

# Justice, Judges, and Priests

Printed Text • Deuteronomy 16:18–20; 17:8–13

Devotional Reading • Proverbs 15:25–26

## Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will DISCOVER why God established the roles of judges, officials, and priests and what those roles entailed; VALUE people who make decisions based on God’s justice; and PRACTICE justice in our roles as leaders.

## In Focus

Rev. Dr. James Sheldon was the newly appointed pastor of a historic church. He spent much of his life and ministry focused on being a bridge between elected officials and the people. He was sought after to speak to critical issues affecting communities of color. He did not live in the neighborhood of his new church, and so he met with church officials to get their input. The church leaders advised him to, of course, meet with the alderman, statehouse and congressional representatives.

He personally called each and invited them to the church for a private luncheon with his church leaders. “I want to ensure a collaborative environment where we all work together for the good of the community,” Dr. Sheldon said to the chair of his board of deacons. As the party came together, the elected officials said how honored they were to meet him because of his reputation to galvanize people.

Alderman Johnson was also new, and as a Christ-follower, he wanted to make sure he served the community with integrity. As he spoke to Dr. Sheldon, he expressed his desire to work with him to get the best resources for the people. “Dr. Sheldon, I grew up in this neighborhood. When I finished my law degree and passed the bar, I promised God that I would give back to those who invested in me. There are a lot of good people here, and I believe with God’s guidance and your help, we can make a difference.”

Dr. Sheldon was relieved to have an ally who aligned with his values. For him, it was the start of a God-ordained relationship.

*How important is it for church and civic leaders to work together in partnership?*

## Keep In Mind

“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, KJV)

## Words You Should Know

**A. Judges (Deuteronomy 16:18)** shafat (Heb.)—A position not unlike today’s judges; leaders of the local council of elders known for availability, impartiality, uprightness, and dedication.

**B. Officials (v. 18)** shoter (Heb.)—Writers of documents and a kind of police that enforced decisions of the judges

## Say It Correctly

**Sanhedrin.** San-HEE-drin

### KJV

**Deuteronomy 16:18** 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.

19 Thou shalt not wrest judgment; thou shalt not respect persons, neither take a gift: for a gift doth blind the eyes of the wise, and pervert the words of the righteous.

20 That which is altogether just shalt thou follow, that thou mayest live, and inherit the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.

**17:8** If there arise a matter too hard for thee in judgment, between blood and blood, between plea and plea, and between stroke and stroke, being matters of controversy within thy gates: then shalt thou arise, and get thee up into the place which the Lord thy God shall choose;

9 And thou shalt come unto the priests the Levites, and unto the judge that shall be in those days, and enquire; and they shall shew thee the sentence of judgment:

10 And thou shalt do according to the sentence, which they of that place which the Lord shall choose shall shew thee; and thou shalt observe to do according to all that they inform thee:

11 According to the sentence of the law which they shall teach thee, and according to the judgment which they shall tell thee, thou shalt do: thou shalt not decline from the sentence which they shall shew thee, to the right hand, nor to the left.

12 And the man that will do presumptuously, and will not hearken unto the priest that standeth to minister there before the Lord thy God, or unto the judge, even that man shall die: and thou shalt put away the evil from Israel.

13 And all the people shall hear, and fear, and do no more presumptuously.

### NLT

**Deuteronomy 16:18** "Appoint judges and officials for yourselves from each of your tribes in all the towns the Lord your God is giving you. They must judge the people fairly.

19 You must never twist justice or show partiality. Never accept a bribe, for bribes blind the eyes of the wise and corrupt the decisions of the godly.

20 Let true justice prevail, so you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

**17:8** "Suppose a case arises in a local court that is too hard for you to decide—for instance, whether someone is guilty of murder or only of manslaughter, or a difficult lawsuit, or a case involving different kinds of assault. Take such legal cases to the place the Lord your God will choose,

9 and present them to the Levitical priests or the judge on duty at that time. They will hear the case and declare the verdict.

10 You must carry out the verdict they announce and the sentence they prescribe at the place the Lord chooses. You must do exactly what they say.

11 After they have interpreted the law and declared their verdict, the sentence they impose must be fully executed; do not modify it in any way.

12 Anyone arrogant enough to reject the verdict of the judge or of the priest who represents the Lord your God must die. In this way you will purge the evil from Israel.

13 Then everyone else will hear about it and be afraid to act so arrogantly.

## The People, Places, and Times

**The Place the Lord Your God Will Choose.** This cumbersome phrase is found often throughout Deuteronomy. It refers to the location of God's holy shrine. The Tabernacle would be set up in several places throughout the period of the judges and kings until Solomon finally finished the Temple in Jerusalem. God did not want to limit His guidance to one shrine location and leave His people confused as to how to obey His laws when the shrine was moved to another location. God chose not to say "the Tabernacle" either, knowing He would later be worshiped in the Temple. This ambiguity later gave the Samaritans an excuse not to worship at Jerusalem as tensions between them and the Israelites rose. The Samaritans believed the place the Lord chose was their own local Mt. Gerizim, rather than the Israelites' Mt. Zion. This was still an object of tension in Jesus' day (John 4:20–21).

## Background

After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the children of Israel were ready to become a nation. God wanted Israel to be a theocracy, where His people would live in a manner that would reflect His government. In this transfer of power, Moses stood as the intermediary serving as prophet and judge. In the book of Deuteronomy, God restates and reaffirms to a new generation the decrees and ordinances given to Israel, starting in Exodus with the Ten Commandments to the laws written in the books of Leviticus and Numbers. The descendants of Israel are instructed throughout the book of Deuteronomy to be careful that they do as the Lord has commanded so that they would live long and prosper in the land. They were to be an example to the other nations of God's power and blessing by administering justice as a civil society (Deuteronomy 5:32, 6:17–19, 7:12–22, 8:11). God, through His ordinances, decrees, and precepts, set the culture for Israel as the mark of His presence. His handprint makes Israel a peculiar nation that worshiped the true and living God.

*What is mark of God's presence in our culture?*

### At-A-Glance

1. Just Officials (Deuteronomy 16:18–20)
2. Civil Obedience (Deuteronomy 17:8–13)

## In Depth

**1. Just Officials (Deuteronomy 16:18–20)** God, through His prophet Moses, instructs Israel as they become a nation to be governed by His standard of right and wrong. God is righteous, just, and upright in all His ways. He sets the expectation through His commands that those placed in civil authority among the tribes and towns be submitted to God as the highest authority. He directs that leaders be chosen from among the people to administer justice just as Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, had advised him soon after escaping Egypt (Exodus 18:13–26). Those chosen were to be people who feared God, were considered trustworthy among the people, wise, impartial, had integrity, able to discern between right and wrong, and not subject to bribery. Justice is at the heart of God's character, and He hates imbalanced scales (Proverbs 11:1).

Moses implores the judges and officers among the tribes to have an unwavering commitment to justice and truth above all in representing the people and making decisions when upholding the Law. God recognizes that when people accept bribes and partiality, it is unjust to the righteous. People living in community will have disputes and disagreements, but there must be a representative who can listen to the facts, review the rule of law, and with the wisdom of God administer fair judgment.

Leaders must seek God's heart in mediating a peaceful resolution to conflicts and upholding the rights of all people, seeing them as God's creation.

*What is the evidence of a godly leader?*

## **2. Civil Obedience (Deuteronomy 17:8–13)**

In establishing civil order for Israel, Moses further instructs the officials on how to handle difficult cases such as murder, assault, or lawsuits. They are told to seek the Lord and go to the Tabernacle to seek the counsel of the Levitical priest and the judge. The Levitical priests were to be in lockstep with God to hear His voice. The priests were to serve as spiritual advisors to judges to support their discernment in interpreting the Law. The judge was in charge of rendering a decision on the matter, like the Supreme Court in our time. The judge's decision under the auspices of godly wisdom was to be final, and once the decision was announced, it could not be overruled or overturned. Moses gives God's command that if the person should not abide by the judge's decision, they would be put to death. It was considered evil before the Lord to not adhere to godly authority, and God expected swift justice so that others would not follow that example.

Further, God expected the judges and priests to be fully submitted to His authority and display excellent moral character so that the people will view them as His representatives. When leaders fail in exhibiting godly character, people lose faith in authority and the result is social disorder.

*How can those in authority change the narrative on leadership to reflect God's heart for justice?*

### **Search the Scriptures**

1. What roles did God through Moses command the people to establish to lead their communities (Deuteronomy 16:18)?
2. What was God's warning to those who failed to heed the priest or judge's decision (Deuteronomy 17:12–13)?

### **Discuss the Meaning**

1. What was the significance of God's command to appoint leaders in the land? Why was it important for these leaders to exhibit excellent moral character and sound judgment?
2. Why do you think God established an order to deal with difficult cases? Why was God stern on the consequences of disobedience to the judge's decision?

### **Liberating Lesson**

Our world needs authority in every realm, and there should be healthy respect and honor for those in leadership. However, when power is misused, it erodes trust and systems break. God provided instructions to safeguard against broken trust, and He also established that when those leaders are proven trustworthy, their word is bond. Leaders and the people under their authority must work as partners in progress; one should not oppress the other. A just society is when all are equal under the law, and people are judged fairly. The people have to be able to trust the integrity of leaders. People must receive due process and have their voices heard for the fair resolution of conflicts. Further, as citizens, we must hold leaders accountable to guide us under the protection of God's authority.

## Application for Activation

Imagine what families, churches, communities, schools, businesses, and justice systems would be like with people who took seriously the God's mandate to lead with integrity? Imagine the impact if people were engaged, involved, and held leaders accountable in a respectful way. Imagine the exchange of ideas if people actively participated in the processes needed to make society just. An essential activity to start living in a just society is to listen with an empathetic ear, to reflect on how an individual can bring forth change, and then take action. Look for opportunities in your spheres of influence to attend town hall meetings or to even host one. These meetings should be places where people can speak with respectful candor, and leaders can give and receive feedback. The lively discussion can usher in a renewed level of engagement.

## 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

### Deuteronomy 16:18–20; 17:8–13

**18 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.**

The judges (Heb. shafat, shaw–FOT) are different from the elders. Their role was not very different from that of today's judges. Four characteristics were required of them; namely availability, impartiality, uprightness, and dedication. They were the leaders among the local council of elders. The officers (Heb. shotar, sho–TAR) on the other hand, were probably assisting the judges. This word means a writer of documents. However they were not mere scribes because both "official" and "scribe" are also used distinctly from one another (2 Chronicles 34:13). The official's role is similar to that of the modern police where they represent the executive branch of the judiciary. Although there is no particular method of selection of the judges, the use of the second person suggests that the people themselves were to select their judges either directly or through the council of elders. In that case, the judges would have the required legitimacy to carry out their duties. The more experienced and upright people among them were to be chosen, or they were picked up among the members of the council of elders. The judge could be the local chief chosen from among the elders.

These appointed judges would limit their jurisdiction to a local community. Each tribe and each town in Israel was to appoint judges for their community. For matters that are not too complex, the local

judges have the authority and the legitimacy to give a verdict. The availability of judges in every town of each tribe was God's provision for the people to have easy access to judges, even in stressful or urgent cases. They were to hold their trials publicly at the city gate, where most legal matters were discussed and decided in the ancient Near East. The judges were to exhibit high moral and ethical standards and carry their duty with fairness, showing no favoritism.

**19 Thou shalt not wrest judgment; thou shalt not respect persons, neither take a gift: for a gift doth blind the eyes of the wise, and pervert the words of the righteous.**

The many important aspects to delivering justice discussed in this verse could be required either of the judges or the whole assembly because verse 19 is in the second person. The KJV uses the second personal pronoun "you," while the NLT put it in the third to assume that the judges must fulfill the below requirements. Although it was the primary duty for the judges to ensure the equity of each case brought before them, it was also a requirement for the entire population to ensure the fair delivery of justice. It therefore makes the judges accountable to the people who appointed them.

This warning against twisting justice appeared in Exodus 23:6 as a provision to protect the poor in judgment. Poor people should not be condemned simply because of their social status. The warning is basically against overturning the verdict of a case in favor of the guilty.

The idiom translated as "respecting persons," here alludes to avoiding miscarriage of justice in favor of rich and powerful people against weak and poor people. But it also means that weak or poor people should likewise not be favored. God's Law also states that there should be no favoritism for the poor nor consideration for the rich (Leviticus 19:15). Fair judgment should be applied to all irrespective of social status.

The Hebrew word used for bribe here is *shahad* (SHAW-hodd), which means a gift for which something is expected in return. Isaiah curses those who justify the wicked for a reward and take away the righteousness of the righteous (Isaiah 5:23). A judge would not accept a fee from a party in a trial against another. God's word warns that a gift corrupts the heart (Ecclesiastes 7:7), and a bribe hurts the cause of the innocent (Exodus 23:8).

**20 That which is altogether just shalt thou follow, that thou mayest live, and inherit the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.**

The necessary condition for the people of Israel to live peaceful and prosper in the Promised Land was the application of true justice. The Lord's blessing for His people is enjoyed as long as the people live in accordance with the requirements laid down for them. The absence of justice will incur not only the curse of God in the land but will also generate disorder that will make life challenging. True justice will protect the vulnerable from oppression by the strong, but above all, it will grant everyone the possibility to enjoy a peaceful life where their rights are protected.

**17:8 If there arise a matter too hard for thee in judgment, between blood and blood, between plea and plea, and between stroke and stroke, being matters of controversy within thy gates: then shalt thou arise, and get thee up into the place which the LORD thy God shall choose.**

With cases that are above their ability to rule, the local judges had to refer them to a higher court. It is not a court of appeal for the ruling in the lower court, but a court of referral which handles cases where guilt or innocence cannot be determined or the application of justice is unclear. This could have been the seventy-one member Sanhedrin (Numbers 11:16-17).

In the wilderness, Moses was the last resort for justice. Difficult cases were brought to him to settle (Deuteronomy 1:17). But once in the Promised Land, a place was designated by God to be the capital city of the nation, the center of their political, religious, social, and judicial life. The higher court was therefore to be located at the Tabernacle (and later the Temple) complex. The appeal to the court of referral is made by the local judges and not the parties involved in the trial.

The three kinds of cases beyond local judge's knowledge or ability that require referral was murder (KJV: "between blood and blood"), lawsuit (KJV: "between plea and plea"), and assault (KJV: "between stroke and stroke"). Murder is a case in which it is difficult to determine whether the act was intentional or accidental or whether the accused person is really guilty. The lawsuit probably refers here to criminal law such as theft or damage. The assault could be bodily injury or property damage done by accident or on purpose.

**9 And thou shalt come unto the priests the Levites, and unto the judge that shall be in those days, and enquire; and they shall shew thee the sentence of judgment:**

All the priests were descendants of Levi. The priest might have judged the court in religious matters and a layman chief judge in secular matters, similar to the court set up by Jehoshaphat in the 9th century BC (2 Chronicles 19:4–11). In Jehoshaphat's time, priests and laymen presided in the high court depending on the issue. The matters related to the worship were sorted out by the priest, while the other matters were solved by the lay judge.

**10 And thou shalt do according to the sentence, which they of that place which the LORD shall choose shall shew thee; and thou shalt observe to do according to all that they inform thee: 11 According to the sentence of the law which they shall teach thee, and according to the judgment which they shall tell thee, thou shalt do: thou shalt not decline from the sentence which they shall shew thee, to the right hand, nor to the left.**

The sentence of the high court of referral was final and did not call for any other appeal. No stroke should be removed from their verdict. Two reasons account for the impossibility to appeal to the decision of the high court. First, its decisions were divinely sanctioned. Secondly, the judges at the higher court were men of experience and knowledge above those of the local courts. The local judges were responsible for the application of the ruling of the high court, because they brought the case before it. They were forbidden to amend it.

**12 And the man that will do presumptuously, and will not hearken unto the priest that standeth to minister there before the LORD thy God, or unto the judge, even that man shall die: and thou shalt put away the evil from Israel. 13 And all the people shall hear, and fear, and do no more presumptuously.**

Any contempt to the ruling of the high court leads to the death penalty. This verse suggests that the high court included priests who could inquire of the Lord for the difficult cases. The act of contempt is a seed of rebellion and should be treated as such.

Capital punishment for contempt of court serves as a deterrent from any subsequent attempt of contempt. Purging the evil from Israel, as stated in the last part of verse 12, appears nine times with slight variations throughout Deuteronomy, all in explaining a law that calls for the death penalty. Paul quotes this verse when he exhorts the Corinthian church to expel the evil of an incestuous relationship from among them (1 Corinthians 5:13). In our present generation, the debate is still going on about outlawing capital punishment, so it is difficult to read about our loving God demanding the death penalty. The view presented in these verses is that a harsh penalty will deter others from

imitating the crime. Much of the cause to abolish the modern death penalty is also due to the possibility of errors in judgment. Here however, God Himself is consulted, so we can trust His judgment as to someone's guilt. Because the priest is consulted in the matter, disregarding the decision is tantamount to disregarding God's word. Therefore, this crime is punished as seriously as other crimes of idolatry and direct defiance of God.

Remember also, that these laws were meant to display God to the nations. Other nations at this time used the death penalty for much lesser crimes. The Code of Hammurabi, for example, calls for the death penalty for various kinds of theft or for harboring a fugitive slave. Across the ancient world, only the most serious offenses called for the death penalty but many other non-lethal punishments existed. In other contemporary cultures, criminals who did not earn death might instead have their hands, noses, or genitals cut off. These mutilations might themselves lead to death by infection or would at least leave the person unable to financially support themselves for the rest of their lives. In God's Law, however, almost all non-lethal punishments were merely fines.

Further, from what scholars can tell, few other ancient cultures troubled themselves with how to uphold the integrity of their legal system. Those guilty of perjury in ancient Egypt would be sentenced to death, but no other law can be found similar to this Israelite law about upholding a judge's decision. God's justice system was to be obeyed to distribute justice to every citizen, no matter their wealth or class. Contempt of the court system was penalized as a serious offense so that the system could make a difference, not just for those who could afford fines and long legal battles, but for everyone.

# Daily Bible Readings

## **MONDAY**

True and False Witnesses  
(Deuteronomy 19:15–21)

## **TUESDAY**

Addressing Church Conflicts  
(Matthew 18:15–20)

## **WEDNESDAY**

The Duty to Forgive  
(Matthew 18:21–35)

## **THURSDAY**

Moses' Court of Appeal  
(Exodus 18:13–26)

## **FRIDAY**

Speak Truth and Act on It  
(Ephesians 4:25–32)

## **SATURDAY**

God Is an Impartial Judge  
(Deuteronomy 10:14–22)

## **SUNDAY**

Appoint Leaders to Administer Justice  
(Deuteronomy 16:18–20, 17:8–13)