

Justice, Judges, and Priests

Good morning, Sister Kadisha. Take a seat,” said Elder Hall. Kadisha sat down at the conference table with the four elders and folded her hands. She was nervous.

Kadisha would have preferred to be anywhere else this Saturday morning. She came to further explain her findings. Three months ago, the church accountant had noticed some discrepancies and seemingly fraudulent matters as it related to receipts and other paperwork expenses for Marcel Scott, the men’s ministry leader.

When Kadisha had initially spoke to Marcel three months ago, he ignored her. Her last two communiques with Marcel was through email, and she had copied Elder Hall. Today, Kadisha had the appropriate receipts, spreadsheets, and other related paperwork to denote her disturbing concerns. After Kadisha had finished speaking, the room was silent for a short time.

“We want to say thank you again,” said Elder Hall. “We are grateful to have such a talented and honest young woman as yourself working for our church. We will be meeting with Marcel on Wednesday, and we will let you know the outcome of his position at the church.”

“I’m sorry for any trouble I’ve caused,” said Kadisha as she rose to leave.

“You did what you were supposed to do,” Elder Harris said, clasping her hand and gripping her elbow.

“Amen,” came the chorus from the three other elders.

1. *Have you ever been in authority and been held accountable for your actions? Explain what happened.*

2. *Why is it important to hold those in authority accountable?*

3. *How and why might we ask someone to hold us accountable?*

Appointing Judges and Officials

Deuteronomy 16:18-20, KJV

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.

Deuteronomy 16:18-20, NIV

¹⁸Appoint judges and officials for each of your tribes in every town the LORD your God is giving you, and they shall judge the people fairly. ¹⁹Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the innocent. ²⁰Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you.

In the chapters preceding this week's lesson from Deuteronomy, Moses addressed issues that would concern the Israelites when they settled in the promised land. He emphasized that all Canaanite altars and idols were to be destroyed (chaps. 12—13), discussed the regulations concerning clean and unclean food (chap. 14), the year for canceling debts and releasing slaves (chap. 15), and about celebrating the feasts (16:1-17). Then, verses 18-20 dealt with the appointment of "judges and officials" (vs. 18) in all the cities of Canaan. These religious leaders and civil servants were to administer decisions involving legal matters with equity and integrity.

Deuteronomy 16:19 highlights the tendency for magistrates to twist the judicial process to their benefit. They may favor one individual or group (such as the wealthy) and disfavor another (such as the marginalized). The law denounced this perversion of justice.

Verse 19 prohibits the receiving and taking of a “gift” (KJV) when deciding legal matters. The reason is that the acceptance of a “bribe” (NIV) impaired the ability of the “wise” to think and act prudently. Likewise, bribery in the judicial process undermined the testimony provided by the innocent, so the wicked rich could exploit the system.

The preceding observation explains the reason for the emphatic statement in verse 20, which literally is rendered, “justice, justice.” Israel’s courts were to remain objective and impartial in their rulings. If God’s people wanted to dwell and flourish in the land He gave them, they had to make pure “justice” a foremost priority. The Lord would accept nothing less than this upright moral standard.

4. *How were legal disputes settled among God’s people?*

5. *What sort of legal system was supposed to exist among the Israelites?*

6. *What incentive did God’s people have to maintain a “just” (Deut. 16:20, KJV) society?*

Deciding Difficult Cases

Deuteronomy 17:8-13, KJV

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;

Deuteronomy 17:8-13, NIV

⁸If cases come before your courts that are too difficult for you to judge—whether bloodshed, lawsuits or assaults—take them to the place the LORD your God will choose.

⁹Go to the Levitical priests and to the judge who is in office at that time. Inquire of them and they will give you the verdict.

¹⁰You must act according to the decisions they give you at the place the LORD will choose. Be careful to do everything they instruct you to do. ¹¹Act

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.

according to whatever they teach you and the decisions they give you. Do not turn aside from what they tell you, to the right or to the left. ¹²Anyone who shows contempt for the judge or for the priest who stands ministering there to the LORD your God is to be put to death. You must purge the evil from Israel. ¹³All the people will hear and be afraid, and will not be contemptuous again.

Soon after Israel's exodus from Egypt, Moses' father-in-law Jethro watched Moses acting as a judge over all God's people. Jethro advised him to delegate some of his responsibilities to trustworthy, God-fearing individuals, leaving only the most complex cases for Moses (Exod. 18:13-27).

The above incident forms the conceptual backdrop for the directives recorded in Deuteronomy 17:8-13. Three kinds of episodes that were "too difficult" (vs. 8) to be resolved in local Israelite "courts" involved homicides, legal claims, and "assaults." Instead of handling these controversial matters at the village gate or town square, they were to be taken to a higher court of authority, whether it was the nearest Levitical city or the central sanctuary.

At such a divinely-designated spot, the contentious cases would be resolved by the Levitical priests who had a deep understanding of the law of Moses, along with the

presiding judge. Their job was to weigh all the evidence, listen to all the witnesses, consult with their peers, and render a just verdict. Perhaps the more challenging part of the judicial process would be adhering exactly to the sentence given by the public officials.

The initial part of verse 11 is literally rendered “according to the mouth of the law.” This expression shows that the legal code that God gave Moses signified more than just an assortment of commands. Just as important was the fact that it had a teaching function, in which God’s people were instructed to behave in a certain way.

So, when it came to judicial verdicts, the Israelites were to follow through on the decisions the court pronounced. God’s people could not threaten the social order by unilaterally omitting or modifying parts of the verdict they did not like, and so turn aside from the path of justice, regardless of whether the deviation was to the right or the left.

If the sentence was not faithfully and fully carried out, the violators faced the prospect of being executed. This harsh outcome reflected the fact that the transgressors had flouted the ruling of the judge or the priest who were representing God’s will in the judicial proceedings.

In a sense, then, defying a court ruling over crimes involving murder, manslaughter, and different kinds of physical injury signified outright rebellion against God. Such crimes called for capital punishment, which served to “purge” wickedness from the nation. News of a fellow Israelite being put to death would circulate far and wide, and God’s people would become “afraid” (vs. 13) to ever behave in a “contemptuous” manner again.

7. *Whom did God say were to decide difficult legal cases?*

8. *In what way were the Israelites supposed to respond to the decisions the Levitical priests made?*

9. *What was the penalty for flouting what a court official decided?*

Accountable to God and Man

This portion of the law guides God’s children on how to live in an upright manner. Moses’ instructions for the appointed judges and officials also applied to the people for everyday living. Either way, whether officials followed specific practices or the people applied the principles personally, God’s Word leads to a path of righteousness.

Community leaders were to show impartiality and integrity in their dealings with the people, instead of taking bribes or otherwise twisting justice in a certain party’s favor. God gave the people the land as their inheritance, and He expected them to maintain an upright and moral standard of justice. The legal system God set up included appointed judges and officials from throughout the nation of Israel. Along with other duties, they resolved disputes among the people. God is our perfect model of impartiality—He shows no favoritism at all.

Moses instructed the judges as well as the people. Cases that were “too difficult” to solve at the local level should be taken to a higher court of authority. Such cases included murder, assaults, and lawsuits. The process was similar to our judicial system today—weighing evidence, listening to witnesses, and pronouncing a just verdict. In turn, the judges were to carry out their sentence exactly.

The appointed judges represented God’s will; therefore, those who defied court rulings were also rebelling against God. Capital punishment for refusal to obey a court order served to purge evil from the nation. As news of one executed for this reason circulated, it served as a warning for the people to fear acting in a contemptuous manner again.

10. *In what ways do judges today hold people accountable for their actions and behaviors?*

11. *Why is it important to carry out the directives from those in authority over us?*

12. *In what ways can we hold those in authority accountable?*

The Accountability Plan

God has placed certain officials in authority over others—a social order—that represent a path of justice. We should follow directives given by those in authority, acting “according to whatever they teach you and the decisions they give you” (Deut. 17:11). However, we must be consistent and do ourselves what we ask others to do because we are commanded to love, honor, and obey God.

► *Identify a person or persons who are in authority over you in some way, and someone you have authority over. In what ways do you expect those in authority over you to justify their actions or decisions? How do those things apply to you as well?*

KEY VERSE

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

Appoint judges and officials for each of your tribes in every town the LORD your God is giving you, and they shall judge the people fairly. —Deuteronomy 16:18, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of January 24 through January 30

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

- Mon.** Psalm 140—God Executes Justice for the Poor.
- Tue.** Deuteronomy 26:1-11—Remembering Our Marginalized Ancestors.
- Wed.** James 5:1-11—Woe to Those Who Mistreat Workers.
- Thu.** Psalm 82—Justice for the Weak and Orphaned.
- Fri.** Matthew 9:27-38—Jesus' Compassion for the Helpless.
- Sat.** Leviticus 19:32-37—Do Not Oppress the Alien.
- Sun.** Deuteronomy 24:10-21—Justice for the Poor.