

Scripture Lesson Text

EXOD. 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.

NOTES

Obedience in Justice

Lesson Text: Exodus 23:1-9

Related Scriptures: *Deuteronomy 19:15-21; Proverbs 6:16-19; Isaiah 10:1-4; Jeremiah 5:25-29; Mark 14:55-59*

TIME: 1445 B.C.

PLACE: Mount Sinai

GOLDEN TEXT—"Keep thee far from a false matter; and the innocent and righteous slay thou not: for I will not justify the wicked" (Exodus 23:7).

Lesson Exposition

IMPARTIALITY IN LEGAL CASES— Exod. 23:1-3

Truthful witness (Exod. 23:1-2). To raise a false report implies both receiving it from another and spreading it further. But being an unrighteous witness involves actually lying in court to defame one's neighbor. Sometimes the temptation to become unjust is a matter of following the crowd. In our present text, following the crowd is especially bad because it hurts the innocent. In addition, in perverting justice, it dishonors the name of our righteous God. Only those who have developed the inner fortitude and mastered the divine standards to do right can resist the pressure to conform to unjust ways (Prov. 1:10-19; Rom. 12:1-2).

Blindness to class (Exod. 23:3). In legal decisions, the social class of the participants must have absolutely no bearing on the verdict: "Neither shalt thou countenance a poor man in his cause." We might sympathize with the poor man who steals food to feed his wife and children, but he is just as guilty of thievery as a wealthy thief. The law must not have a double standard for rich and poor.

COMPASSION IN EVERYDAY CONDUCT—Exod. 23:4-5

Returning property (Exod. 23:4). In everyday activities, it would be easy to return evil for evil—to say that the enemy deserved any loss he suffered.

But this is not God's way of dealing with enemies. He sets an example for us by sending His blessings on the just and unjust alike (Matt. 5:44-45), and He sent His Son to die for us and provide salvation "while we were yet sinners" (Rom. 5:8). We are therefore commanded to love our enemies.

Assisting in difficulty (Exod. 23:5). "Thou shalt surely help with him" means that the person was to join with his enemy in helping to release an animal from any burden. This would display compassion. It would also help defuse any bad feelings the other man had toward him. His kindness would take away any grounds his enemy may have had for hating him.

INTEGRITY IN HUMAN RELATIONS—Exod. 23:6-9

Upholding the needy (Exod. 23:6). "Thou shalt not wrest the judgment of thy poor in his cause."

Those who serve as local officials are usually themselves prominent members of the community. So it is easy for them to identify with others of the same social class and to take their side. They also understand that the poor have no means to retaliate against them if they rule against them.

The Lord expressed Himself forcefully and repeatedly concerning His care for the poor in Israel (cf. Lev. 19:9-10; Deut. 15:7-11). Yet His commands were repeatedly violated, as is evident from the denunciations of the prophets (cf. Isa. 3:14-15; Amos 2:6; 8:4).

Supporting the innocent (Exod. 23:7). Israel's law also cautioned, "Keep thee far from a false matter; and the innocent and righteous slay thou not: for I will not justify the wicked." The "false matter" refers to a false charge that could lead to an unjust execution.

But God judges all things perfectly, and He will not allow the wicked to escape justice. He will hold accountable the *real* criminals in the case, regardless of the decision of a human tribunal. He will also punish the unjust judges who perpetrated this miscarriage of justice.

Refusing bribes (Exod. 23:8). "Thou shalt take no gift," the law commanded. This is a prohibition of bribery, the corrupt practice of giving gifts for favors received.

Bribery is one of the most common forms of political corruption. Scripture condemns it repeatedly, for it makes a mockery of justice. This is because a bribe blinds even wise leaders.

Befriending the stranger (Exod. 23:9). The narrow-minded prejudice and discrimination against Gentiles so prevalent among Jews in Jesus' day was nowhere advocated in the Old Testament law. "Thou shalt not

oppress a stranger" is the command given here. To be sure, resident aliens had no inherited rights in Canaan, but they were to be treated with fairness (cf. 22:21).

Numerous times Scripture classifies "strangers" with widows and orphans as those needing special consideration. They were to be treated fairly in court (Deut. 1:16; 24:17) and cared for in their poverty (Lev. 25:35). They were to be included in the festivals (Deut. 16:11, 14).

Israelites, of all people, should have understood strangers. "Ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exod. 23:9).

—Robert E. Wenger.

QUESTIONS

1. What harm can result from yielding to peer pressure and following the views of the majority?
2. How can we resist following the opinions of the crowd?
3. Are the poor to be shown favor over the rich? Explain.
4. What is God's method of dealing with enemies?
5. What good can result from helping an enemy in a hard situation?
6. Why are political officials inclined to side with the rich?
7. Was oppression of the poor a problem in Israel? How do we know?
8. How will God deal with those who condemn the innocent?
9. Why does Scripture so strongly condemn the practice of bribery?
10. What special favors were Israelites to give to resident aliens?

—Robert E. Wenger.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. Whether in a courtroom or in everyday life, we must always speak the truth at all costs (Exod. 23:1).
2. Shading the truth for a popular cause may be tempting but must be avoided (vss. 2-3).
3. Lending a hand to an enemy may be the last thing we want to do, but we must if we love God (vss. 4-5).
4. If we get someone in trouble through lies and deceit, we will be in big trouble ourselves—with God (vss. 6-7)!
5. Bribery and oppression have no place among the people of God (vss. 8-9).

—Kenneth A. Sponsler.

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

1. How does being in a large group of people often make telling the truth a difficult command to follow (Exod. 23:2)? How can we resist the pressure?
2. If it could help a destitute person make a case against a powerful organization that has wronged him, why would it be wrong to use a small falsehood (vs. 3)?
3. When it comes to enemies, most people simply try to stay out of their way and avoid trouble. Why is this insufficient in God's view (vss. 4-5)?
4. What is the motivation for denying justice to individuals just because they are poor (vs. 6)?
5. Why was it especially wrong for God's people to mistreat foreigners (vs. 9)?

—Kenneth A. Sponsler.

Golden Text Illuminated

“Keep thee from a false matter; and the innocent and righteous slay thou not: for I will not justify the wicked” (Exodus 23:7).

The people of Israel were to be a testimony to all the world concerning what God is like. They were to draw all nations to recognize His glory.

So rather than being an exact blueprint for secular governments today, the Law of Moses was intended to reflect God's character for all the world to see.

What does this mean for us today? First, we certainly have to affirm that Christians should work to promote justice in society. Throughout the Old Testament law there are principles to apply to all of life, principles that reflect the character of God.

Another way that we can live out the truths of this verse is by being just in our individual dealings, no matter how corrupt the earthly government we live under might be.

God warned the Israelites that violations of justice would be met with divine punishment. He would not “justify,” or acquit, the evildoers. There were severe consequences for offenders outlined in the old covenant law. Those exact penalties do not continue under the terms of the new covenant, but we must be careful not to dismiss the seriousness of unjust acts.

Let us be examples of fairness and conscientious integrity before the world, so that we can be effective witnesses for God.

—Stephen H. Barnhart.