

Justice and the Marginalized

Who helps the homeless after Christmas, Mom?" Evana asked her mom Leonda, while scraping the remaining contents of her plate into the trash disposal.

Evana was a sensitive and compassionate seven year old who had led the family in fundraising efforts for local pantries this past Christmas.

"Helping them once a year isn't enough," said Evana.

Leonda eyed her daughter. She was raising an organizer and perhaps a philanthropist. Leonda and her husband Jarvis had purposefully infused Christ, the Word of God, and godly principles into the life of their family. She and Jarvis had agreed to water and nurture the godly seeds that sprung up.

Three weeks later, Leonda, Jarvis, and Evana sat in the reception area of a non-profit group that helped the homeless. Leonda and Evana had gone online to register for volunteer opportunities with the group's housing and homeless service programs.

"Good afternoon," said the tall woman as she rose from her desk and extended her hand first to Evana. "I understand this meeting is because of you."

"Yes, ma'am," said Evana.

"Well, I'm glad to meet you all. Please sit down," the woman said. "I must say it is wonderful to find sincere concern that is not only willing to volunteer, but to make a habit of it! So, let's get down to some specifics."

1. *What part does the Holy Spirit play in showing us people who are in need?*

2. *Why do God's people sometimes hesitate about helping those who might be neglected by society?*

3. *What are some ways we might provide for similar groups of people?*

Maintaining Equitable Loans and Wages

Deuteronomy 24:10-15, KJV

10 When thou dost lend thy brother any thing, thou shalt not go into his house to fetch his pledge.

11 Thou shalt stand abroad, and the man to whom thou dost lend shall bring out the pledge abroad unto thee.

12 And if the man be poor, thou shalt not sleep with his pledge:

13 In any case thou shalt deliver him the pledge again when the sun goeth down, that he may sleep in his own raiment, and bless thee: and it shall be righteousness unto thee before the LORD thy God.

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.

Deuteronomy 24:10-15, NIV

¹⁰When you make a loan of any kind to your neighbor, do not go into their house to get what is offered to you as a pledge. ¹¹Stay outside and let the neighbor to whom you are making the loan bring the pledge out to you. ¹²If the neighbor is poor, do not go to sleep with their pledge in your possession. ¹³Return their cloak by sunset so that your neighbor may sleep in it. Then they will thank you, and it will be regarded as a righteous act in the sight of the LORD your God.

¹⁴Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether that worker is a fellow Israelite or a foreigner residing in one of your towns. ¹⁵Pay them their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor and are counting on it. Otherwise they may cry to the LORD against you, and you will be guilty of sin.

As Moses continued his address to a new generation of Israelites, he shifted his focus to the issue of promoting

equitable loans and wages. In the ancient Middle East, social values and norms were quite different from those today. For instance, an emphasis was placed on honor versus shame between people and the ideas of acceptance versus rejection, as well as inclusion versus shunning.

Those ideas help clarify Moses' instructions to the Israelites about making loans to a "neighbor" (vs. 10). It would be a social disgrace for the lender to barge into the private home of the borrower to retrieve the item given as a "pledge." Instead of shaming the borrower that way, the lender was to remain outside (vs. 11) and let the borrower bring out what was offered as collateral for the debt.

For the poor, the most likely item offered as a "pledge" (vs. 12) of repayment would be their "cloak" (vs. 13). They would use this outer garment as a covering to keep themselves warm at night while sleeping. For this reason, the law required the lender to return the borrower's mantle at sundown. In turn, the borrower would bless the lender for being so thoughtful and generous. The Lord would consider this humane deed to be a "righteous act" (NIV).

For day laborers who were destitute, the legal code prohibited the wealthy from exploiting and abusing them, whether the hired worker was a "fellow Israelite" or one of the resident "foreigners." Each day, before sunset, the wealthy were to pay day laborers the wages they earned. They could not afford to skip a day's earnings since they depended on those earnings to buy food for their families. So, for a landowner to deprive laborers of their "wages" would displease God. If the oppressed cried out to God for justice, He would regard the landowner as being "guilty" of sinning against these workers.

4. *What restriction was placed on the collection of debts?*

5. *How could the making of loans with the poor remain equitable?*

6. *When were wages to be paid to laborers?*

Promoting Justice and Generosity throughout Society

Deuteronomy 24:16-21, KJV

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.

Deuteronomy 24:16-21, NIV

¹⁶Parents are not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their parents; each will die for their own sin.

¹⁷Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge.

¹⁸Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this.

¹⁹When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

²⁰When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. ²¹When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow.

It would be a grave injustice for parents to be given the death penalty for crimes committed by their children. Similarly, the legal code that God gave Moses prohibited children from being executed for the offenses committed by their parents. In short, every person was to be put to death “for their own sin” (vs. 16).

Resident foreigners, along with orphans, deserved to be treated in an equitable manner. The law did not leave any room for the perversion of justice in Israel. Even the confiscation of a widow’s garment as collateral for a “pledge” (vs. 17) was banned. Otherwise, she would not have any protection from the elements. The Israelites’ incentive for treating others in a humane and considerate manner was their time of slavery in Egypt. It was only when the Lord “redeemed” (vs. 18) His people from bondage that they experienced true relief from being oppressed.

Moreover, generosity of spirit toward non-Israelites, orphans, and widows applied to wealthy landowners. For instance, bundles of grain overlooked in a field during harvesting were to be left for the poor. Likewise, when fruit was knocked down from olive trees, whatever remained in the “branches” (vs. 20) was to be left for the impoverished. Unharvested grapes in the vineyard were left for the poor.

In all these situations, the motivation for being generous included God’s pledge to “bless” (vs. 19) His kindhearted and compassionate people. After all, ancient Israel did not have any government welfare programs. Out of gratitude, then, for what the Lord had done, wealthy landowners could afford to be generous to those who are not as well off in society.

7. *What restriction was placed on capital punishment?*

8. *What motivation did the Lord provide His people to be just in their actions?*

9. *In what way were the Israelites to be generous when they harvested their crops?*

Living Generously

Moses encouraged the people to reflect on their bondage and redemption from Egypt as motivation for treating others in a humane and considerate manner. The Israelites were to show compassion and generosity to marginalized people in their communities out of gratitude for what God had done for them when He rescued them. God's infinite love and boundless grace provides a model for His people to treat others with justice and kindness.

Today, it's not unusual to view certain groups of people through the lens of prejudice or through our opinions instead of fact. We may have preconceived notions about what foreigners, orphans, and widows do or do not need. Often we allow other people to shape our beliefs and actions regarding people who have a different background or fewer material possessions than we do.

We talk a lot about justice for immigrants, but less about what we need to do for widows and orphans. They are as much at the bottom of society now as in Jesus' day.

Deuteronomy points out the importance of viewing those on the edge of society with God's point of view. He is in the business of rescuing people, whether from physical or spiritual bondage, oppression, or poverty. He calls us to remember with gratitude how He has delivered us from our past. As Christ's hands and feet here on earth, we are called to provide from God's abundance to meet the needs of those around us

10. *Which groups of people are on the fringes of society today?*

11. *Why might we find it difficult to offer these groups equity and integrity?*

12. *What can we do to treat "foreigners," day laborers, the fatherless, and widows with equity, respect, and honor?*

13. *Describe a time when God showed compassion and generosity to you and how you can reflect that in your interactions with others.*

Meeting the Need

What Moses said about helping foreigners, orphans, and widows applies to our time as well. Jesus said the new covenant does not abolish the Old Testament law but fulfills it (Matt. 5:17). Taking care of orphans and widows in our communities is a critical need today.

► *Discuss how you would finish each sentence below. Share your answers to remind you of action steps you can take this week.*

Foreigners in our community include _____. This group of people needs _____.

Widows in our community need _____. One way to meet this need would be to _____.

The fatherless in our community need _____. We can help meet this need by _____.

KEY VERSE

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.
—Deuteronomy 24:18, KJV

Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this.
—Deuteronomy 24:18, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of January 31 through February 6

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

- Mon.** 2 Samuel 11:1-13—David's Sin with Bathsheba.
- Tue.** 2 Samuel 11:14-27—Murder of Bathsheba's Husband.
- Wed.** 1 John 1:5-10—Walk in the Light.
- Thu.** Psalm 51:1-14—Create in Me a Clean Heart.
- Fri.** Psalm 32—Redemption through Repentance.
- Sat.** 1 John 2:1-11—Christ, the Sacrifice for Our Sins.
- Sun.** 2 Samuel 12:1-9, 13-15—Nathan Tells a Pointed Parable.