

JUSTICE AND THE MARGINALIZED

DEVOTIONAL READING: Deuteronomy 24:10-21

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Deuteronomy 24:10-21

TODAY'S SCRIPTURE: Deuteronomy 24:10-21

I. Just Lending

Deuteronomy 24:10-13

10 When thou dost lend thy brother any thing, thou shalt not go into his house to fetch his pledge.

11 Thou shalt stand abroad, and the man to whom thou dost lend shall bring out the pledge abroad unto thee.

12 And if the man be poor, thou shalt not sleep with his pledge:

13 In any case thou shalt deliver him the pledge again when the sun goeth down, that he may sleep in his own raiment, and bless thee: and it shall be righteousness unto thee before the LORD thy God.

10-11. Moses described a situation in which a *brother*—a fellow Israelite—needed a loan. Elsewhere, the law forbade Israelites from charging interest on loans made to other Israelites (Exodus 22:25).

However, lenders were allowed to receive collateral, or a *pledge*, as security for a loan. Even then, certain restrictions remained for what lenders could take as a pledge; taking as a pledge a person's method of livelihood was forbidden.

To maintain the borrower's dignity, the lender was not permitted to enter the borrower's *house*. Instead, the lender was required to stay outside the borrower's dwelling, allowing the borrower

to *bring out the pledge*. In this situation, the borrower controlled what was offered as pledge, with dignity and respect maintained.

12. The law added extra clarification for loans made to *poor* individuals. Such lending stipulations were required because of the extra vulnerability poor individuals may have faced. Furthermore, the law specifically prohibited lenders from charging interest on loans in these situations.

13. Additionally, lenders were limited on what could be done with a *pledge* of a borrower's clothing (*raiment*). If that was all a poor individual could provide as a pledge, then the lender was prohibited from keeping it overnight; the clothing had to be returned by sunset. This limitation protected the borrower's health during the night. Lenders were to be gracious in their lending practices because God is gracious (Exodus 22:27; Psalm 116:5).

The lender's act resulted in two outcomes. First, the borrower would *bless* the lender. One can picture the borrower, preparing for a good night's sleep, offering a prayer of thanksgiving to God.

Second, the lender's gesture would be judged by the *Lord* and deemed as *righteousness*. Such acts were considered right standing in God's eyes and conformed to the demands of God's law and covenant. God desired His people to live in this

manner because His own nature is one of righteousness and justice. Lending practices as prescribed by the law served as an example of the just and equitable actions the Lord wants His people to pursue, especially toward the marginalized.

II. Just Labor

Deuteronomy 24:14-15

14 Thou shalt not oppress an hired servant that is poor and needy, whether he be of thy brethren, or of thy strangers that are in thy land within thy gates:

15 At his day thou shalt give him his hire, neither shall the sun go down upon it; for he is poor, and setteth his heart upon it: lest he cry against thee unto the LORD, and it be sin unto thee.

14a. The concern for justice among the *poor and needy* extended to hired hands. After their experience of slavery in Egypt, Israelites were not permitted to be sold as slaves (Leviticus 25:42). However, an Israelite who experienced economic difficulty to the point of losing everything might serve other Israelites as a *hired servant*, or “sojourner” (25:35). Such individuals had the expectation of eventually receiving freedom. The status of such a person is sometimes known as indentured servant.

14b. Prescriptions to protect hired hands were enacted to maintain the economic livelihood, dignity, and ability of impoverished individuals, *brethren* or not, to continue to live among the people of God.

God’s people, however, were not to mistreat these individuals. Even in (or especially in) hiring and working practices, God’s people were to practice justice. The most obvious way to do so was through the timely deliverance of wages (next verse).

15a. Workers were paid for their labors at the end of an agreed time of work. However, the hired worker who was *poor* was to receive their agreed upon wages

at the end of each day, before *the sun go down*. This worker, perhaps living a hand-to-mouth existence, depended on such timely pay to provide for daily necessities.

15b. If workers were treated unjustly, it would be within their power to *cry out unto the Lord* for help and justice. As failing to return a poor person’s pledge at the end of the day would be considered unrighteous, withholding pay from a poor person at the end of the day would be considered a *sin*.

III. Just Community

Deuteronomy 24:16-18

16 The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin.

17 Thou shalt not pervert the judgment of the stranger, nor of the fatherless; nor take a widow’s raiment to pledge:

18 But thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in Egypt, and the LORD thy God redeemed thee thence: therefore I command thee to do this thing.

16. The principle described here stands in contrast to other law codes of the ancient world. The Babylonian law code of Hammurabi prescribed that if a builder built a house that collapsed, causing the death of the homeowner’s son, the builder’s son was to be put to death.

However, this principle does not contradict what is found elsewhere regarding God’s “visiting the iniquity of the *fathers* upon the *children* unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me” (Deuteronomy 5:9). While each person will surely experience the consequences of their *sin*, the repercussions of those sins are often experienced by others. We may think of a parent today who is sent to prison for a crime, with side effects of

their family suffering destabilization in their relationships.

17. All Israelites were tasked with looking out for the marginalized and the defenseless among them. The Hebrew words translated *stranger*, *fatherless*, and *widow* occur together in triads in 11 verses in the book of Deuteronomy, emphasizing God's concern for these vulnerable people.

To *take a widow's raiment to pledge* is in the same category as taking the garment of a poor man—*forbidden*. Lenders who had taken such garments in pledge sometimes worsened the offense by taking those items to pagan worship (see Amos 2:8).

God desires justice for needy individuals and His people are to desire the same. Following God's commands for just living requires extra attention to vulnerable people.

18. Moses reminded this generation of Israelites of their history in the land of *Egypt*. God's redemptive act was the foundation for Israel's identity.

The corporate memory of that bondage and their following redemption was to motivate the Israelites to compassionate treatment of the marginalized. That would happen as the Israelites remembered their own suffering and marginalization as slaves in Egypt. To treat others as they had been treated by God was the watchword for Israel. They were to remember that *God redeemed* them from that situation and provided justice where injustice reigned.

IV. Just Harvest

Deuteronomy 24:19-21

19 When thou cuttest down thine harvest in thy field, and hast forgot a sheaf in the field, thou shalt not go again to fetch it: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow: that the LORD thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hands.

20 When thou beatest thine olive tree, thou shalt not go over the boughs

again: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow.

21 When thou gatherest the grapes of thy vineyard, thou shalt not glean it afterward: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow.

19a. In addition to justice in lending practices, justice to the vulnerable was also to be seen in agrarian practices at *harvest* time. Often the poorer Israelites would work in the fields during the annual harvest time. The work of harvesting was completed with a hand sickle, cutting bundles of grain and binding each into a *sheaf*. Written in terms of what the landowner *hast forgot* should have encouraged the underprivileged to boldness in retrieving the grain accidentally left behind. There should have been no worry that the landowner would later demand it back.

Furthermore, the law made clear that the edges of the fields be left unharvested and only a single harvest occur so that “the poor and *stranger*” might harvest from the fields for their own sustenance (Leviticus 19:9-10; 23:22). This legislation is seen enacted in the narrative of Ruth, a foreign widow who gleaned the leftover grain from the fields of her relative (Ruth 1:22–2:3).

19b. The phrase *that the Lord thy God may bless thee* occurs three times in the book of Deuteronomy. In all three cases, God's blessing is contingent on meeting the needs of others. The Lord will bless those who honor His laws and treat the marginalized with respect and compassion.

20-21. Grape and olive crops were often planted together using a method called polyculture, the practice of growing several crops side by side.

Harvesting olives required that a harvester beat the *boughs* of the olive *trees*. Any olives remaining on the branches were to be left for the *stranger*, the *fatherless*, and the *widow*.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

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Into the Lesson

Receive a playing card from your teacher, but don't look at it. Hold the card against your forehead so others can see the card, but you can't. Discern your card's relative "value" based on the way others treat you as you mingle; card values are not to be discussed directly. Describe your experience:

Society tends to define people's value by outward appearances and status symbols. But let's see if that lines up with how God calls us to treat one another.

Into the Word

Read Deuteronomy 24:10-21. What are the examples of exploitation and of honoring others in this Scripture?

What are modern-day examples of exploitation?

What are modern-day examples of honoring others?

How has the vulnerability of the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow changed since Old Testament times, if at all?

Read Deuteronomy 24:16. How does this prohibition relate to the other commands before and after it?

Into Life

Brainstorm local organizations that can provide guidance and opportunities for appropriate service, then make contact throughout the week.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Remembering how God has treated us should always govern how we treat others.