

Prayer

Holy Spirit, we praise You today. Thank You for Your works of power through Jesus Christ, thank You for the victories You have won in heavenly places to defeat death and Satan, and thank You for the peace we have with God the Father and the assurance of our sins forgiven. We worship You, Holy Spirit, for You dwell with God the Father and with Jesus Christ the Son, one God for all eternity: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Make sure that you listen to the concerns of the people you meet today, and towards the end of the day, offer these to the Lord in prayer.

On-going prayers

- **Pray about the use of the Bible.** *Pray for those are responsible for translating the Bible and publishing it.*
- *Give thanks for love, for the people who love you and all that this means to you*
- *Pray for the United Kingdom after the recent election*

Meditation

Peace is knowing that you are special and loved;
Loved so much that you do not have to question it.

Security is being able to do what you believe to be right,
And not feeling ashamed before anyone else about it.

Health is feeling good about yourself all the time,
So good that no illness or disease can break your heart.

Hope is having complete confidence in your future,
For it is guaranteed by promises of which you can be sure.

To act with integrity is to abandon deceit and wickedness,
And be entirely honest and open in your dealings with others.

Confidence is being able to get on with things unhindered,
Because your conscience is clear that you are doing what is right.

So, although all this can sound worldly, you will discover
That only in Jesus Christ are these things found complete.

Bible passage – Exodus 23:1-9

¹ Do not spread a false report.

Do not join with a wicked man to act as a malicious witness.

² Do not follow a majority in wrongdoing, and you must not bear witness in a lawsuit by following the majority in order to pervert justice;

³ Do not show favouritism to the poor in a dispute.

⁴ If you encounter your enemy's ox or donkey wandering away, you must bring it back.

⁵ If you see the donkey belonging to someone who hates you fallen under its pack, you must refrain from leaving it, and must free it with him.

⁶ Do not pervert justice for your poor in their lawsuits.

- ⁷ Keep away from a false charge, and do not put the innocent or those in the right to death, for I will not acquit the guilty.
- ⁸ Do not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds those with sight, and subverts the cause of the just.
- ⁹ You shall not oppress a resident stranger; you know the life of a stranger, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.
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Bible Study

Review

This passage contains yet another group of ten regulations, and it is not merely a random list of godly advice and 'common sense' for ancient people. These regulations are obviously very different from previous rules and regulations in Exodus about social justice generally (22:18-31), and they are very different from those that follow, about the worship of God especially at festivals (23:10-19 – see tomorrow). The list goes to the heart of what God requires for the practice of good justice, especially in litigation, where one citizen is set against another. They focus on the nature of justice and they describe how God's people may obtain His true justice, and as such, they have important implications for God's people today.

The first three are about the obligations placed upon everyone in the judicial process to act with integrity and honesty. People must give false reports, join with others to act maliciously, or do wrong just because everyone else does (23:1,2). These regulations are similar to the eighth and ninth (23:7,8), which call on people to refrain from falsehood and stand clear of corruption. These five regulations reflect the absolute justice of God, and the need to deal with those who subvert justice for their own ends. They also reflect many of the principles we recognise within justice systems today, such as the integrity of a court, due process, and the obligation of people to speak the truth in court. All in all, they are like a set of instructions both for those who seek justice, and for those who had to deliver justice under God's rule.

Within the whole sequence, two regulations appear almost the same; the fourth one that says no favouritism should be shown to the poor (23:3), and the seventh one that requires justice be maintained for the poor (23:6). Whilst these appear similar, they are really quite different, and when read together, they express God's concern for the poor in a very subtle way without compromising his impartiality. Consequently, God's command tells us we must deliver justice for the poor but through equitability and fairness, not through legal bias.

Two laws in this group seem different and out of place, and they are found in verses 4 and 5. Both of them demand that personal animosity should not prevent people from helping animals. We can easily imagine how someone might turn a blind eye to the distress of animals belonging to an enemy, but this is expressly forbidden, at least, for the sake of the animals. These laws are appropriate here because legal processes can highlight personal animosities; so in the midst of a court case, and when hatred runs at its height, people should not refrain from doing what is right. It was right that litigants maintain their social responsibilities, and respect the fact that before God, an enemy was 'innocent until proven guilty'. In earlier readings we found that individual regulations could often represent general principles, and if this is the case here, these two regulations (23:4,5) represented an appeal to all parties in a legal dispute to withhold hostilities whilst a case was being considered. Aggravation during due process was not right.

These regulations tell us that in God's eyes justice can either be done properly or improperly, and God is just. This is worth bearing in mind when disputes arise within the church causing great distress. People often turn to the New Testament for advice about how to deal with disputes, for example, Jesus' comments about people listening to each other before taking a dispute further (Matt 18:15) and Paul's comments about church disputes and law courts in 1 Corinthians 6. What may not be clear to us is that both these and other New Testament texts assume that the reader knows the laws and regulations of the Old Testament, as found here in Exodus. If we know these, then the advice of Jesus and Paul makes far more sense. We need to look at the whole of God's Word to create systems for dealing with disputes within the church!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- How were these laws applied, and what evidence is there for them?
- What makes for a good court under God?
- Does God show favouritism to the poor or not?
- How does helping our enemies help legal processes?

Notes on the text and translation

- V1** ***'Do not join with a wicked man to act as a malicious witness'*** *The first part of the phrase 'do not join with' is a Hebrew colloquialism which reads 'do not place your hand with a wicked man'. The last part of the phrase reads literally 'to become a witness of violence'; this is a strong way of describing the violence of injustice (see study).*
- V2** ***'do not follow a majority'*** *The Hebrew says 'do not go after the many', and this is like 'following the crowd'. The text presents this not as blind behaviour, however, but as a decision about how to act.*
- V5** ***'you must refrain from leaving it, and must free it with him.'*** *This is a difficult sentence to translate and there are wide variations in the different Bible versions. The gist of it is clear, however; it is something of a play on words in Hebrew, including an emphatic double use of the word for 'set free', indicating this is a strong command, 'you must ...'*
- V9** ***'you know the life of a stranger.'*** *This is translated in a number of different ways in the different Bible versions. The Hebrew words at the heart of this sentence is 'nephesh' meaning 'soul' or 'life', therefore referring to everything that it meant to be a stranger living in a foreign land.*

Going Deeper

How were these laws applied, and what evidence is there for them?

Moses gave these laws for God's people during the 'lawgiving' at Mount Sinai (20:1f.), but the laws themselves appear to look forward in time to Israel's later settlement in the villages and towns (or cities) of Canaan. Nevertheless, the laws were received and had to be enacted whilst the Israelites were in the desert, journeying towards the 'Promised Land'. Moses had appointed elders (18:22), and these community leaders acted as judges within the tribes of Israel whilst they journeyed in the wilderness, and their successors performed the same judicial function when they settled in Canaan. In the wilderness, we do not know how such 'courts' were convened, but there is ample evidence in the rest of the Old Testament that once settled, such courts gathered at the gates of their settlements and cities (Judges 9:35f. Ruth 4:1, Amos 5:10), and by and large, they managed to maintain community justice for considerable periods of time in the life of Israel.

Individuals in the community who had grievances came to the elders to present their cases and had an expectation of justice. As God's people, they had an expectation that they would receive justice that reflected not the opinions of the elders before whom they appeared, but a justice based on the God in whom they believed. None of the regulations in our group today mentions God or threatens any divine punishment, but they were designed to reflect the nature of God's covenant justice. We should not forget that it was an essential part of the process that judges/elders were appointed in a hierarchy, so that when people came to seek justice, if those they first saw could not settle their grievance, the matter was sent to higher authorities. Eventually the final authority was God alone, as we have seen in a number of individual laws (for example 21:6,13, 22:8,9). It was essential that God's people knew that the justice they received was God's justice and not the opinion of any particular judge or elder.

What makes for a good court under God?

If we look carefully at this list of ten laws, then some features of good law and legal practice spring out immediately. The first is the fact that God insists that false reporting and false witness is an abhorrence (23:1). Both the regulations in verse 1 expand upon the ninth of the Ten Commandments; 'You shall not bear false witness', and confirm our impression that ever since the Ten Commandments, each of them is expanded upon by one of the subsequent collections of laws. The second regulation in verse 1 is important however, because of the general principle in Israel that any report must have the support of more than one witness (Deut 17:6, 19:15). The greatest danger to judicial process therefore happens not merely when one person gives false witness, but when a wicked person gains support from someone else to give the false impression that testimony is corroborated. Such activity is described as that of a 'malicious witness', or more literally, 'witness of violence', and one example of this is the attempt of the Sanhedrin to obtain corroborating false testimony to confirm their charge against Jesus of blasphemy (Matthew 26:59f.)

The issue of false witness returns in verse 7, where God issues a threat using His full authority, saying that even when a court is corrupted by means of a false charge, the Lord God knows the truth and he will 'not acquit the guilty', especially if this has led to the death of an innocent man. It is extraordinary to read this in the light of what we know happened to Jesus, and the evidence of the Gospel writers that the Sanhedrin and Chief Priest of the day knew what they were doing when they tried to manipulate Israel's legal processes!

Two other cautions are provided for by this set of regulations that by implication also come under God's threat. Firstly, people are implored not to 'go with the majority' (23:2), which is clear advice to all to exercise their own minds, and a warning that even in the community of God's people, the majority are not necessarily right. Justice is based on truth, not gossip, wickedness or the human desire to avoid trouble and merge with the crowd. Secondly, verse 8 identifies bribery as a fundamental blight on justice, as it has always been. The regulation powerfully describes the effect of bribery, saying that it causes the subversion of justice by rendering 'blind those with sight' (23:8). Paul says that money is the 'root of all evil' (1 Tim 6:10), and implies that one human failing is that most people 'have their price'. No system of justice can retain the confidence of people unless those involved are able to withstand bribery, especially those in the community who are respected for their usual ability to perceive and discern the truth; those with 'sight'.

Does God show favouritism to the poor or not?

Scripture mostly gives us examples of God's direct favouritism of the poor, for example, as in yesterday's social regulations that provided for 'widows and orphans' (22:22). It is therefore surprising to read in these regulations; 'do not show favouritism to the poor' (23:3). Paradoxically however, this ruling has the desired effect of helping the poor because by drawing attention to them and God's desire that they must not be favoured in the processes of law, they stand a better chance of getting what they really need, which parity with the rich before the law, and justice. The second regulation about the poor is different, however, and commands those responsible for justice not to pervert it 'for your poor in their lawsuits' (23:6). In most human society, the poor do not get full or adequate justice, often because they cannot pay for it, yet God insists to this day that good judicial processes must make it possible for all people to stand equal before the law, without exception.

The issue of the poor is mentioned in the final regulation, which we have not yet commented upon. The regulation; 'you shall not oppress a resident stranger ...' (23:9) is similar to the regulation in yesterday's passage (23:21) where they were identified as the poor of the land. Oppression takes many forms, but its most pernicious is to prevent them from having equal access to justice, and this is abhorrent to God. In yesterday's verse as in this one, an appeal is made to Israel to accept that they were once the poor of the land when they were enslaved in Egypt, and this past experience should enable them to understand those who experience poverty now. When Moses said 'you know the life of a stranger', he was appealing to those who had indeed been enslaved themselves, and told them never to forget what it was like to live in real poverty. The regulation has now become an appeal to people to understand what it must be like to be truly poor.

How does helping our enemies help legal processes?

The two central verses (23:4,5) go to the heart of people's attitudes when facing disputes and judicial process. Even amongst God's people today, when accusations have been made and a ruling needs to be obtained about some injustice, great animosities can be created which can have terrible consequences. I have known congregations to be torn apart by such divisions before anyone has had a chance to present a case or be exonerated, for example, and by the time an issue is decided, the damage is done.

This is where these two regulations come into their own, for they reflect a community just like a church, in which people lived side by side, and needed to continue community life. Verse 4 reflects the general social law of the Old Testament 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Lev 19:18), but it is set in the context of practical help offered as might be expected of any neighbour.

The next verse is far more challenging. The picture here is something we are not familiar with, and this means that some translations of the verse are less than clear, so I will explain. If a donkey is given a load that is too much for it to bear, or becomes too much for it on the course of a journey, it will fall over. However, having fallen over, it finds it impossible to get back up unless it is freed from the pack and given assistance. Clearly, verse 5 instructs someone to help another when they observe that this has happened, because it is a difficult job and requires more than one person. The clue to the relevance of this regulation to the processes of law is that it should be done for someone 'who hates you'. Now, it would be difficult enough to do this for someone who you hate because you are in dispute with them, but surely far harder to do this for someone who hates you, who has perhaps made a false accusation against you. It would be far easier to pass by, as the Hebrew suggests by its choice of words, but in a way that is untranslatable into English! This ruling, just like the teaching of Jesus, presents the hardest circumstances possible and demands that even in the worst scenario of division and strife amongst God's people they behave towards each other with godliness and compassion. In addition, this case hints to us that it is not only ourselves who bear the cost of disputes, in this case it is innocent animals as well.

Application

This last regulation is stunningly close to the ethic Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, stating that God required 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Matt 5:44). It is hard to see that Jesus taught as he did about conflict without taking it for granted that those who paid attention to His words were aware of what the Old Testament said about conflict and its resolution. It is desperately sad to see the manner in which Christians can act when there is conflict, and it is profoundly challenging to read all this in Exodus, and realise that here we have God's system of justice designed to help us in these circumstances. I know of plenty of people who have quoted Paul and Jesus at each other in the middle of a conflict, but few who know that God commands them to love each other precisely in the middle of such a conflict, for the greater good of the church! I also know few official systems of resolving disputes used by churches that draw on any aspect of what God says here, for they all use modern judicial processes. It is as if no one has bothered to find out whether God has anything to say in His word about conflict resolution!

Paul says to Timothy, 'all Scripture is breathed by God and profitable for teaching, reproof, correction ...', and here it is just right for reproof and correction! It is not hard to take the ten regulations in our passage today and turn them into guidelines for conflict resolution in church life, but I will not take up time unnecessarily in going through the whole list doing just this. What is important is that God's people know that such regulations exist, moreover, they accept that God's primary way of resolving conflict is by good law and by just management of proper processes that are trusted by all parties.

Of course, no one can set up proper conflict resolution guidelines in the middle of a crisis, and Christians tend to feel that such conflict cannot surely happen amongst God's people until it happens before their eyes! So the wise church leader will ensure that Godly systems that are derived from Scripture are in place, moreover, when conflict occurs, it is essential that all parties be told the modern equivalent of verses 4 and 5. This will surely be very similar to Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount, and if people will do their best to keep to this, despite their intense feelings, much damage can be averted. God's people have a greater duty to the mission of the church when conflict arises, than to their own personal sense of grievance; neither should a controversy be a subject of gossip, false reporting or testimony, the rule of the majority, or most awfully, bribery. We need to be very clear about these things, even though they are not what we feel are of primary concern for the proclamation of the Gospel.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group the relevance of these laws to today and in particular in the life of the church.
2. How can we help the poor if we do not redress the balance and give them prior treatment, even in matters of law?
3. How does bribery work today either within society or within the church? Can the church ever be immune from conflict?

Personal comments by author

I feel rather concerned at times that many people in the church today just do not know what the Bible says about justice. Too quickly, we jump on the bandwagons of how the world deals with justice, organising things, leadership, or other organisational issues, and assume that this will give us the best results, without ever knowing that the Old Testament teaches all we need to know! Too often I have suggested to church leaders that there is benefit in learning from Scripture, and been met by astonishment and a certain amount of incredulity. Having spent a large part of my working life teaching the Old Testament, I feel these things rather deeply, but I must abide by the requirement of this passage to keep the greater good of God's people in mind without making this into a matter of conflict. That is, unless the Lord makes it so!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- Study this Scripture carefully, and decide for yourself what it teaches about conflict resolution and processes of law. Discuss it with others and see whether you can convey your own thoughts about this to others.
- Pray for those in the church who are going through conflict, and need to find peace. Pray that they will be blessed by Godly conflict resolution.

Final Prayer

Lift us, dear Lord and Father, to the heights of praise and worship; not only now, but throughout our day and in the dreams of our night's sleep. Raise our spirits so that others around us can see that You are with us, and we are Yours, to the praise and glory of Your name: AMEN.
