

Deuteronomy 24:14-22

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In our current section on case laws (Deut 19:1—26:19), we are considering how the nation of ancient Israel was to practice righteous living after they entered the land of Canaan (Deut 16:20), how righteousness was measured by conformity to God's laws (Deut 6:24-25), and obedience would result in the Lord's blessings (Deut 11:26-28). In this section, Moses directs the wealthy employer to pay his laborer at the appropriate time (Deut 24:14-15), commands that a son not pay for his father's crime (Deut 24:16), that the powerful not pervert justice due the poor (Deut 24:17-18), but to be gracious and help them (Deut 24:19-22).

Don't withhold payment for laborers

Those with financial wealth in Israel were to be rich in love and consideration of the less fortunate, especially their employees. For this reason, Moses said, "You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your countrymen or one of your aliens who is in your land in your towns" (Deut 24:14). A command always assumes intellectual capacity to understand the directive, volitional capacity to obey the directive, and present or future opportunity. In this instance, the directive is centered on the wealthy Israelite who employs poor laborers to work for him. A countryman would be a fellow Israelite, and an alien (גֵר *ger*) would be a foreigner who joined the covenant community by faith in Yahweh and commitment to Israel's laws (i.e., Ruth 1:16-17).

Moses continued, saying, "You shall give him his wages on his day before the sun sets, for he is poor and sets his heart on it; so that he will not cry against you to the LORD and it become sin in you" (Deut 24:15). In this context, to oppress the poor or needy person meant to withhold his wages beyond the day. It was wrong because the poor laborer lived hand to mouth. To withhold his pay meant he would go hungry. If this happened, the poor person could take his complaint directly to God, and the employer would be guilty of sin. The wealthy Israelite, in this situation, stands before God as one who should have honored his word and paid his employee. Failure to pay at the appropriate time was a violation of the commandment, "You shall not steal" (Deut 5:19). James addressed this same issue in his epistle (Jam 5:4).

Individual responsibility

Moses also addressed the subject of individual responsibility, saying, "Fathers shall not be put to death for their sons, nor shall sons be put to death for their fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin" (Deut 24:16). A crime that warranted

the death penalty was to be paid by the perpetrator and not a son. The law code of Hammurabi (*circa* 1750 B.C.) allowed for a son to be put death for his father's crime. The law of Hammurabi stated, "If a builder constructed a house for a seignior, but did not make his work strong, with the result that the house which he built collapsed and so has caused the death of the owner of the house, that builder shall be put to death. If it has caused the death of a son of the owner of the house, they shall put the son of that builder to death."¹ Though permitted under other ancient near eastern law codes, this practice was strictly forbidden by God. Each person was to be personally responsible for his/her own sin.

However, when a person commits a crime, it impacts the offender as well as those in connection with him/her, and this is especially true in the family. Though children were not to pay for their parent's crime, they would still experience the fallout of the parent's behavior, as the death of the parent would have an immediate and future impact on the children mentally, emotionally, financially, and spiritually. Actions have consequences which often impact others (see Jonah 1:12).

Don't abuse the poor

Concerning the rights of the poor, Moses stated, "You shall not pervert the justice due an alien or an orphan, nor take a widow's garment in pledge" (Deut 24:17). God cares about the rights of the poor in society and had issued specific laws for their protection and care. To obey God's law and uphold justice for the alien, orphan, or widow was regarded as righteousness. To disobey God's directive would cause harm to the vulnerable and was regarded as a crime.

Previously God had permitted creditors to accept a garment as a pledge (Deut 24:12-13), which apparently had limitations, as He completely prohibited accepting a widow's cloak as a pledge. Being poor, she was apparently exempted from giving anything as a pledge for a loan. Eugene Merrill states, "This would, in effect, have become more a gift than a loan because her opportunities for repayment would have been extremely limited depending on her age and physical capacity and the like."²

God legislated certain rights for vulnerable persons in society; specifically, the poor, widows, orphans, and sojourners. These rights were theirs by divine law in which God commanded those blessed with resources to provide for the needs, protection,

¹ James Bennett Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. with Supplement. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 176.

² Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 323.

and just treatment of the vulnerable. Blessed Israelites were theologically obligated by God to help the less fortunate. In God's theocratic kingdom, the dependent could expect the powerful and wealthy (who were obedient-to-the-word-believers), to help meet their needs and defend their rights. Solomon wrote, "The righteous is concerned for the rights of the poor, the wicked does not understand such concern" (Prov 29:7).³ The "righteous" are those who have regard for God and His laws and are "concerned for rights of the poor" (cf. Isa 10:1-2). Those who disregarded God's laws concerning the vulnerable could expect to be judged by Him, as Moses wrote, "Cursed is he who distorts the justice due an alien, orphan, and widow" (Deut 27:19).

The wealthy Israelite was to act toward the poor and needy the same way God had acted toward His people when they were in slavery in Egypt. For this reason, Moses said, "But you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and that the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore, I am commanding you to do this thing" (Deut 24:18). Israelites were directed by God to remember their heritage and that they were descendants of slaves in Egypt, that they were once oppressed, and that God had delivered them from oppression (Deut 5:15; 15:15; 16:12; 24:22). Such remembrances would help guide them in their behavior towards others who were less fortunate and needed defenders who would fight for them.

Remember to care for the poor

Continuing the discussion about caring for the poor, Moses said, "When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow, in order that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands" (Deut 24:19). The harvesting by the farmer was to be done in such a way that he was not to pick his field clean, and if something was left in the field by accident, he was to leave it there for the poor. The generous farmer might even arrange to leave something behind, as Boaz had done for Ruth (Ruth 2:15-16). Concerning orchards and vineyards, Moses said, "When you beat your olive tree, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow.²¹ When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not go over it again; it shall be for

³ Solomon's mother planted these seeds of righteousness in the garden of her young son's mind, hoping someday the landscape of his thinking would beautifully display the richness of God's Word. She instructed her young son, saying "Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all the unfortunate. Open your mouth, judge righteously, and defend the rights of the afflicted and needy" (Pro 31:8-9). Oh, that mothers would instruct their children in the ways of the Lord; that their children would grow up with godly values that instruct them to care for others and to help the less fortunate. That their children would grow up to represent the highest and best within society and not the lowest and worst.

the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow” (Deut 24:20-21). Concerning these verses, Warren Wiersbe states:

The farmer was to leave some “gleanings” for the poor during the time of harvest (Deut. 24:19–22; see Lev. 19:9–10). This would give the aliens, orphans, and widows opportunity to gather food in a dignified way and not be forced to beg. As with the lender, so with the generous farmer: God would bless him in his work and reward him for his kindness to the poor (Psa 41:1; Prov 14:21, 31; 29:7).⁴

In the Old Testament, the poor were to receive special consideration. During harvest time, the Lord instructed farmers to leave a portion of their fields uncut and their vineyards with fruit left on the trees and vines so that the needy person in their community could come and work the fields for themselves and have something to eat (Lev 19:9-10). God had blessed the farmer, and He expected him to be a conduit of blessing to others. The unharvested portion of the field was for the less fortunate in society, but they had to come and work for what was left, and this provided them food to eat.

For a second time in this section, Moses states, “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore, I am commanding you to do this thing” (Deut 24:22; cf., Deut 5:15; 15:15; 16:3; 24:22). Again, Israelites were directed by God to remember their heritage and that they were once an oppressed people. The word *remember* translates the Hebrew verb זָכַר *zakar*, which means to *call to mind*, and implies intentionality. God’s people were commanded to remember their past servitude in Egypt, and that memory was to have a direct influence on how they treated others who were less fortunate than themselves. Remembering God, His commands and blessings, is set against the danger of forgetting, which will lead to ruin (Deut 6:12; 8:11, 14). If a wealthy Israelite mistreated the poor, like Egypt had mistreated Israel, then God would treat the abuser as He had treated Pharaoh, bringing divine judgment. Blessing or cursing was an option for each Israelite (Deut 11:26-28).

Present Application

The Bible promotes a strong work ethic for all who are able. Solomon wrote, “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might” (Eccl 9:10a). And the work we perform is not merely for self or others, but unto the Lord. Paul wrote,

⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Equipped*, “Be” Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Pub., 1999), 160.

“Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve” (Col 3:23-24). With this realization, we should work wisely and with good energy, producing a good product or service, knowing we are working and serving the Lord Himself.

In contrast to good workers, the apostle Paul states, “if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat” (2 Th 3:10). No work means no food. Of course, this assumes one has the physical and cognitive ability as well as the opportunity. Naturally, a special dispensation is granted to those who cannot help themselves because of a disability, as was the case with Mephibosheth (2 Sam 9:1-13).

God expects laborers to be compensated for the work they do. In fact, God’s expectation of compensation for work performed was so strong, it even extended to animals, as Moses wrote, “You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing” (Deut 25:4). The animal that worked had the right to benefit from its labor. The apostle Paul used this verse in Deuteronomy as an analogy for compensating pastors for their work, saying, “The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing’, and ‘The laborer is worthy of his wages’” (1 Tim 5:17-18). In this way, believers help support their pastors for the work they do. Such support is honored by God.

However, we must also guard against overworking ourselves. In the Mosaic Law, God mandated physical rest on a regular basis. Moses wrote, “Six days you are to do your work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and the son of your female slave, as well as your stranger, may refresh themselves” (Ex 23:12; cf. Ex 34:21). Here, the rest was for everyone and even included animals. In another place, Solomon said, “One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind” (Eccl 4:6). This means there is balance to one’s life regarding work and rest. During a time of ministry, Jesus told His disciples, “Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while. For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat” (Mark 6:31). Mark informs us that Jesus pulled His disciples away for a while to rest and eat, which is a necessity for those who engage in regular ministry.

Personally, I love to work and be productive. If anything, I tend to overwork, and that to my own harm. Over the decades I’ve overworked myself into fatigue, burnout, and even depression a few times. And I’ve contracted Shingles on three occasions because of unmanaged stress. That’s no fun. Managing my workload and stress levels has been a challenge for me, and I’ve had to make it a discipline to force

myself to stop working, take some rest, and find something enjoyable to do. This benefits me physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. Lewis Chafer wrote, “It is a serious thing to remove the element of relaxation and play from any life. We cannot be normal physically, mentally or spiritually if we neglect the vital factor in human life. God has provided that our joy shall be full.”⁵ Of course, other matters for good health include proper sleep, good nutrition, hydration, exercise, socialization, etc. As Christians, we should work with integrity, be open-handed toward the poor, make time for rest, and help support God’s ministers. All things should be done in moderation.

⁵ Lewis S. Chafer, *He that is Spiritual* (Grand Rapids, Mich. Zondervan Publishing, 1967), 60-61.