

FPFWC Christian Development



God The Source of Justice

January 2022

Winter Quarter

January 22, 2022

Lesson #3 – Justice, Judges, and Priests

SCRIPTURE TEXT – Deuteronomy 16:18-21; 17:8-13

ICE BREAKERS-

1. Why is God so insistent in condemning injustice?

Key Verse: Judges and officers shalt thou make thee in all thy gates, which the LORD thy God giveth thee, throughout thy tribes: and they shall judge the people with just judgment.—Deuteronomy 16:18

LESSON BACKGROUND –

Moses himself appointed the first judges (Exodus 18:24–26), but no formalized program existed for training to become a judge in the Israel of Moses' day (about 1447 BC). There was a certain kind of “bar exam” that an individual had to pass before being appointed to judge. The first stated criteria for passing were four in number: (1) ability, (2) fear of God, (3) reliably truthful, and (4) hatred of covetousness (18:21). Moses received these criteria from his father-in-law, Jethro, shortly after leading the Israelites out of Egypt but before reaching Mount Sinai (19:1, 20). The individuals who met these criteria assisted Moses as judges, providing rulings on the legal cases of the people brought before them (18:26). During Israel's sojourn to the promised land, they received many more instructions that distinguished just from unjust behavior. Some are recorded in Exodus 23:1–12, the text of last week's lesson.

The focus of the book of Exodus is on the first generation of the new nation of Israel. But as the book of Deuteronomy opens, 40 years had passed, and a new generation of Israelites needed to hear the law expounded (Deuteronomy 1:1–5). This included reiterating the characteristics of a proper judicial system in general and the requirements of judges in particular (1:16–18).

The exact steps of appointment processes for judges isn't clear. Hundreds of years after Moses, Absalom used subversion to get himself appointed as judge by popular acclamation (2 Samuel 15:1–6). Later, King Jehoshaphat (reigned 872–848 BC) appointed judges personally (2 Chronicles 19:4–7). In 458 BC, Ezra was charged with appointing judges in his capacity as a priest and an expert in the law (Ezra 7:25). Stricter, more specific requirements for serving as a judge are found in Ezekiel 44:15–27.

This lesson considers how the leaders of Israel, namely judges and priests, were to advocate for and implement justice among the people of Israel. This week's lesson comes from the portion of Deuteronomy where Moses spoke on various leadership positions and how they were to function. Judges (Deuteronomy 16:18–17:13), kings (17:14–20), priests (18:1–8), and prophets (18:14–22) are among those groups described by Moses. Today's lesson will illustrate how the

Lord demands just judgment and desires His covenant people to be led by individuals who exhibit the ability to practice just judgment among them.

LESSON COMMENTARY

16:18–20. This is the beginning of a new section that continues until 18:22. Moses had just appealed for compassion toward those in need and for worship of the LORD with rejoicing. Here he returned to the theme of chap. 13, which focused on the conduct of national and spiritual leaders. This passage deals with job descriptions for different officials within Israel. Having discussed commands dealing with covenant loyalty, Moses transitioned to human leaders who would have political and spiritual administrative responsibilities. The first officials to be discussed, because of their importance in maintaining justice, were the judges. Since Deuteronomy is a law code, it is fitting that Moses began with those who would arbitrate on legal matters. After the nation settled in the land, **judges and officers** were to be appointed for judging the **people with righteous judgment**. Earlier (1:9–18) Moses addressed the need for impartial judges to assist in administration, and here he gave additional instructions. These judges were in no way to **distort justice, be partial, or take a bribe**. Bribes were especially forbidden since they blind **the eyes of the wise**. Their main task was to pursue justice, because when justice characterized Israel they would remain alive and continue to **possess the land ... the LORD was giving them**.

16:21–22. This section may seem out of place in an overall discussion of justice. Yet Moses may have been using the case of not setting up idols (16:1–2) and not sacrificing blemished animals (17:1) as a matter that judges (16:18–20) would need to watch over so that justice prevailed in the land. Besides overseeing civil matters judges were also tasked with supervising theological and religious issues and maintaining the Ten Commandments, especially the first two. Here the specific instruction was that no **Asherah or any kind of tree** was to be planted **beside the altar of the LORD** in the central sanctuary, or a **sacred pillar** anywhere. These were objects the Lord vehemently hated because they were associated with Canaanite fertility rites and were expressly forbidden by the first and second commandments.

17:8–13. If local courts could not render a decision because the **case was too difficult**, such as determining **one kind of homicide or another**, then the case was to be brought to either the Levitical priest or an appointed judge there (perhaps both in conjunction) who would adjudicate the case (vv. 8–9). The officials deciding the case were to give the reasons for their decision and thus **teach** those present in the law (v. 11). Anyone who did not abide by his or her decision was to be put to death because the person was acting presumptuously (v. 12). The death sentence applied in these cases would **purge the evil** from the land, and it would also serve as a deterrent for anyone else rebelling against the authority of the priests and judges. For 17:10, see the comments on Mt 23:3.

LESSON NUGGET – God’s Word reveals God’s will and we must not go beyond what God permits. To transgress means to cross the line, which is presumptuous

sin. God says, "Thus far and no farther!" and we must obey. That obedience applied to sentences of judgment (vv.8-13). The sinner who challenged the judgment of God's appointed leaders was destined to die. "Hear and fear!"

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