

Unit II: God: The Source of Justice

Unbiased Actions

DEVOTIONAL READING: 1 Peter 3:8-12

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Exodus 23

PRINT PASSAGE: Exodus 23:1-12

KEY VERSES

Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil; neither shalt thou speak in a cause to decline after many to wrest judgment: neither shalt thou countenance a poor man in his cause. (Exodus 23:2-3, KJV)

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“Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd, and do not show favoritism to a poor person in a lawsuit.” (Exodus 23:2-3, NIV)

Lesson Aims

As a result of experiencing this lesson, you should be able to do these things:

- Remember that God expects believers to care for others.
- Aspire to be impartial in showing justice and mercy.
- Practice helping those who are in need.

*Key Terms

False Report(s) (verse 1)—Hebrew: *shav* (shawv): deception(s); falsehood(s); lie(s).

Oppress (verse 9)—Hebrew: *lachats* (lawkhats’): to press, squeeze; crush or burden by abuse of power.

Perverts (verse 8)—Hebrew: *salaph* (saw-laf’): overturns; “twists” (NIV); “perverteth” (KJV).

*(Word Study Supplement—Refer to page 2)

Introduction

Biases are prejudices in favor of or against one thing, person, or group (and usually in an unfair manner). We have either experienced prejudice or are guilty of allowing prejudices to dictate our relationships. Among believers, biases about doctrine, worship, and preferred styles of music have infiltrated congregations and caused schisms and the loss of loving Christian fellowship. Biases also feed acts of social injustice. Various “levels” of society, age groups, and those who are culturally and ethnically diverse from the mainstream culture are targeted for mistreatment because of ill-founded biases against them. The justice system is one area where biases are recognizable. Harsher sentences are often experienced for identical or lesser crimes



The Biblical Context

Exodus 20–24 contains the Ten Commandments (20:1-26) and the civil and religious laws of Israel (21:1–24:18). The Ten Commandments were God's instructions that were to govern Israel's covenant relationship with Him and with each other. The first four (20:1-11) detail the basis of this relationship. God expected Israel to acknowledge and obey Him because of who He is. The last six (20:12-17) spell out the requirements for and responsibilities to family, neighbors, and communities. Living as God expected was to be vertical (honoring God) and then horizontal (honoring others). A proper relationship with Him determines how we relate to others. Exodus 23:1-12, the focus passage, is an application of the ninth and fourth commandments. Specific principles detail how to execute justice and mercy in Israel's courts and toward neighbors (23:1-9) and the proper observance of the Sabbath (23:10-12). The focus on Sabbath expands to include principles governing the use of land as a blessing to the poor and animals. The basis for the Ten Commandments and each of these laws is God Himself (Exodus 20:1-2). They are still essential for a just society today.

because of the ethnicity of the offenders. Fair treatment of others—social justice for all—was and is God's expectation. How we treat each other does matter to God, and we are accountable to Him for failing to follow His standards for social justice and equity. God set Israel apart from other nations to be His special ambassadors among them to promote and model His standards of just treatment in Canaan. Exodus 20 and the subsequent chapters provide details and examples of God's commandments to His people regarding fair and unbiased treatment among themselves and toward others.

ANALYSIS OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

Uphold the Truth (*Exodus 23:1-3*)

KJV

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.

NIV

“DO NOT spread *false reports*. Do not help a guilty

person by being a malicious witness.

2 “Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd,

3 “and do not show favoritism to a poor person in a lawsuit.”

If the nation of Israel was to be the example of the kind of just society God wanted, then they would have to live the principles He established in His laws among themselves. The key to a just society is its legal system. It must be one characterized by upholding unbiased truth. The ninth commandment (see Exodus 20:16) prohibiting “bearing false witness” against one's neighbor is the foundational principle. It could simply read, “Do not lie” (**verse 1**). This commandment is broken in several ways in the courts (**verses 2-3**): accepting bribes to falsify evidence; yielding to the pressure of those attempting to subvert justice; and showing favoritism to the poor who were guilty of some crime. This third perversion of justice could be applied to the rich and those considered powerful in society. Bearing false witness or lying is definitely detrimental to any legal system—but its scope is much broader. When believers slander, gossip, sow ideas intended to harm others, share others' faults without their knowledge, and attempt to deceive others for gain or profit, they are guilty of bearing false witness (being liars). Today's society is “diseased” with bearing false witness at all levels (and even among Christians). Lying is a specific sin that God hates. The Bible teaches that all liars will be judged: “A false witness shall not be unpunished, and he that speaketh lies shall perish” (Proverbs 19:9; see

also Romans 1:29-30, 32; Psalm 101:5; Revelation 21:8). The sad truth is that everyone is guilty of lying in some form. There is deception even in being silent and withholding truth when we should speak to uphold the truth. What is the solution to dealing with this sin? It involves confession, repentance, and working to become progressively more like Christ, the model of absolute truth (see John 14:6).

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

What specific role can believers take to ensure more equitable justice in our legal systems?

Fair Treatment for All (*Exodus 23:4-9*)

KJV

- 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.
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.

NIV

- 4 "If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to return it.
5 "If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help them with it.
6 "Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits.
7 "Have nothing to do with a false charge and do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty.
8 "Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds those who see and *twists* the words of the innocent.
9 "Do not *oppress* a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt."

God's requirement to practice unbiased actions and attitudes extended beyond Israel's legal system; He commanded the fair treatment of their enemies as well (**verses 4-5**). An "enemy," in this context, may refer to a legal adversary—but the expectation was not to withhold justice nor take revenge on their livestock. Believers are to avoid the "you kill my dog, I'll kill your cat" payback mentality. This particular law required returning an enemy's lost property if found and helping that person as needed. Helping an enemy is difficult, to say the least, but is expected of believers. Doing so requires demonstrating agape love, which is only possible when one is rightly related to God. Any deliberate perversion of justice was strictly forbidden, including denying it to the poor, bringing false charges against the innocent, executing them based on fraudulent charges, and mistreating foreigners or strangers living among them (**verses 6-9**). Israel was repeatedly reminded of her oppressive experiences as strangers and slaves in Egypt to motivate her to show compassion and empathy to strangers in her midst. These principles were commands to Israel but apply to believers now. Literally and vicariously, believers are experiencing perversions of justice in this country. In response, the responsibility is to use the power of the vote supported by prayer to ensure

that men and women of integrity sit in our courts and are part of other areas of the legal system. Believers are also to be models of unselfish concern for others, even enemies and those who are culturally and ethnically different. The challenge is to act on what we know and submit our lives to God's will and purposes.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

How can we overcome the tendency to allow our preconceived notions about others to control our behavior toward them?

Justice and the Sabbath (*Exodus 23:10-12*)

KJV

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.

NIV

10 "For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops,

11 "but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what is left. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove.

12 "Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and so that the slave born in your household and the foreigner living among you may be refreshed."

God is holistic in His relationship with His people. Every area of life, civil and religious, is to be guided by His principles of justice. The fourth commandment (see Exodus 20:8-11) is repeated in the text, and its policies extended to the fair use of Israel's land. Two Sabbaths were observed: the Sabbath year and the Sabbath day (**verses 10-12**). The agricultural purpose of the Sabbath year was to allow land to remain unplowed and unused; it could rest and be revitalized. The application of justice to this commandment was to enable the poor and wild animals the opportunity to secure food for themselves. Everything that came up naturally was to be shared with them during the Sabbath year. The purpose of Sabbath rest was about more than being idle or taking a break from work. Israel's Sabbath was holy and intended to be a day of compassion toward and to focus on the emotional well-being of Israel's slaves, the strangers among them, and their work animals. What was the lesson in these practices for Israel? God intended that they learn to be compassionate toward the less fortunate, common laborers, and the animal life He created. One can only imagine the benefits and blessings Israel would have received had they obeyed this commandment. They failed, and God allowed the land to be taken away from them. If the spirit of this law is put into practice now, unbiased compassion for the poor and oppressed will increase, as will multiple opportunities to meet their needs and to evangelize the lost among them. For some among the community of faith, this will require reevaluating ministries against these principles of fairness and realigning them with God's intended purposes of justice for all.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

What do these specific laws reveal about God's character?