

The Laws of Justice and Mercy

As Alecia approached three of her friends while they were all on their break, she noticed that they were huddled in a tight circle and were speaking to one another in low undertones. *They're doing it again*, she thought to herself. *They're criticizing Denise again*. She could jump to that correct conclusion because she had been a part of the gossip group weeks before. But after a long discussion with Denise herself—and finding out that she really liked her—she was feeling guilty about what she had said. Now she had a decision to make. Would she join her friends and listen in? Maybe contributing new negative tidbits about Denise? Would she merely walk away? Or would she attempt to put a stop to the gossip?

As Shawn opened the door to the supply room, he saw his coworker Larry sliding paper and folders into his briefcase. The look Shawn gave him elicited a defensive response. “What?” Larry asked. “Everybody here takes a little stuff out of this room for their personal use at home. What could be wrong with that?” Shawn had earlier mentioned how he was stopping by the office supply store to pick up some envelopes and paper clips for his wife. Now Shawn had a decision to make. Would he take supplies himself and skip the visit to the store? Or would he simply say “No, thanks” and drop the matter? Or would he privately confront Larry—and maybe others in the office—about stealing from the supply room?

- 1.** *In general, is it difficult for you to go against the crowd? Why or why not?*
- 2.** *Why does it often take courage to resist joining a crowd that is doing something you know is wrong?*
- 3.** *How are you affected when you conform to the wrong behavior of a crowd?*

Living in a Virtuous Manner

Exodus 23:1-3, KJV

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.

Exodus 23:1-3, NIV

¹“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, ³and do not show favoritism to a poor person in a lawsuit.”

To help secure justice, God commanded His people not to spread baseless reports (Exod. 23:1) about each other. This included an injunction against circulating malicious gossip and unfounded rumors. Also included was a ban against joining hands with evil and unscrupulous persons.

God did not want the Israelites helping to bring about a mistaken judgment or to contribute to the cause of evil. It was important to make sure that false witness not be offered in court, thereby resulting in someone's wrongful punishment.

Another way the Israelites were instructed to maintain impartial justice was avoiding a “crowd in doing wrong” (vs. 2). God called His people to individual responsibility in doing what is right according to His Word, not according to what other people are doing. Being part of a crowd would not exempt anyone of guilt. Also, following a throng of agitators could get a person into great trouble.

Exodus 23:2 echoes verse 1 by warning against offering testimony in a “lawsuit” that agrees with the majority opinion, but warps justice by bringing about a corrupt decision. Verse 3 adds that God's people were prohibited from showing partiality in a legal proceeding to someone just because of that person's poverty. Giving preferential treatment to the poor because of their destitution was just as wrong as condemning the rich because of their wealth.

In every situation, God wanted the Israelites to seek out

the truth and be impartial in their judgment. The critical issue is whether the accused party—rich or poor—was guilty or innocent.

4. *The Israelites were expected to foster what sort of witness?*

Living in an Upright Manner

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.

Exodus 23:4-9, NIV

⁴"If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to return it. ⁵If 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.

⁷Have 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."

For the Israelites to be God's representatives to the rest of the world, it was important that they exhibit justice and compassion—even to their enemies. Thus, God commanded that His people help those in need, and He gave them two examples. In the first one, an Israelite encountered the "ox or donkey" (vs. 4) of their foe wandering away. In an agriculturally-based society, it was common for some animals to be grazing, while

other beasts were used to carry heavy burdens. Also, there were times when someone would come upon a stray. The kind gesture was to return the animal to its owner.

In the second example, an Israelite came upon the donkey (vs. 5) belonging to an enemy. The pack animal had either stumbled or collapsed under its heavy load, and now it lay helpless. The quickest way to correct the problem was for two people to stand on each side of the animal and simultaneously lift its load. The compassionate response would not be to ignore the enemy, but to stop and offer help.

While the poor were not to be given special privileges, neither were they to be denied justice. Truth was to be sought in every case, regardless of the social status of those involved. Accordingly, the righteous were to keep their distance from those falsely accusing someone of committing a crime. Likewise, they were banned from bringing capital punishment on those who were “innocent or honest” (vs. 7).

The Lord declared that bribes could cause judges to act greedily rather than justly and would make impartial justice impossible. Likewise, bribes had the effect of thwarting a just person’s testimony, thus allowing a guilty person to go free.

The Hebrew verb translated “oppress” (vs. 9) literally means “to crush” and refers to actions that are abusive and overbearing. Foreigners might be oppressed in a court of law. The Israelites were to treat resident foreigners fairly because God’s people had a long history as outsiders in Egypt for 430 years.

5. *How were the Israelites to treat their enemy’s property?*

6. *How were the “poor” (Exod. 23:6) to be treated in a court of law?*

7. *Upon what basis did the Lord appeal to the Israelites in their treatment of a “foreigner” (Exod. 23:9)?*

Observing Sabbath Regulations

Exodus 23:10-12, KJV

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

Exodus 23:10-12, NIV

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

KJV

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

¹¹but 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.”

The Lord provided directions regarding the seventh year. It was intended to remind His people that He owned the land and provided it as a trust for their prudent use. During the six years preceding the Sabbath year, the Israelites were directed to plow their fields and harvest their crops. Then, during the seventh year (vs. 11), they were to let the land lie idle. God reassured them that what they harvested during the sixth year would sustain them until they harvested their planted crops.

The Sabbath year also considered the impoverished living in Israel and the welfare of the “wild animals,” along with the vineyards and olive groves. The crops that grew without being cultivated and harvested during the seventh year would be left for the indigent along with any animal of the field.

Verse 12 focuses more narrowly on the Sabbath day. God reminded the Israelites to observe a time of rest including their oxen, donkeys, and other beasts of burden. Even human laborers, such as slaves and foreign residents dwelling among the Israelites, were to be “refreshed” by the rest.

8. *How did the Sabbath impact the Israelites' agricultural practices?*

9. *What place did the Sabbath have among the Israelites?*

Righteous Among the Nations

In 1953, the modern State of Israel instituted the awarding of an honorific distinction to Gentiles who had risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. The title of this award is “Righteous Among the Nations,” and since 1963, a justice of the Supreme Court of Israel selects the recipients for this title. Recipients are bestowed a medal in their name, a certificate of honor, and the privilege of having their name added with those on the Wall of Honor in the Garden of the Righteous at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. Moreover, Israel confers an honorary citizenship, and if they have died, a commemorative citizenship in recognition of their actions.

One such recipient was Jane Mathison Haining, a Scottish evangelical missionary for the United Free Church of Scotland, who was stationed in Budapest, Hungary, in June 1932. When war broke out in Europe, her church advised her to return home, but she decided to remain among the people she served and loved—that is, at a girls’ home comprised mostly of Jewish girls. After the Nazis invaded Hungary in March 1944, the German SS began deporting Jews to the concentration camps. Because of her efforts to aid her Jewish girls, the Gestapo arrested Haining, and she was sent to the concentration camp in Auschwitz, Poland, where she died. In 1997, Haining was recognized as “Righteous Among the Nations.”

Haining’s heroism is both remarkable and unique. Nevertheless, although it takes courage and boldness to go against the crowd to do God’s justice, our actions need not be as remarkable and unique as Haining’s. When God calls us to act justly, there is often a price to be paid, but the cost pales in comparison to pleasing our Lord and Savior Christ Jesus.

10. *Why does the crowd often go against what God says to do?*

11. *How might you go against the crowd in doing God’s justice?*

12. *How should you be recognized for doing God’s justice when such action is not popular?*

Courage Against the Crowd

Because God wanted to bring judicial order to the Israelites and because He sought to identify them as His people, He gave them His righteous laws and commands. God's laws often go against what those around us say we should do, but we must stand strong for God's justice against the crowd when it wants to do the opposite of His will.

► *"I will go against the crowd and stand up for His justice." Explain how you could do this in a particular situation you know of where you need to challenge wrong words, thoughts, and actions.*

KEY VERSE

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

"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

DAILY BIBLE READINGS

Week of January 17 through January 23

(See *The Quiet Hour* for devotionals on these passages.)

Mon. Deuteronomy 19:15-21—True and False Witnesses.

Tue. Matthew 18:15-20—Addressing Church Conflicts.

Wed. Matthew 18:21-35—The Duty to Forgive.

Thu. Exodus 18:13-26—Moses' Court of Appeal.

Fri. Ephesians 4:25-32—Speak Truth and Act on It.

Sat. Deuteronomy 10:14-22—God Is an Impartial Judge.

Sun. Deuteronomy 16:18-20; 17:8-13—Appoint Leaders to Administer Justice.