



JUSTICE & RIGHTEOUSNESS

Doug McNett // May 10, 2026

Text: Deuteronomy 16 & 17 (ESV)

Big Idea: God forms His people to steward influence with justice, humility, and submission.

Well, good morning; how are we? Good, good. I want to give a quick shout-out to those joining us in our online community. We're grateful you're part of the Foothills family, worshiping with us wherever you are. If we haven't met, my name is Doug. I'm one of the pastors here.

This morning we're continuing our series through Deuteronomy. So, if you would, go ahead and grab your Bibles and turn with me to Deuteronomy chapter 16.

Last week, we looked at how God was shaping His people through worship. Deuteronomy 12 wasn't ultimately just about locations or sacrifices or centralized worship. God was teaching Israel something deeper. He was teaching them that they were not going to survive in the Promised Land if their hearts became scattered in their worship. They were being formed into a people whose lives revolved around Him instead of revolving around the cultures and people around them. God wasn't just giving them laws. He was shaping an entirely different kind of community than the rest of the world.

And what's interesting is that as we move forward in Deuteronomy, Moses keeps building on that same idea. Because if God's people are going to live differently, it won't just show up in how they worship. It'll show up in how they lead, how they make decisions, how they treat people, how they handle authority, how they respond when they have influence, power, leverage, or the ability to benefit themselves at someone else's expense.

One of the things that becomes obvious pretty quickly in life is that power has a way of revealing what's already inside of us. Sometimes it's big power, sometimes it's small power, but give somebody influence, authority, control, or even just the upper hand in a situation, and whatever has been or is shaping their heart usually starts surfacing pretty fast. A person can sound incredibly humble until they're the one in charge. A person can talk a lot about fairness until fairness becomes

costly to them personally. A person can sound deeply principled until compromise benefits them all of a sudden.

I think when we hear words like justice or authority or leaders, or even righteousness, we might think about governments, courtrooms, politics, or people above us...somewhere out there. But in Deuteronomy does something different. It doesn't portray justice, or authority and righteousness and so on as something that's off in the distance, it points to almost all of us as carrying influence somewhere. I mean, Parents do. Teachers do. Employers do. Coaches do. Ministry leaders do. Older siblings. Friend groups. Every single day, we make decisions in our own lives that actually affect the people around us.

And as Israel is preparing to enter the Promised Land, God is aware that they are going to be building an entire society together. And as He is working through Moses as His leader of the people, Moses is thinking, man, this is no longer just about surviving the wilderness. They're going to need judges. Leaders. Systems. Authority structures. And the deeper question underneath all of it is this: what will make God's people different from every other nation around them?

Because God wasn't simply interested in giving Israel a functioning society. That's not enough for Him. What God was doing, was forming a people whose lives reflected His character. And that's exactly where Moses goes next. Check it out with me in Deuteronomy 16 starting in verse 18, I'll be reading from the ESV, ¹⁸ "You shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns that the LORD your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. ¹⁹ You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. ²⁰ Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the LORD your God is giving you."

One of the things we can easily miss when we read a passage like this is just how different Israel was supposed to be from the nations around them. Because in the ancient world, justice was often connected to

power, wealth, status, political influence, or social class. If you had money, connections, or the favor of rulers, life worked differently for you. The wealthy could often manipulate outcomes. The poor regularly lost disputes. Foreigners and widows were incredibly vulnerable. Bribes weren't shocking in the ancient Near East; in many places they were expected. Justice was often something reserved for the powerful rather than something accessible to ordinary people.

But Israel was supposed to function differently because their laws were rooted in the character of God, Himself. Unlike the surrounding nations and cultures, the law of the Israelites is rooted in theology. The law is rooted in theology

In other words, the way Israel treated people was meant to flow out of what they believed God Himself was like. God is just, therefore His people are called to reflect His justice. In other words, the reason justice mattered so deeply in Israel wasn't because God wanted them to have a more efficient society than the surrounding nations. It mattered because the way they treated people was supposed to reveal something about what God Himself is like.

And notice where Moses begins. Verse 18 says judges and officers were to be appointed "in all your towns." That matters. Justice was meant to be local, accessible, and woven into everyday covenant life. This wasn't supposed to become some distant, unreachable system where ordinary people had no access or no voice. God intended righteousness and justice to permeate the community itself. Everyday decisions. Everyday disputes. Everyday relationships. The people of God were supposed to experience fairness, integrity, and righteousness in the ordinary rhythms of life.

Then Moses says something incredibly direct in verse 19: "You shall not pervert justice." The Hebrew idea there carries the sense of twisting or bending something out of shape. It's the idea of taking something that should be straight and slowly distorting it. And honestly, that's kinda how injustice usually works. It rarely begins with somebody waking up one morning deciding to become corrupt. Most injustice begins slowly,

subtly, internally. A compromise here. A justification there. A bending of truth when it becomes personally beneficial.

And if we're honest, most injustice doesn't begin in courtrooms. It begins in ordinary hearts that slowly become comfortable twisting things when it benefits us. It shows up when we apply different standards to ourselves than we do to others. It shows up when we excuse sin in our own lives while becoming harsh toward someone else's failures. It shows up when protecting ourselves becomes more important than honesty. It shows up when we subtly manipulate situations because we want control over the outcome.

And what's fascinating is that Moses specifically warns against partiality and bribery because both of those things distort judgment. Partiality says, "I will treat you differently based on who you are." A bribe says, "I can be persuaded away from what is right if something benefits me enough." Both reveal the same deeper issue: the heart can slowly drift away from righteousness when self-interest becomes the controlling force.

And then Moses says something incredibly strong in verse 20: "Justice, and only justice, you shall follow." In Hebrew, repetition communicates intensity. It's emphasis. It's seriousness. It's almost as if Moses is slowing the people down and saying, "Don't drift from this. Don't compromise this. Don't redefine this when it becomes inconvenient or costly." Because human beings have always had a tendency to reshape justice around personal preference, personal comfort, or personal advantage.

And notice the promise attached to it. "That you may live and inherit the land that the Lord your God is giving you." That means justice and righteousness were tied directly to the flourishing of the covenant community. Israel's future in the land wasn't simply connected to military strength or economic success. Their flourishing was deeply connected to whether they reflected the character of God in the way they treated one another.

And I think that's important for us to hear because we live in a culture where justice is almost always discussed externally. We immediately think about governments, institutions, systems, politics, and debates

happening somewhere out there. But Deuteronomy keeps bringing the conversation back to us...inward. Before justice becomes something structural out there...in the society, it's something personal. It asks questions like: What happens when I have influence? What happens when I have leverage? What happens when honesty costs me something? What happens when fairness becomes inconvenient? What comes out of me when I'm the one with authority in the situation?

Because the reality is, almost all of us carry influence somewhere and what Moses is showing Israel is that God cares deeply about what kind of people they become when they hold influence over the lives of others.

But Moses also understands something else. Even with good laws, there will still be difficult situations. There will still be complicated cases. There will still be moments where wisdom is needed because laws alone cannot fully solve the deeper problem of the human heart. And that leads into the next section beginning in chapter 17. Here Moses addresses what happens when things come up that are too difficult for the local judges to handle on their own. Let's pick it up beginning in verse 8.

⁸“If any case arises requiring decision between one kind of homicide and another, one kind of legal right and another, or one kind of assault and another, any case within your towns that is too difficult for you, then you shall arise and go up to the place that the Lord your God will choose.

⁹And you shall come to the Levitical priests and to the judge who is in office in those days, and you shall consult them, and they shall declare to you the decision. ¹⁰Then you shall do according to what they declare to you from that place that the Lord will choose. And you shall be careful to do according to all that they direct you. Deuteronomy 17:8-10.

Now, at first glance, this section can feel a little distant from us because most of us aren't judges trying to settle legal disputes in ancient Israel. But underneath this section is actually a really important principle about the kind of people God was forming. Because Moses understood something that still remains true today: not every situation in life is simple. Not every conflict is black and white. Not every circumstance can

be solved by a quick reaction, a personal opinion, or an emotional response.

There were going to be difficult situations in Israel where wisdom was needed. Cases where local leaders disagreed. Situations where people were uncertain about what righteousness actually required. And notice what Moses doesn't say. He doesn't say, "Everybody just decide truth for themselves." He doesn't say, "Do whatever feels right to you personally." Instead, he points the people toward God's established authority and instruction.

And I think this matters because one of the defining instincts of our culture is the belief that maturity means autonomy. That maturity means I get to do what I want. That freedom means becoming your own final authority. That nobody should be able to speak truth over your life except you. But covenant life with God has never worked that way. From the very beginning, following God has required humility. The willingness to admit that we are not wise enough to build truth entirely from ourselves.

And honestly, this is one of the hardest things for human beings to accept. We don't mind authority when it agrees with us. We struggle with authority when it confronts us. We like guidance when it confirms our instincts. We resist it when it challenges them.

But Israel was being formed into a people who understood that righteousness required submission to something higher than personal preference. That's why the difficult cases were brought before the priests and judges at the place God appointed. The issue wasn't merely legal procedure. The deeper issue was trust. Would the people trust God enough to submit themselves underneath His wisdom rather than simply following their own instincts?

And there's actually an important historical detail here that helps make this clearer for us. In the surrounding nations, kings were often viewed as the ultimate source of law and authority. Pharaoh's word was absolute. Ancient rulers often functioned almost like divine figures themselves. But in Israel, even leaders stood underneath God's authority. Truth did not originate from the king. Justice did not originate from the opinions of

whoever had the most power. God Himself was the ultimate authority over the nation.

That's part of what made Israel so unique among the ancient nations. Their entire society was supposed to acknowledge that no human being ultimately sat at the center. God did.

And honestly, that principle still confronts us today because we all have moments where we want to function as our own authority. We want to define righteousness on our terms. We want to reshape obedience around what feels comfortable, or reasonable, or culturally acceptable to us. But friends, Scripture repeatedly reminds us that spiritual maturity is not found in self-rule. It's found in surrender.

Pastor Theologian, A.W. Tozer, said, "The man who has God for his treasure has all things in One." I think part of what Tozer was getting at is that when God truly occupies the center of our lives, we stop needing ourselves to occupy that place. We stop treating our opinions, our desires, our instincts as ultimate. We begin learning how to trust Him even when obedience feels difficult or costly.

And that leads Moses directly into the final section of this passage because eventually Israel is going to ask for a king. In fact, Moses already anticipates it here. And what's fascinating is that God already knows the great danger that comes with human leadership. Because power has a tendency to elevate the human heart if it isn't anchored deeply in submission to God.

Listen to what Moses says beginning in verse 14. "When you come to the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you possess it and dwell in it and then say, "I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me," you may indeed set a king over you whom the LORD your God will choose..." Then jumping down to verse 18, "And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law... And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life... that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers..."
Deuteronomy 17:14-20.

This section is honestly remarkable because long before Israel ever had a king, God already knew what the danger would be. And the danger wasn't merely poor leadership strategy or political instability. The deeper danger was what power tends to do to the human heart. Because if influence is not shaped by submission to God, it begins drifting toward self-exaltation. Toward believing our way is always right, our perspective matters most, and our desires should ultimately win.

And if you know Israel's history, this becomes incredibly important. Eventually, in 1 Samuel chapter 8, Israel does ask for a king. But part of the reason they ask is because they want to be "like all the nations." They look around at the surrounding cultures and think, "That's what strength looks like. That's what security looks like. That's what greatness looks like." They wanted a visible ruler who looked powerful in the eyes of the world. But God immediately places boundaries around Israel's future kings because His people were never supposed to function like the surrounding nations. The king was not supposed to multiply horses, wives, or excessive wealth. Horses represented military strength and dependence on military power. Wives often represented political alliances with foreign nations and eventually led many kings into idolatry. Wealth represented self-sufficiency, excess, and pride. None of those things were automatically sinful by themselves, but they became spiritually dangerous when they slowly replaced dependence on God. And honestly, Israel's history proves the point. Solomon becomes the clearest example of this failure. He accumulates massive wealth. He multiplies horses. He multiplies wives. And over time, his heart slowly drifts away from the Lord. The very things Deuteronomy warned about become some of the very things that contribute to Israel's spiritual decline.

But what's even more striking is what the king was commanded to do. He was to personally write out a copy of God's law and read it all the days of his life. Think about that for a moment. The highest human authority in Israel still sat underneath the authority of God's Word. The king was never

supposed to view himself as ultimate. He was supposed to remain continually shaped by the voice and wisdom of God.

And verse 20 tells us exactly why: "that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers."

That's really the issue underneath all of this. Power has a tendency to convince people they are above others. Above correction. Above accountability. Above dependence on God. But biblical leadership was never meant to elevate a person above everyone else. Leadership in God's kingdom was supposed to be marked by humility, submission, and obedience.

And honestly, this matters far beyond kings and governments because most of us will never sit on a throne, but almost all of us will hold influence somewhere. In marriage. In parenting. In leadership. In ministry. In friendships. At work. And one of the most important questions we can ask ourselves is this: what is shaping me when I'm the one holding influence? Because eventually whatever is shaping the heart starts surfacing through our decisions, our leadership, and the way we treat people.

And this is ultimately why the Old Testament leaves us longing for a better King. Because Israel's kings fail over and over again. Some are decent. Many are corrupt. Even the good ones are flawed. Which creates this anticipation throughout the Old Testament for a ruler who will finally lead with perfect righteousness and justice.

And that's exactly who Jesus is.

Jesus is the true and better King who never used power to exalt Himself at the expense of others. He never manipulated people for selfish gain. He never distorted justice for personal comfort. Philippians chapter 2 tells us that although He existed in the form of God, He humbled Himself. The King of Kings stepped down into humanity, took on flesh, and ultimately laid down His life for people who deserved judgment instead.

And through Him, God is still forming a people whose lives reflect His character. Not perfectly. Not instantly. But progressively. As we surrender ourselves to Him, He reshapes how we lead, how we treat people, how

we handle influence, how we pursue righteousness, and how we submit ourselves underneath His authority.

Because at the end of the day, Deuteronomy is not merely asking whether Israel would have good systems. It's asking whether they would become the kind of people who reflected the heart of God.

And honestly, that's still the question sitting in front of us today.

Let's pray.