

Christian Manner of Justice

Devotional Reading: Luke 3:7–14

Background Scripture: Exodus 1:8–14; Amos 5:6–15; Zechariah 8:16–17

Today's Scripture: Deuteronomy 24:14–21; Ephesians 6:5–9;

1 Timothy 6:17–19

I. Generosity in Work

Deuteronomy 24:14–21

14 Thou shalt not oppress an hired servant that is poor and needy, whether he be of thy brethren, or of thy strangers that are in thy land within thy gates:

15 At his day thou shalt give him his hire, neither shall the sun go down upon it; for he is poor, and setteth his heart upon it: lest he cry against thee unto the Lord, and it be sin unto thee.

16 The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin.

17 Thou shalt not pervert the judgment of the stranger, nor of the fatherless; nor take a widow's raiment to pledge:

18 But thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in Egypt, and the Lord thy God redeemed thee thence: therefore I command thee to do this thing.

19 When thou cuttest down thine harvest in thy field, and hast forgot a sheaf in the field, thou shalt not go again to fetch it: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow: that the Lord thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hands.

20 When thou beatest thine olive tree, thou shalt not go over the boughs again: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow.

21 When thou gatherest the grapes of thy vineyard, thou shalt not glean it afterward: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow.

Israel's identity as God's covenant people was supposed to shape their treatment of poor and marginalized people. Moses had already reminded the Israelites that poor people would always be part of the population (Deuteronomy 15:11). As a result, he commanded an openhanded policy toward these people, requiring generous giving without resentment.

14. An Israelite who experienced economic difficulty might serve other Israelites as a *hired servant*. These workers committed to a set time of service. They would eventually receive their freedom.

God's command to treat laborers fairly does not depend on a laborer's place of origin. God expects His people not to *oppress the poor and needy*, whether those people are *brethren* Israelites or *strangers* (non-Israelites living within Israelite towns).

15. One obvious way to practice justice toward workers is through the timely payment of wages. The hired workers described in this verse are equivalent to day laborers. They were usually paid for their work at the end of an agreed time. It was cruel and unlawful for a landowner to withhold a day's wages from the worker.

The text notes that causing these workers reason to cry out *to the Lord is sin*.

16. The principle in this verse differs from other law codes of the ancient world. The Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, for example, stated that if a builder built a house that collapsed, causing the death of the homeowner's son, the builder's son was to be killed. In contrast, the Law of Moses protects innocent family members who might otherwise be punished for a relative's actions. The given stipulation in God's law prevents a potentially endless chain of revenge.

This principle does not contradict the Scripture that speaks of God's "visiting the iniquity of the *fathers* upon the *children* unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me" (Deuteronomy 5:9). Each person surely experiences the consequences of their sin, as do others close to them.

17. The three groups of people most at risk of unfair *judgment* are *the stranger* (non-Israelites living in the land), the *fatherless*, and widows.

This text contains a specific statute to protect widows. Lenders could not take a widow's *raiment* as a *pledge* when lending. While the law includes rules for lenders to take clothing as collateral, they are strictly forbidden to take it from the vulnerable.

18. The Israelites recall their history of enslavement in the land of *Egypt*. That history, along with God's redemptive act, serves as the foundation of Israel's identity. Israel was to *remember* that *God redeemed* them and respond by caring for the most vulnerable around them.

19. One practical way the Israelites showed justice to the most vulnerable was through practices at harvest time. Harvesters in a field would cut bundles of grain and bind each bundle into a sheaf. The poor and vulnerable could collect the leftover grain in a process called "gleaning." If the harvesters forgot a sheaf, the text directs them to leave it for the gleaners.

This practice reminds landowners that their land and the resulting harvest belong to the Lord. God's blessing depends on meeting the needs of others.

20–21. The ancient world prized olive trees for their fruit and the oil they produced. Cultivation and harvest of the *olive tree* and *vineyard* requires considerable time and energy. Landowners worked hard to prevent any wasted crops.

II. Mutual Respect in Work Ephesians 6:5–9

5 Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ;

6 Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart;

7 With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men:

8 Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free.

9 And, ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening: knowing that your Master also is in heaven; neither is there respect of persons with him.

5. In many ways, slavery in the first-century world was unlike slavery in the pre-Civil War United States. During the time of the apostle Paul, it was possible for enslaved people, mainly males who worked in households, to gain a level of freedom. Paul begins this text by addressing the less powerful party. He directs *servants* to submit to earthly authority by being *obedient*. Although an enslaved person is under an authority *according to the flesh*, both the master and enslaved person have one Lord: Christ Jesus.

Fear of violence and cruelty was com-

mon in the lives of many enslaved people. This verse, however, does not indicate approval of such things. Intimidation and brutality have no place in a household that follows Christ. Instead, the phrase *fear and trembling* communicates a sense of reverent respect.

6–7. The opposite of working as if *unto Christ* is working only to please people. If someone works only to win favor in the public eye, then the attitude of their heart is wrong. Labor in any context should be completed as if in service to *Christ*, who knows the thoughts and intentions of *the heart*. Workers are free to serve others for the sake of the Lord.

8. When it comes to obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ, all people, *bond or free*, are under the same authority. All people will stand before Christ to have their works tested, and all will have an opportunity to receive a reward. Therefore, all people should aim to do *good* works in response to receiving the gift of grace.

9. Paul now directs his teachings toward *masters*. In Paul's day, this turn would have surprised readers. Household codes rarely mentioned the obligations of masters to enslaved people. The apostle directs masters *to do the same things*: treat others, including those enslaved under their authority, with respect out of reverence for Christ. This was to result in fair and just treatment of enslaved people. One way masters could practice justice was by no longer *threatening* those under their authority.

III. Future Rewards of Work

1 Timothy 6:17–19

17 Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy;

18 That they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate;

19 Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.

17. Paul gives specific advice to Timothy for teaching those in his faith community who are *rich in this world*. These people seem to have many reasons to *trust* their own judgment, abilities, and *riches*, but these things are not guaranteed to last. All people need to trust in the Lord.

The wealthy must also remember that God is the source of their wealth. He is the creator and sustainer of the world, and all wealth comes from His provision and generosity. This is true of both material and spiritual wealth.

18. Wealthy people have an opportunity to use their resources to *do good* for the body of Christ. Paul engages in wordplay by using the word *rich*, a word often associated with earthly possessions, to describe the practice of doing *good works* for others. The phrase *ready to distribute* suggests generosity, while *willing to communicate* likely means a willingness to share.

19. The image of *laying up* treasure implies that when believers give to others, they are not losing their wealth but transferring it from earth to heaven. The time to come that Paul has in mind might be a time of economic distress in the near future, or it might be the time of Christ's return. At any rate, people who have shared their wealth with the faith community are promised *eternal life*.

Paul does not suggest a person can earn eternal life through good works. His words are consistent, however, with James's teaching that true faith is evidenced by works. Generosity builds a strong *foundation*.

Involvement Learning

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Into the Lesson

Brainstorm a list of jobs. How can workers complete these jobs with the intention of caring for or blessing people?

Into the Word

Read Deuteronomy 24:14–21. Write down ways that modern-day believers can demonstrate fair and just treatment of the poor, needy, fatherless, foreigners, and widows.

Read Ephesians 6:5–9. How does Paul's message encourage us to act justly and treat others fairly in our labor?

Read 1 Timothy 6:17–19. How will you use your material blessings to be rich in good works in the upcoming week?

Key Text

When thou cuttest down thine harvest in thy field, and hast forgot a sheaf in the field, thou shalt not go again to fetch it: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow: that the LORD thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hands.

—Deuteronomy 24:19

Into Life

List people you interact with in and through your work. Identify them by their roles, not their names (examples: coworkers, clients, supervisors, customers, etc.). Next to each example, brainstorm a way you could care for them.

Thought to Remember

Serve God by serving others with justice, respect, and generosity.