

June 5, 2022

“Practice Justice”  
Lesson 1 of Unit

Exodus 23:1-9

**Intro**

In our world, there are frequent calls for public officials to act justly, to enact “justice”. Christians have to use discernment in these calls for justice, even if the person calling for it claims to be doing it from a godly perspective or intent. Maybe even more so with those who claim this godly perspective. Justice can be sought using the world’s political means, and some get so frustrated with it all that they ignore political concerns altogether.

God’s people make their most fundamental contribution to justice when they order their personal lives, for all the world to see, according to God’s standards. Today’s passage deals with various laws / commands that God gives his people. Some might see them as a legalistic way of achieving righteousness: Do the things that God says to do and you’re right with Him. That’s not an accurate view of what God intended with these laws. They were instead God’s way of forming a special people who would get the attention of the world by the way they were faithful to God’s will. These verses consider the everyday practice of justice.

**Read Exodus 23:1-9**

1. vs. 1: This verse deal with the legal system

This time period didn’t have video, fingerprinting, and DNA testing

The legal system relied mostly on eyewitness testimony

The biggest threat to eyewitness testimony is someone giving a false report

Why would someone do this?

Perhaps someone convinces them it’s in “the best interest” to alter their testimony

Perhaps some have even been bribed (see vs. 8)

God here says that false reports “help a wicked man”

The wicked man could be the accused doer of the action

He could also be one who is persuading the witness to alter their story

2. vs. 2: This verse deals with peer pressure—“Do not follow the crowd”

Following the crowd is specifically linked to giving testimony

Everyone thinks *this*, so a person feels pressure to testify they same way

God says, “Do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd”

This implies that the witness changes their story to go along with the crowd

This also implies that the person knows and wants to tell a different story

“Going along with the crowd” prevents scorn and ridicule

It keeps one “in the group”

But that isn’t what God wants from His people

He wants them to act justly, to do what’s right

They are to be different from the crowd where right and wrong are at stake

3. vs. 3: God cares for the poor—this is shown repeatedly throughout Scripture

See Lev. 19:9-10 and James 2:1-4

The poor are vulnerable in the legal system because they lack money

They can't influence judges or witnesses

In our day, they can't afford the best attorneys

Yet here, God says true justice doesn't show favoritism to the poor

God's system is not one that favors the poor, but favors none

A guilty person is a guilty person in God's eyes, rich or poor

4. vs. 4-5: God's instruction here move from the legal system to daily lives

He instructs His people to do good for an enemy

"take {your enemy's ox} back to him"

--this is if it is seen wandering, or if it is struggling with a load

The person to be helped here is an enemy

The natural tendency is to not help them, to see their problems as "just desserts"

Jesus said to pray for those who persecute you

God is saying the same thing here in the OT

We are not to just avoid evil, but overcome evil with good (Rom.12:17-21—which is quoting Prov. 25:21-22)

We are called to act out godliness for the good of all, even if they are enemies

5. vs. 6: This verse connects to vs.4-5.

God has just said don't show favoritism to the poor because they're poor

Now He says "Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits"

God makes it very clear that justice is unbiased—it does not allow for "leaving"

Our textbook has this comment regarding this verse:

*"The economic, cultural, and political forces of sinful society may place certain parties at a disadvantage. To do nothing to correct this is to displease God. A system that reflects God's justice will be sensitive to abuses of the legal system so that injustices that are normal in the world will not be seen as normal among God's people."*

Within the church, we are called to honor one another (Rom. 12:10)

We are not seeking power or influence, but to please God

6. vs. 7: God warns His people here not to have anything to do with falsehoods

"Have nothing to do with a false charge"

Could be giving false witness, or merely agreeing to a charge known to be false

Doing anything known to be false is rejecting and opposing the truth

God specifically notes the potential outcome of this action

"do not put an innocent or honest person to death"

God's people are called to follow Him, and He says to not connect to falsehoods

The consequences for doing so are serious:

"I will not acquit the guilty"

7. vs. 8: God here centers in on bribes:

“Do not accept a bribe”

A bribe has two negative consequences here:

First, it “blinds those who see”

This means the bribe causes the one getting it not to notice something that the briber doesn’t want them to pay attention to

The innocence of an accused person

Another business that is in competition

Second, it “twists the words of the righteous”

A bribe causes the one receiving it to speak with “twisted” words

They don’t/won’t say what is true, because of the bribe given

Receiving bribes is as sinful as giving them

Both sides are participating in deception (see Deut. 16:19, 27:25)

The one giving the bribe may entice by saying, “Look what good you can do with this money”

Any “good” that may be done is tainted by the bribe itself

It can happen that a righteous person deceives themselves into accepting a bribe for “good” reasons

8. vs. 9: God here reminds His people that justice is to be given to the alien as well

“Do not oppress an alien”

The people living in the land were all to live according to the same standard:

God’s standard of justice

People who were once oppressed should remember how it feels and not repeat it

They are not to become the new oppressor

We are “aliens and strangers” living in a land that doesn’t accept Christ

We know what it’s like to be an alien and be mistreated

We need to make sure that “aliens” who come to church are not made to feel like foreigners, but as welcome guests

Application: In these verses, God gives His people Israel a series of commands about how to live out justice in their lives. We might live in various countries, but the body of believers are really citizens of a different nation—a heavenly one. Our king has called us to live life as He has commanded. In the NT, both Jesus and the other writers point out that our behaviors are to be just like those commanded in Exodus 23:

be hospitable to strangers (Heb. 13:2)

love our enemies (Matt. 5:44)

see to the needs of the poor (Gal. 2:10)

avoid wrong partnerships (2 Cor. 6:14, James 4:4)

resist showing partiality to the wealthy (I Tim 5:21-22, James 2:1-9)

We are called to live by God’s standard of justice

Prayer: Father God, thank You for showing us what Your standard of justice is, so we can avoid one which is faulty. Thank You for giving us Your laws and teachings about justice, so we can live those out in our daily lives. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

