

FPFWC Christian Development



God The Source of Justice

January 2022

Winter Quarter

January 15, 2022

Lesson #2 – Justice and Fairness

SCRIPTURE TEXT – Exodus 23:1-12

ICE BREAKER –

1. How does God expect us to treat our enemies?
2. What can you do better to resist temptation to go along with the crowd?

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

LESSON BACKGROUND

To understand the laws under consideration in today's text, we must pay attention to their contexts (plural). On a larger scale, Exodus 21–23 is often called the Covenant Code because it gives foundational rules for ancient Israel's corporate life. In other words, the laws reflect how people were to conduct themselves in typical, everyday situations. This collection of laws is the basis of longer discussions in Leviticus 17–27 and Deuteronomy 12–26.

Within Exodus, the Covenant Code comes immediately after the Ten Commandments. While that shorter list includes 10 distinct laws, expressed for easy memorization, the longer list of the Covenant Code repeats itself and arranges topics more by association ("speaking of X, consider also Y"). That sort of organization appears in today's lesson.

The sequence of the laws influences meaning. Readers should not think of them as sound bites but as a web of required behaviors that collectively reflected the character of those practicing them.

On a smaller scale, today's text of Exodus 23:1–12 concentrates on issues of justice. Verses 1–9 fit closely with the end of chapter 22, while verses 10–12 open up a discussion of the proper use of time for worship and rest. The two major sections of the text at hand use the same sort of lock-and-key organizational technique common in Israelite legal texts and in the book of Proverbs. That is, several statements on obviously related themes follow each other. Then the topic seems to change, and then it returns to the original subject.

This pattern challenges the reader to see previously unconsidered dimensions of both the main idea on the ends of the list and a seemingly different idea wedged into the middle. In this case, Exodus 23:4–5 seems to change the subject covered in verses 1–3 and 6–8, all of which feature a courtroom setting. Verses 4–5 envision encounters out in the field or on the road. The apparent change of topics reminds the reader that lying in court does not occur in the abstract but at the expense of real people and relationships. Conversely, the text's connection between judicial proceedings and ordinary helpfulness toward enemies reminds

the reader that even the most mundane incidents of life have wider societal implications.

These laws apply concretely the more general command to “love thy neighbour as thyself” (Leviticus 19:18). Since people tend to extend greatest love to friends and family members while treating others less favorably, the Law of Moses identifies classes of people who deserved respect in the Israelites’ interactions with them. The law does not allow for rationalizing, self-indulgence, or sanctimonious self-justification. Rather, it demanded that the Israelites take seriously their status as peers with all other human beings and as fellow subjects of their Creator. This fact is reflected in the apostle Paul’s statement that “he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law” (Romans 13:8).

These laws also assumed that the Israelites *wanted* to be people of integrity. The Israelites should have wanted to act justly, even when pushed to do otherwise or when conflict made them want to take personal revenge. They were to have recognized their own faults and temptations to misbehavior and take steps to correct them.

LESSON COMMENTARY

23:1–9. Several laws were given that seemed to reiterate some of the laws previously established. Lying (**a false report**) was prohibited (23:1). So also was participating in a false testimony (**join your hand**) (23:1). One was not to join in a mob-like action (23:2) for this often leads to more injustices. Nor is one to be **partial to the poor** in a legal or criminal matter simply because he is poor; the principle of “fairness” was to be upheld above all (23:3). One was enjoined to care for the property of others (23:4–5); the principle of the right and value of personal property was just as much a concern as the need to care for the vulnerable and needy. Justice (as in a court of law) was to be maintained—no false witness was to be given, no bribe was to be taken, no oppression (advantage taken) of strangers (23:6–9) was permitted.

Some of these laws appear to be fairly obvious as to their intent and purpose. They teach that there must be equity and evenhandedness in social relationships. Furthermore they teach that these behaviors are simply incompatible with the mind, heart, and will of God. These actions, such as immorality, impurity, injustice, inconsideration of others, and lies, are simply contrary to His nature. Devotion to God will mean living and serving and worship in ways quite distinct from the surrounding culture. The Lord is a God of truth and justice and His people must be the people of truth and justice.

5. Laws Pertaining to Worship (23:10–19)

23:10–13. A series of laws were given that pertained to the nation’s worship and life before the Lord. The law of Sabbath rest for the land (23:10–11) stipulated that there should be six years of sowing and reaping and then one year for the land to lie fallow. This requirement for a sabbatical “seventh year seems to have been unique with Israel” (Davis, *Moses and the Gods*, 244). In part this was a provision for the poor, **so that the needy of your people may eat**; presumably they could

harvest the residual crop that grows up on fallow ground. This was also for **the beast of the field**, presumably to give wild animals some suitable habitation. The nation failed notoriously to observe the land sabbatical and was in part the reason for the seventy-year captivity (cf. 2Ch 36:17–21). “All Sabbaths were reminders of the sovereignty of God in His exercise of power in creative acts. The Sabbath year was a reminder that the land belonged to God and man merely possessed it in trust under God (Lv 25:23)” (Davis, *Moses and the Gods*, 244). In addition there was to be a Sabbath rest for the domestic animals and the domestic servants (23:12). Thus there were times for work and times for rest; there was to be rest personally, for animals, and for slaves.

LESSON NUGGET – Treating people justly would seem to be an easy thing to do, but the sinful human heart can lead us astray with rumors, false witnesses, crowds, and money. The fact that a person is rich or poor, a friend or an enemy, must not blind us to the truth. Integrity must not be for sale.

Sources: *Moody Bible Commentary, Standard Lesson Commentary, The Essential Everyday Bible Commentary and The Word for Today Bible.*