

# The Laws of Justice and Mercy

Printed Text • Exodus 23:1–12

Devotional Reading • 2 John 1:4–6

## Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will REMEMBER that God expects believers to care for others, ASPIRE to be impartial in showing justice and mercy, and PRACTICE helping those who are in need.

## In Focus

Toni had lived in her neighborhood for ten years. She tried to take an active role in helping the neighborhood be a safe and welcoming place. One afternoon while resting on her front porch, Toni's neighbor Binta stopped by to chat.

"When are you going to bring your family over for dinner with us?" Toni asked. "We really do need to return the favor for that delicious ablo and grilled chicken you made for us last week!"

Binta smiled. "I hope we can join you soon, my friend. But this week I am too busy with business troubles."

Binta explained she was planning to rent a local storefront to sell furniture and antiques. However, she was a little uncomfortable with the contract for the lease agreement. English wasn't Binta's first language, so some of the contract wording was difficult for her to understand. Toni agreed to take a look at the lease paperwork.

After reviewing Binta's paperwork, Toni discovered that several of the rules in the lease were unusual and seemed to favor the landlord. She suspected that the landlord was trying to take advantage of Binta. Toni worked with Binta to renegotiate the lease so that the terms were reasonable. The following week, Binta happily reported that the landlord had agreed to the new terms. She thanked Toni with a big hug. "Thanks for looking out! You're a true friend!"

*How do you help those around you who are new to the area or to the country?*

## Keep In Mind

"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)

## Words You Should Know

**A. Countenance (Exodus 23:3)** hadar (Heb.) — To turn one's face toward or honor

**B. Enemy (v. 4)** 'oyeb (Heb.) — One who hates another

## Say It Correctly

**Decalogue.** DEH-kah-log

## KJV

**Exodus 23:1** 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.

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.

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.

## NLT

**Exodus 23:1** "You must not pass along false rumors. You must not cooperate with evil people by lying on the witness stand.

2 "You must not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you are called to testify in a dispute, do not be swayed by the crowd to twist justice.

3 And do not slant your testimony in favor of a person just because that person is poor.

4 "If you come upon your enemy's ox or donkey that has strayed away, take it back to its owner.

5 If you see that the donkey of someone who hates you has collapsed under its load, do not walk by. Instead, stop and help.

6 "In a lawsuit, you must not deny justice to the poor.

7 "Be sure never to charge anyone falsely with evil. Never sentence an innocent or blameless person to death, for I never declare a guilty person to be innocent.

8 "Take no bribes, for a bribe makes you ignore something that you clearly see. A bribe makes even a righteous person twist the truth.

9 "You must not oppress foreigners. You know what it's like to be a foreigner, for you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.

10 "Plant and harvest your crops for six years,

11 but let the land be renewed and lie uncultivated during the seventh year. Then let the poor among you harvest whatever grows on its own. Leave the rest for wild animals to eat. The same applies to your vineyards and olive groves.

12 "You have six days each week for your ordinary work, but on the seventh day you must stop working. This gives your ox and your donkey a chance to rest. It also allows your slaves and the foreigners living among you to be refreshed.

## The People, Places, and Times

**Perjury.** The Ten Commandments clearly state God’s law against “false witness.” Elaborating from this, the Law of Moses often reiterates how negatively God feels toward lying. A lying tongue is one of the few things God hates (Proverbs 6:17). Today, before witnesses may testify during a trial, they must swear to “tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” This reinforces the law of perjury, and if violated and proven that one has lied under oath, it carries a serious penalty. In non-legal settings, the justice principle of speaking truthfully about others extends to gossip and slander.

**Law Codes.** Today’s Scriptures focus on the arena of law called “social justice” legislation. The first set of judicial imperatives is addressed to witnesses in a legal proceeding. These are given as examples of the types of things that constitute injustice, which are to be avoided under penalty of judgment. The list was not meant to be exhaustive, and there are many other similar situations that would involve the same principles of not only avoiding injustice, but also doing justice. Most ancient law codes, including the Law of Moses, should not be read as a full listing of society’s dos and don’ts. They are examples of wise standards of justice. Judges would familiarize themselves with all these laws and extrapolate from them what verdict to give in a particular situation.

## Background

The Covenant Code of Exodus 20:22–23:33, also known as “The Book of the Covenant,” follows and expands on the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments) that God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai. This was not a one-way relationship, because Israel had readily agreed to obey God’s laws (Exodus 19:2–8). It was their voluntary agreement to follow and obey God that caused Israel to suffer God’s judgment when they disobeyed the covenant laws. Implicit in any law forbidding something is a judgment for disobedience. Because of the justice and mercy infusing God’s character and His Covenant Code, God’s anger was kindled when His people engaged in injustice and did not show mercy to others.

### At-A-Glance

1. Five Judicial Imperatives (Exodus 23:1–3)
  2. Two Case Studies (vv. 4–6)
3. Five More Judicial Imperatives (vv. 7–9)
  4. The Sabbath Year (vv. 10–12)

## In Depth

### 1. Five Judicial Imperatives (Exodus 23:1–3)

Lying is forbidden in two legal situations: in bringing a false accusation (KJV: “a false report,” v. 1) and while acting as a witness in a trial. This is reiterated in the case of popular opinion, too. Going along with a “multitude” does not protect you if you do evil, especially if it causes you to lie and pervert justice. Not only must a just person not follow the crowd, but also he or she must be willing to speak out against it.

While many Old Testament laws encourage the Israelites to show kindness to the poor, God also cautions them to not automatically show partiality for a poor person, just because he or she is poor. A

normal, flawed human system might not give the poor a fair shake, but the pendulum should not swing the other way. The just child of God must be equitable to all, whether poor or wealthy.

*How do your stereotypes of the poor and the wealthy affect how you view them?*

## **2. Two Case Studies (vv. 4–6)**

The just person is to help a man whose donkey has strayed, even if that person is an enemy. Through the ages, this has been the testimony that often has won converts because they saw God's people being kind and just, even to their enemies. Similarly, the just person must also help a person whose donkey has fallen with a load, even if that person is an enemy. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a perfect New Testament parallel to this Old Testament injunction. The just person must offer help in all situations, whether the person needing help is a friend or foe.

*When have you had an opportunity to help your enemy?*

## **3. Five More Judicial Imperatives (vv. 7–9)**

Just as one should not deny justice to a rich person just because he or she is rich (v. 3), so the just person must not deny justice to a poor person just because he or she is poor. A judge must never falsely charge anyone and must never put an innocent person to death. Particularly when it comes to matters of life and death, God specifically will not excuse any with innocent blood on their hands, but will Himself judge the unjust judge.

Sadly, bribing judges and other officials is a sin that continues to this day. No one in a position of authority should take a bribe. Bribes blind judges to justice, when instead judges are to be blind to partiality.

As the Israelites were once oppressed as strangers in Egypt, they are not to oppress strangers (e.g., foreigners and travelers) in their own land. While this injunction is likely spoken specifically to judges, the guideline applies to any just God-follower. No one, especial a person on trial, should be judged in light of their nationality or ethnicity.

*How have you seen justice perverted because of bribes?*

## **4. The Sabbath Year (vv. 10–12)**

Finally, God institutes the practice of a Sabbath year that provides many righteous outcomes. Besides the obvious rest for the farmer, a Sabbath year also allows the animals and the land itself to rest, showing them respect. During this rest time, the farmers are compelled to rely on the grace of God to get by, which strengthens their faith. The Sabbath year also provides food for the poor, who are allowed to reap freely of the vineyards, olive groves, and fields during that time. A Sabbath year is to proceed much as a Sabbath day would. God's just provision provides rest for all: His people, their land, their animals, their servants, and even the foreigners among them.

*What would a Sabbath Year look like among God's people today?*

## **Search the Scriptures**

1. How do popular opinions and bribes affect the administration of justice (Exodus 23:2, 8)?
2. What steps does God's Law take to systemically protect the poor?

## Discuss the Meaning

1. Compare the examples of injustice given in the Covenant Code. Try to find modern examples that would parallel the same principles. Have you ever witnessed injustice firsthand or participated in it?
2. How can Christians protect their hearts from wanting to see their enemies suffer? How do Christians ensure they will stop and help their enemies when the chance arises?

## Liberating Lesson

One hears a lot about social justice in the news, and it is only natural for victims of injustice to cry out for justice in every aspect of society. Studying the Scriptures that pertain to social justice presents a clear picture of what it means for God's people to embody justice in society—how they are to both avoid injustice and exercise justice. This clear picture must be preserved in a world where so many believe that only political solutions or new laws will fulfill God's requirements for justice. Governments are capable of doing things that individuals cannot, as they enact sweeping laws that shape our perspectives and begin to change the way we treat each other. But according to God's Word individuals are always responsible for their own actions and decisions. Even governments are made up of individuals, and each will give an account of every decision, whether it was just or unjust. Ultimately, no one will be excused for inflicting or enabling injustice.

## Application for Activation

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## Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

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## Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

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## More Light on the Text

### Exodus 23:1–12

The Covenant Code of Exodus (20:18–23:33) immediately follows the Decalogue in 20:1–17. This portion of that code addresses behavior toward others, focusing on the arenas of justice and mercy. Earlier sections of the covenant code stress love and compassion toward the disenfranchised widow, orphan, and stranger. This section now begins to exhort another virtue: justice.

#### **1 Thou shalt not raise a false report: put not thine hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness.**

This verse adds detail to the ninth commandment (20:13; see also Leviticus 19:11; Deuteronomy 19:15–21) and indicates a courtroom situation, but it is not limited to that context. Any “raising up” of an “unrighteous” witness or testimony in any context is to be avoided. This includes even telling the truth in an unrighteous way (i.e., bringing harm to a person or damaging them in any way). Rather, Christians are called to speak the truth in love. It is common knowledge that there are countless scenarios where gossip has caused great injury and injustice. The entire spectrum of gossip—from inappropriate truth telling, to minor exaggerations, to outright fabrications is to be avoided by God’s people.

Exodus 23:1 also specifically addresses giving false testimony about someone who is guilty, which would include helping cover up an evil person’s deeds. Doing so enables the wicked person to continue in his or her evil and directly contributes to any future harm that comes to others as a result of the false testimony. According to Old Testament Law, any false or unrighteous report (also in v. 8, “perverteth the words of the righteous”) deserves the same punishment that was intended for the other (see Deuteronomy 19:15–21). To put one’s hand with the wicked, as said in the second part of the verse, refers to working together with another to pervert the course of justice and deprive an innocent individual of his rights.

#### **2 Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil; neither shalt thou speak in a cause to decline after many to wrest judgment:**

Justifications such as “majority rule” or “popular consensus” do not relieve a child of God from the responsibility of speaking out against evil. When it comes to the weighty matter of injustice, God expects His people to take a stand—even if it means swimming against the current or enduring the pressure of the crowd attempting to pervert justice. “Multitude” in Hebrew is *rab* (ROV) and means “many,” but also can mean “mighty” or “chief,” which is a sharp contrast to the plight of the vulnerable poor person whose welfare is at stake. “To decline after” (Heb. *natah*, naw–TAW) the crowd means to turn aside toward their opinion. The word is similarly used in the time of the judges when Abimelech convinces his relatives to make him their king, and they “inclined to follow” him (Judges 9:3). Simply following the majority opinion is not wrong in itself. The problem comes when the crowd wants to “wrest” (Heb. *natah*) judgment. In other words, we must not turn aside to the crowd when the crowd wants to turn aside justice.

In verse 1, the prohibition was against personally engaging in the evil; verse 2 prohibits hiding the truth even when one’s opinion is outnumbered. Again, the verse implies primarily a courtroom setting, but can extend universally. These injunctions are amplifications of the Decalogue, but do not and cannot cover all possible cases for doing evil and committing injustice. In a modern application, even if the other eleven jurors are tired and want to throw the accused under the bus so they can be done

with him or her, God's people are held to a higher standard and must uphold justice, no matter how unpopular.

### **3 Neither shalt thou countenance a poor man in his cause.**

**“Countenance” in the Hebrew is hadar (ha– DAR) and means to honor. This verse can be viewed with the illumination of Leviticus 19:15, which addresses the same matter of partiality or favoritism—which perverts justice—but specifies both rich and poor. Sympathy for a poor person should not be allowed to influence justice any more than partiality for the rich might subvert justice. The message, especially for judges, is simply to never show partiality.**

**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.**

Verses 4 and 5 are two case laws showing examples of impartiality, which specifically address justice for one's enemies. Apparently, it was a common misunderstanding—and still is—to think that the Old Testament taught people to hate their enemies. On the contrary, benevolence and mercy were frequent themes (see 2 Kings 6:18–23; Proverbs 25:21–22; Jeremiah 29:7). Even the famous “eye for an eye” assertion (Exodus 21:24) was a matter of upholding straight justice rather than revenge or hatred. In reality, vengeance often far exceeds the original incident. What Jesus clarified and overruled in the Sermon on the Mount was a misinterpreted oral tradition and not a matter of actual law (Matthew 5:38–39). These verses are examples of the practical application of justice, a dominant and explicit theological theme of the Old Testament.

Even when the circumstance involves an “enemy,” which in Hebrew is 'oyeb (oh– YABE)—a common word which can also mean one who hates you—God's standards clearly are to dispense justice for all. In today's world, helping someone with his or her donkey that has strayed or fallen with a load would be like helping someone change a tire. In this case, it would be helping someone who perhaps had mistreated you, or flat out despised you. Doing a good thing for him or her would heap coals of shame on his or her head for hating you (Proverbs 25:22). Jesus illustrated the principle with the parable of the Good Samaritan. An act of compassion or kindness, even for those who hate you, is what Jesus meant when He refuted the mistaken oral tradition of hatred toward one's enemies, and instead embraced the greater and also explicit commands for justice and mercy, even for enemies (Matthew 5:43–45; 23:23; Luke 6:27–38).

**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.**

The injunction now returns to courtroom procedural laws, this time addressing corrupt judges who put vulnerable people at a great disadvantage. There are two types of poor in this section: “poor” in Exodus 23:3 in Hebrew is dal (DAL), a basic term, while “poor” in verse 6 in Hebrew is 'ebyon (eb– YONE) and refers to an extremely needy person, in danger of oppression and abuse; someone who is destitute or indigent. Verse 9 works together with verse 3 showing that while judges should not skew justice toward the poor just for being poor, neither should they pervert (KJV: “wrest,” as in verse 1) justice away from the poor just for being poor. Again, God's people are called to a higher standard, and even the poorest of the poor must be treated fairly and justly. Since such matters frequently fall to judges to determine, they are singled out for these holy proscriptions.

Even more specific is the injunction to see to it that no innocent person (“innocent or honest,” NLT) is ever put to death, which begins by staying far away from anything false or evil. In this case, God warns that He will not spare judgment on the judge. The warning is transcultural on principle to all who occupy positions of power or influence, not only judges, but any who abuse their positions by acting unjustly. No matter how high their offices— even Supreme Court judges—they are not the ultimate authorities.

**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.**

As if the above is still not explicit enough against favoring the rich, verse 8 specifically discusses taking bribes. In verse 8, the word “gift” in Hebrew is shakhad (SHAW–khad), and means a bribe or present for a corrupt official, that is, a gift with the intent of gaining some kind of favor. The Old Testament has many such warnings (see the close parallel in Deuteronomy 16:19, “a gift doth blind the eyes of the wise, and pervert the words of the righteous”; see also Proverbs 17:8, 23; 21:14). In some countries and agencies, bribes are a routine order of business.

Christians must fight against this wherever it is seen. In a society and economy so tied up with monetary wealth, it is easy to be tempted to go with the highest bidder, the one who will pay the most for your services, or the one who promises you the best deal. We must be careful, however, to make sure that the benefits being offered are offered fairly and that our final decision is just.

The rule to be kind to the stranger is important to God. Therefore, there are several passages nearly identical to this one, for example Exodus 22:21; Leviticus 19:34; and Deuteronomy 10:19. The latter verse in the list goes far above and beyond not oppressing and extols the Israelite to “love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.” To “oppress” (Heb. lakhats, law–KHOTS) a stranger means to take advantage of them, pervert justice for them, or treat them cruelly. The Israelites are often led to remember their time in Egypt as the time when they were dispossessed as foreigners at the whims of a cruel power. Even though the Israelites lived in Egypt comfortably for many years, when their numbers swelled and the Egyptians feared them, they became oppressed and enslaved. That cultural memory of suffering is meant to remind them not to despise Egyptians for oppressing them, but to rise above the temptation to oppress those that come under their power.

Ultimately, why should Israel exercise, even for enemies and aliens? The greater truth is that justice is the embodiment of God’s holiness within His people. God did not simply deliver His Law to His people, and then leave them to their own devices to interpret and apply it. Rather, He is personally involved with the lives of His people, even judging individual cases, and He hears the cries of the oppressed (see also Exodus 22:22–24; Judges 2:18; Nehemiah 9:27).

**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.**

One reason George Washington Carver so avidly researched peanuts and sweet potatoes is that he understood the agricultural importance of crop rotation. Here, baked into the Law of God, we also have the importance of allowing the land to lie fallow for a year, so that its nutrients are not continuously depleted. Just like everything else in God’s creation, the land itself needs to rest periodically. This law is important for more than just the ground, however.

The poor are entitled to the entire harvest once every seven years. The poor are usually allowed to glean just what the harvesters leave behind, giving them just enough to scrape by until next harvest. On the Sabbath Year, however, they themselves are the harvesters. They are allowed to take the entire crop of whatever grows naturally from what the plants dropped the year before. This is just the kind of economic boost that many of them would need to get the capital to get back on their feet financially. They will be food secure and perhaps have some to spare. This process is true not just for the grain fields, but also for the vineyards and olive groves.

As a point of comparison, in ancient Rome, the government gave a free daily grain dole to its needy citizens, and offered reduced prices for other food. It is estimated that this daily amount of food did not keep them well nourished, but did at least keep them from starving. However, this food was distributed only to citizens living in cities. If you were not a citizen, or lived in the country, you would not receive this handout. God's people, on the other hand, allowed the poor free access to all crops, vineyards, and olive groves regularly throughout the land. The Law does not clearly state that foreigners are allowed the same access to the fields as the poor are during the Sabbath Year (v. 11). It can be assumed, however, that they do have such access, since the poor and the foreigners are grouped together so often in laws like this (v. 12).

**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.**

Lastly, the Commandment to observe the Sabbath is reiterated. The scope of the law is once again expansive: including not just citizens but also the foreigner, not just people but also animals, not just employers but also employees, not just adults but also children. All of God's creation is allowed to rest and refresh themselves. The three words used for resting in this verse have similar, but nuanced meanings. The first is that the Hebrews shall "rest" (Heb. shabat, shaw-BOT), or cease from labor. The second is that the ox and ass shall "rest" (Heb. nuakh, NOO-akh), or settle down and enjoy a quiet repose. The third is that the handmaid and foreigner may be "refreshed" (Heb. nafash, naw-FOSH), or allowed to take a breather. This word is from the same root as the Hebrew word for breath or spirit. It is a pause to catch your breath, and perhaps to see to the rejuvenation of your soul rather than just your body.

Ultimately, the Sabbath day and Sabbath year are both supposed to be soulful practices for all those living among God's people. It is a time to trust God's provision for your physical needs, rather than getting hung up on providing for yourself or worrying if you are living up to your role as a provider for your family. God is the ultimate provider and will see to His children with even more vigor than you see to yours. During this time of rest from our usual labors, when we embrace the peace that comes from knowing God will cover our body's needs, we have time to focus on our soul's needs. It is a time to reorient ourselves toward God, remember His goals for our lives, and reset our households to start living out God's community of faith in the week or year to come.

# Daily Bible Readings

## **MONDAY**

Serve God Alone  
(Exodus 23:13–19)

## **TUESDAY**

Blessings for the Obedient  
(Exodus 23:20–33)

## **WEDNESDAY**

Mercy Triumphs Over Judgment  
(James 2:1–13)

## **THURSDAY**

Faith Without Works Is Dead  
(James 2:14–26)

## **FRIDAY**

Seek the Advantage of Others  
(1 Corinthians 10:23–33)

## **SATURDAY**

Steadfast Love and Faithfulness  
(Psalm 85)

## **SUNDAY**

Treat Others Justly  
(Exodus 23:1–12)