and they shall shew thee the sentence of judgment:

10 And thou shalt do according to the sentence, which they of that place which the LORD shall choose shall shew thee; and thou shalt observe to do according to all that they inform thee:

11 According to the sentence of the law which they shall teach thee, and according to the judgment which they shall tell thee, thou shalt do: thou shalt not decline from the sentence which they shall shew thee, to the right hand, nor to the left.

12 And the man that will do presumptuously, and will not hearken unto the priest that standeth to minister there before the LORD thy God, or unto the judge, even that man shall die: and thou shalt put away the evil from Israel.

13 And all the people shall hear, and fear, and do no more presumptuously.

8. In especially challenging instances, Moses prescribed the steps and actions for those making *judgment* in a legal *matter*. The use of *thee* refers to local judges who were unable to resolve a particularly controversial or challenging legal case.

In these situations, the involved parties were to *arise* and go to the location chosen by *God*. The exact identity of the involved parties is unclear and could include either the tribunal of judges or the parties of the dispute. Previous precedent suggests that it was the duty of the local judges to take this step and confer at the indicated location (compare Exodus 18:13-20).

This *place* was mentioned previously in more detail as a place of sacredness—a place where the Lord would “put his name” (Deuteronomy 12:5). In that place, in what became a central sanctuary, the Israelites offered their sacrifices, tithes, special gifts, and vows. This location served Israel not only for its legal needs but also for its sacred and ceremonial needs.

9. For these challenging cases, the Le-

vitical priests and the judge provided the final ruling. The exact identity of the judge is unknown. The person's position likely came from a precedent made by Moses years before (Exodus 18:13-20).

Priests were *Levites*, members of the tribe of Levi. These individuals guided the religious practice of Israel by officiating times of worship, teaching the stipulations of the Law of Moses, and guiding the proper actions of life—even as related to health—within the community of God's people. Unlike other tribes of Israel, Levites owned no land, but lived on properties donated by the Israelites.

The involvement of these leaders with seemingly “nonreligious” judicial cases might seem inappropriate from a modern perspective. However, Old Testament Israel had the singular responsibility to follow God's laws in every realm of life. Because of the all-encompassing nature of their covenant relationship with God, there was no distinction between sacred and secular.

The Levitical priests and the judge made their *sentence of judgment* based on their understanding of civil and criminal law, thereby acting as leaders of God's covenant people.

10. Whatever *sentence* the judges and Levites render, the involved parties must abide by those decisions. Their decision was final! The reminder that their verdict occurred in *that place which the Lord shall choose* reinforces the sacredness of that location and the decisions made there.

11. Moses emphasized strict obedience to *the judgment* provided by the judges and Levites. All parties involved were not to deviate from that decision.

Elsewhere, Moses described obedience to God's law in similar terms, exhorting Israel to “observe to do . . . as the Lord your God hath commanded you: ye shall not turn aside *to the right hand or to the left*” (Deuteronomy 5:32). The pointed counsel

prepared hearers for a solemn warning if they failed to adhere to Moses' guidelines.

12. The individual who defied the ruling of *the judge* or *the priest* was described as acting *presumptuously*. The Hebrew word behind this term describes an individual acting out of pride or haughtiness of heart. These defiant individuals acted pridefully as they disregarded the given judgment of the ordained leadership who *minister there before the Lord*.

Such defiance and contempt also brought harm to the community of Israel. Upon an initial inspection, that the defiant individual shall *die* seems harsh or disproportionate to the initial act that brought them to this place. However, the following line indicates the measures the community was required to take to protect *Israel* from *evil*.

Israel's law described other instances that necessitated capital punishment (among others), such as a rebellion against God, a false prophet, or an insubordinate family member. In these instances, the primary concern was that the people of God maintained holiness in their covenant relationship and that evil no longer polluted the covenanted people.

13. The harsh actions of the previous verse were revealed to have another, more communal function: as a deterrent to any further *presumptuous* behavior.

Fear of such punishment served as a powerful motivation for avoiding the conduct resulting in that degree of disciplinary action. God required that His people live justly. He had strong consequences for those who refused to live in that manner or who distracted others from that same quest for justice.

The Old Testament *does* record numerous examples of how justice became disregarded by those in power, a problem that the Lord's prophets called attention to when they saw it happening.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

JUSTICE, JUDGES, AND PRIESTS

Into the Lesson

Consider a television show or movie that feature a judge as a central figure. Does this judge exhibit the character you think is appropriate for a judge? How is that character revealed in the judge's treatment of people and in decisions rendered?

Into the Word

Read Deuteronomy 16:18-20 and 17:8-13. Describe the characteristics of an ideal judge based on these verses.

Using these points, what would be an appropriate campaign slogan and platform for electing a hypothetical judge to office?

Into Life

What positions in the church are most like that of the judges of ancient Israel (as described in the lesson text, not as in the book of Judges)?

What similarities cause you to reach that conclusion?

How are the positions different and what accounts for those differences?

List up to five friends who possess qualities noted in the text. Make this your list of go-to advisers when you face situations that are too difficult to resolve on your own.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER
No one is exempt from practicing justice!