

CHRISTIAN MANNER OF JUSTICE

Jerricka blinked as she stared at the screen. There were the results of her mammogram. The doctor was talking again.

“This is the area that looks suspicious. It can always turn out to be nothing, but we need to schedule more tests.”

Jerricka could hardly believe it. Breast cancer? She exercised regularly, ate a good diet, all the things. As a secretary at her church, it wasn't long before dozens of people on the prayer chain were reaching out to offer encouragement.

One woman in her Bible study stopped by with a card. “I just have to ask,” the woman said with kind eyes, “how are you doing financially? Do you think this is going to set you back?”

Jerricka thought for a moment. She'd been so concerned about everything else. She's hardly thought about what everything might cost, if she needed treatment or surgery.

“You know,” she said shrugging her shoulders, “I think I'm going to be alright. The church helped me get on a health plan when I started working here. I think there's even a fund for medical expenses.”

“I *know* that has been a major focus in the past,” said Faith. “The elders wanted staff to be healthy, to have what they needed.”

“It's just one more reason I'm grateful for this community,” said Jerricka, trying not to get misty.

1 Do you ask for help quickly, or is that hard for you to do?

2 What is the responsibility of a church community to care for financial needs?

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.

¹⁴ Do 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. ¹⁵ Pay 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.

¹⁶ Parents 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.

¹⁷ Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. ¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ When 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.

²⁰ When 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. ²¹ When 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.

Providing for All

In his parting words to Israel, Moses gives instruction for life in the promised land. God redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt; He requires their just and generous treatment of the poor and powerless among them: hired workers, foreigners, orphans, and widows.

Moses addresses employers, cautioning that they are not to take advantage of anyone hired (vv. 14–15). They must treat workers—both Israelites and foreigners—fairly and justly (Deut. 24:14). Consider the practical realities facing people who live “paycheck to paycheck” (as we say today). Timely payment of a day’s wages could spell the difference between having food to eat or not. But if the powerful take advantage of the powerless, God will hear the cries of the oppressed—just as He heard the cries of Hebrew slaves (Ex. 3:7). Moses warns that economic exploitation is a sin (Deut. 24:15).

In the same context, God answers a general question: *Who is responsible for crimes?* Instead of punishing families together for capital offenses, He holds individuals responsible for their own sins (v. 16). This prevents a variety of abuses, with innocent people receiving guilt by association.

Finally, God gives specific requirements for the protection of the destitute (vv. 17–21). All people are deserving of justice, and it is never acceptable to take clothes from another’s back (v. 17). This “pledge” refers to collateral for a loan (since handwoven garments are valuable). God is telling the loaner to make it easy for the person who needs financial help. Owners of fields, orchards, and vineyards must deliberately leave extra food around, free for “the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow” (vv. 19–21). In the promised land, there shall be more than enough for everyone (see 15:4–8). And if God’s people share with the needy, they invite the Lord to bring even more abundant blessing (v. 19).

1 Why are hired workers and destitute people a focus here?

2 What similarities and differences do you see between Israel’s system of justice and welfare and ours?

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.

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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.

⁵ Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. ⁶ Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. ⁷ Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, ⁸ because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. ⁹ And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.

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¹⁷ Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸ Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. ¹⁹ In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

Trusting God, Treating Others Fairly

In Ephesians 5:21–6:9, Paul writes what is called a *household code*, applying the gospel to various relationships of daily life. “Slave”—we need precision with this word. The systems of slavery in the ancient world are *not* synonymous with the system of race-based chattel

slavery in America. Often, slaves in ancient Israel and Rome were indentured—people who sold themselves out of financial necessity, yet by choice, and who could still achieve social mobility. At the same time, slaves were regarded as property and subjected to abuse. In a world of masters and slaves, Paul saw the gospel at work, even among fundamentally unjust relationships.

Notice, Paul addresses the lower-status group first. For slaves, Paul requires obedience to their masters (v. 5). But Paul reorients their status by calling them “slaves of Christ,” their service as “doing the will of God from your heart . . . as if you were serving the Lord” (vv. 6–7). Adopting this point of view, slaves can offer obedience “with sincerity of heart,” even to flawed human masters, for God will regard wholehearted devotion as good that is being done for Him (v. 8).

To masters, Paul issues a subversive command: Treat slaves “in the same way” as slaves were asked to treat them (v. 9). Masters must offer heartfelt respect, not hateful threats. After all, both groups have a greater master in heaven. The world is partial to the powerful, but God is not (v. 9). Paul lays a foundation that will ultimately undermine and tear down systems of slavery.

But in 1 Timothy 6, Paul tackles the other worldly force that props up systems of oppression: money. His instructions are for “those who are rich in this present world” not to trust in riches. Wealth is not a foundation of hope. Wealth is “uncertain” (v. 17).

Paul again reframes social standards: The wealthy should not think highly of themselves. God is the owner and giver of riches (v. 17). They should consider spiritual wealth—being “rich in good deeds”—as more valuable (v. 18). God requires generosity and sharing (v. 18). Living this way, the wealthy will find the surer footing and “firm foundation” that comes from treasures kept safe in heaven (v. 20; see Matt. 6:19–24).

1 “Slaves, obey your earthly masters” (Eph. 6:5). Does this statement make you uncomfortable? Should it?

2 What is surprising about Paul’s instructions for masters?

3 Imagine a church community that does not “put their hope in wealth” (1 Tim. 6:17). Describe it.

Holding Wealth Loosely

We talk about how to handle our money when it often feels more like our money handles us. No matter how much or little we have, it never feels like enough to satisfy our desires or allay our fears. And we can't shake the reality that money correlates with power, and that those who have less are at the mercy of those who have more.

The Bible offers us a way out of money's grip: to hold our money with an open hand. We can begin to do this with two changes of mindset.

First, we can abandon a scarcity mindset, the voice in our head that tells us, *There's not enough for everyone—you have to fight to get yours*. The Bible paints a different picture. God “richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Tim. 6:17). God has not made a world where we must fight for our “piece.” Instead, we share to have peace. There is no certainty or peace in the possession of wealth.

Second, instead of lording our money and power over others (or wishing we could), we can “have the same mindset as Christ Jesus,” who became a servant (Phil. 2:6–7). Servants have no wealth to be concerned about, and they focus on the needs of others. Regardless of our bank accounts or social standing, we have the one Master and one Lord (Matt. 23:10; Col. 4:1; Eph. 4:5).

Approaching our money and possessions with an abundance and servant mindset, we become as free in our sharing as in our receiving. While we work to provide for ourselves and our families, we can also help those around us who are struggling. There's no shortage of people needing help. We can make our churches places where the poor and the powerless experience God's abundance through Christlike generosity. And when we hold money with open hands, we rediscover “life that is truly life” (1 Tim. 6:19)—God's abundance.

1 How would the world be different if everyone adopted an “abundance mindset”?

2 How easy or difficult is it for you to see yourself as a servant?

3 We live in an era of long lifespans, retirement planning, and long-term care. What does it look like to balance responsibility (saving) and generosity (sharing)?

Blessed to Be a Blessing

Most of us won't spend our workday harvesting in the fields, but all of us have opportunities to bless those around us as an extension of God's grace. Just before you enter your workplace this week, pray this simple prayer. You might want to write it on a card to tuck into your wallet. If you don't work a formal job, you can pray this before heading to the store, the gym, anyplace you'll be around others.

Lord, open my eyes to an opportunity to bless someone else today.

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 KJV

When 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.

—Deuteronomy 24:19 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of May 18 through May 23

Mon. John 2:1–11—A Feast of Finest Wine.

Tue. Genesis 21:1–8—Celebrate God's Blessings.

Wed. Zechariah 8:1–5—Playing Children Signal God's Grace.

Thu. Colossians 2:16–23—Release from Human Rules.

Fri. Matthew 11:7–11, 16–19—A Time for Feasting and Joy.

Sat. Jeremiah 31:10–14—Rejoice and Be Glad.

Next Week: Mark 2:18–28

We will talk about the freedom we enjoy as Christ's servants. Jesus is Lord of every moment. What day or time do you claim for spending with your Lord?