

## January 23 Lesson 8 (NIV)

### JUSTICE, JUDGES, AND PRIESTS

**DEVOTIONAL READING:** Deuteronomy 16:18–21; 17:8–13

**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** Deuteronomy 16:18–20; 17:8–13; 19:15–21

#### DEUTERONOMY 16:18–20

<sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> Do 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. <sup>20</sup> Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you.

#### DEUTERONOMY 17:8–13

<sup>8</sup> If 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. <sup>9</sup> Go 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. <sup>10</sup> You 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. <sup>11</sup> Act 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. <sup>12</sup> Anyone 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. <sup>13</sup> All the people will hear and be afraid, and will not be contemptuous again.

#### KEY TEXT

*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*

### JUSTICE, LAW, HISTORY

#### Unit 2: God: The Source of Justice

LESSONS 5–9

## LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the type or types of justice at hand.
2. Contrast characteristics of just judges and their rulings with those of unjust judges.
3. Create a list of go-to advisers for challenging situations.

## LESSON OUTLINE

### Introduction

- A. The Journey to Judgeship
- B. Lesson Context
- I. General Goals (Deuteronomy 16:18–20)
  - A. Responsible People (v. 18)  
*The Fair Judge*
  - B. Reliable Principles (vv. 19–20)
- II. Specific Challenges (Deuteronomy 17:8–13)
  - A. Difficult Instances (vv. 8–11)
  - B. Defiant Individuals (vv. 12–13)  
*Discipline and True Freedom*

### Conclusion

- A. Operation Greyford Revisited
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

## HOW TO SAY IT

Absalom *Ab-suh-lum*.

Ahab *Ay-hab*.

Jehoshaphat *Jeh-hosh-uh-fat*.

Jezebel *Jez-uh-bel*.

Levitical *Leh-vit-ih-kul*.

Naboth *Nay-bawth*.

## Introduction

### A. The Journey to Judgeship

Becoming a judge is a rigorous and demanding (not to mention expensive!) process. The process includes specialized, post-graduate education at a law school to earn a JD (juris doctor) degree, passing the bar exam, completing a judicial clerkship, and practicing law by prosecuting and/or defending cases in court. Only at that point does one stand a chance of being elected or appointed to the bench.

The entire process often takes decades. The education, training, and experience a potential judge receives during years of preparation provide the necessary foundation needed to render right judgments based in law.

Becoming a judge in Old Testament Israel was radically different from the process required nowadays. But a necessary element for *continuing* as a judge remains the same as it did some 34 centuries ago—a key issue in this week’s lesson.

## B. Lesson Context

Moses himself appointed the first judges (Exodus 18:24–26), but no formalized program existed for training to become a judge in the Israel of Moses’ day (about 1447 BC). There was a certain kind of “bar exam” that an individual had to pass before being appointed to judge. The first stated criteria for passing were four in number: (1) capability, (2) fear of God, (3) trustworthiness, and (4) hatred of dishonest gain (18:21). Moses received these criteria from his father-in-law, Jethro, shortly after leading the Israelites out of Egypt but before reaching Mount Sinai (19:1, 20). The individuals who met these criteria assisted Moses as judges, providing rulings on the legal cases of the people brought before them (18:26). During Israel’s sojourn to the promised land, they received many more instructions that distinguished just from unjust behavior. Some are recorded in Exodus 23:1–12, the text of last week’s lesson.

The focus of the book of Exodus is on the first generation of the new nation of Israel. But as the book of Deuteronomy opens, 40 years had passed, and a new generation of Israelites needed to hear the law expounded (Deuteronomy 1:1–5). This included reiterating the characteristics of a proper judicial system in general and the requirements of judges in particular (1:16–18).

The exact steps of appointment processes for judges isn’t clear. Hundreds of years after Moses, Absalom used subversion to get himself appointed as judge by popular acclamation (2 Samuel 15:1–6). Later, King Jehoshaphat (reigned 872–848 BC) appointed judges personally (2 Chronicles 19:4–7). In 458 BC, Ezra was charged with appointing judges in his capacity as a priest and an expert in the law (Ezra 7:25). Stricter, more specific requirements for serving as a judge are found in Ezekiel 44:15–27.

This lesson considers how the leaders of Israel, namely judges and priests, were to advocate for and implement justice among the people of Israel. This week’s lesson comes from the portion of Deuteronomy where Moses spoke on various leadership positions and how they were to function. Judges (Deuteronomy 16:18–17:13), kings (17:14–20), priests (18:1–8), and prophets (18:14–22) are among those groups described by Moses. Today’s lesson will illustrate how the Lord demands just judgment and desires his covenant people to be led by individuals who exhibit the ability to practice just judgment among them.

## I. General Goals

(DEUTERONOMY 16:18–20)

**A. Responsible People (v. 18)**

**18. 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.**

Moses prescribed two groups of leaders for the community. The *judges* were those leaders tasked with exacting decisions of justice for the people. These individuals were considered leaders of the community and, as such, were often mentioned alongside the priests (Deuteronomy 19:17) and the elders (21:2).

*Officials* served the people of Israel in a different fashion than judges. These individuals assisted the judges in providing leadership and just decision making for the people of God as they presented themselves before God (Deuteronomy 31:28; Joshua 8:33; 24:1).

The Hebrew word rendered *fairly* can also mean “righteous,” or the idea of pursuing a right relationship with God as well as right and fair relationships with other humans (see lesson 9 commentary on Deuteronomy 24:12–13; see also Leviticus 19:15, 36; Deuteronomy 1:16; 25:15; Job 8:3; Isaiah 51:5). For Israel, fair and righteous action was not a hypothetical to be wished for but tangible acts of following the just laws that God had set forth.

Legal proceedings often took place at the gates of *every town*. These gates served as the center of the town’s public life and constituted the location where significant administrative and legal decisions were made (see Genesis 19:1; Deuteronomy 22:15; Ruth 4:1, 11; 1 Kings 22:10). In essence, the gates were a public forum in which accountability to God’s law was acknowledged by all.

**B. Reliable Principles (vv. 19–20)**

**19a. Do not pervert justice**

To *pervert* refers to the act of twisting, skewing, withholding, or distorting. In this case, it affects one’s ability to practice right and fair *justice*. Later texts describe individuals who withhold justice as being “cursed” (Deuteronomy 27:19).

The act of perverting justice was quite concerning for the needy individuals in the land, especially the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow (Deuteronomy 24:17; see lesson 9).

**19b. or show partiality.**

Administrators of justice were not to *show* undue *partiality* based on the social standing of other individuals. Scripture declares that all people are equal before God and, therefore, he does not show partiality, or favoritism (Deuteronomy 10:17; Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11). Therefore, the people of God are to demonstrate a life committed to showing impartial justice (Leviticus 19:15; 2 Chronicles 19:7).

**19c. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the innocent.**

Finally, administrators of justice must be wary of accepting a *bribe*, or a gift, lest their judgment become clouded. This is not the only instance where the people of God are called to avoid bribes. Moses warned Israel that “a bribe *blinds* those who see and *twists the words of the innocent*” (Exodus 23:8). Bribes and influencing gifts distorted the leader’s ability to judge rightly in the manner God required. When this occurred, justice became a commodity that could be

bought and sold. Such individuals were called “wicked” as they “pervert the course of justice” (Proverbs 17:23).

Years later, the sons of Samuel would be appointed as Israel’s leaders (1 Samuel 8:1). However, the sons were more interested in receiving personal gain from the position they were in than the process of exacting justice among the people (8:3).

**20. Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you.**

Just as reflected in the English translation, the Hebrew words behind the phrase *justice and justice alone* read as the repetition of the Hebrew word for “just” (see commentary on Deuteronomy 16:18, above). Repetition of a single word in this manner signifies the word’s magnitude and its importance for the reader or hearer. As a result, complete and absolute justice with no compromise must be the passion for all God’s people.

As Israel and its leaders made efforts to *follow* the just living that God required, a positive consequence would be their continued residence in *the land* given to them by God. Their ability to *live* in and *possess* the promised land had nothing to do with their own virtue; it was a matter of making the Lord’s priorities *their* priorities. As Israel made justice a priority, God’s priorities for justice became Israel’s top priority.

## II. Specific Challenges (DEUTERONOMY 17:8–13)

### A. Difficult Instances (vv. 8–11)

**8. If 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.**

In especially challenging instances, Moses prescribed the steps and actions for those making judgment in legal *cases*. The use of *your* refers to local judges or courts who were unable to resolve a particularly controversial or challenging legal case.

Such cases often involved an intent to kill (*bloodshed*), legal claims (*lawsuits*), or physical injury (*assaults*).

In these situations, the involved parties were to *take them* to the location chosen by *God*. The exact identity of the involved parties is unclear and could include either the tribunal of judges or the parties of the dispute. Previous precedent suggests that it was the duty of the local judges to take this step and confer at the indicated location (compare Exodus 18:13–20).

This *place* was mentioned previously in more detail as a place of sacredness—a place where the Lord would “put his Name” (Deuteronomy 12:5, 21). In that place, in what became a central sanctuary, the Israelites offered their sacrifices, tithes, special gifts, and vows (12:11). This location served Israel not only for its legal needs but also for its sacred and ceremonial needs.

**9. Go 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.**

For these challenging cases, the *Levitical priests* and the *judge* provided the final ruling (see Deuteronomy 19:17). The exact identity of the judge is unknown. The person's position likely came from a precedent made by Moses years before (see Lesson Context; Exodus 18:13–20).

Priests were Levites, members of the tribe of Levi. These individuals guided the religious practice of Israel by officiating times of worship (Numbers 18:5–7), teaching the stipulations of the Law of Moses (Leviticus 10:8–11), and guiding the proper actions of life—even as related to health—within the community of God's people (Deuteronomy 24:8). Unlike other tribes of Israel, Levites owned no land, but lived on properties donated by the Israelites (Numbers 18:20; Joshua 21:1–42).

The involvement of religious leaders with seemingly “nonreligious” judicial cases might seem inappropriate from a modern perspective. However, Old Testament Israel had the singular responsibility to follow God's laws in every realm of life. Because of the all-encompassing nature of their covenant relationship with God (Deuteronomy 5:1b–3), there was no distinction between sacred and secular.

The Levitical priests and the judge made their *verdict* based on their understanding of civil and criminal law, thereby acting as leaders of God's covenant people.

King Jehoshaphat of Judah (reigned 872–848 BC) served as an example of this text's prescriptions. Jehoshaphat appointed judges and priests in Jerusalem for the administration of justice (2 Chronicles 19:5, 8). In following the words of Moses, the king warned the counsel to “judge carefully, for with the Lord our God there is no injustice or partiality or bribery” (19:7; see commentary on Deuteronomy 16:19, above).

**10. You 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.**

Whatever sentences the judges and Levites render, the involved parties must abide by those *decisions*. Their decision was final! The reminder that their verdict occurred in *the place the Lord will choose* reinforces the sacredness of that location and, therefore, the decisions made there.

**11. Act 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.**

Moses emphasized strict obedience to what the Levites and the judge *teach* and *the decisions they give*. All parties involved were not to deviate from the decision rendered.

Elsewhere, Moses described obedience to God's law in similar terms, exhorting Israel to “be careful to do what the Lord your God has commanded you; do not turn aside *to the right or to the left*” (Deuteronomy 5:32). The pointed counsel prepared hearers for a solemn warning if they failed to adhere to Moses' guidelines.

## B. Defiant Individuals (vv. 12–13)

**12. Anyone 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.**

The individual who defied the ruling of *the judge* or *the priest* was described as acting out of *contempt*. The Hebrew word behind this term describes an individual acting out of pride or haughtiness of heart (compare Deuteronomy 17:12; Proverbs 11:2; Jeremiah 49:16). These

defiant individuals acted pridefully as they disregarded the given judgment of the ordained leadership who *stands ministering there to the Lord your God*.

Such defiance and contempt also brought harm to the community of Israel. Upon an initial inspection, that the defiant individual shall *be put to death* seems harsh or disproportionate to the initial act that brought them to this place. However, the following line indicates the measures the community was required to take to protect *Israel* from *evil*.

Israel's law described other instances that necessitated capital punishment (among others), such as a rebellion against God (Deuteronomy 13:5), a false prophet (18:20–22), or an insubordinate family member (21:18–21). In these instances, the primary concern was that the people of God maintained holiness in their covenant relationship and that evil no longer polluted the covenanted people.

### **13. All the people will hear and be afraid, and will not be contemptuous again.**

The harsh actions of the previous verse were revealed to have another, more communal function: as a deterrent to any further *contemptuous* behavior.

That Israel *will hear and be afraid* of such punishment served as a powerful motivation for avoiding the conduct resulting in that degree of disciplinary action (see Deuteronomy 13:11; 17:13; 19:20). God required that his people live justly. He had strong consequences for those who refused to live in that manner or who distracted others from that same quest for justice.

The Old Testament *does* record numerous examples of how justice became disregarded by those in power, a problem that the Lord's prophets called attention to when they saw it happening. The prophet Amos indicted the people in his day were guilty of that disregard; Amos described them as those who "turn judgment into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground" (Amos 5:7).

At times the innocent were punished and the guilty went free, as in the case of Naboth's vineyard (see 1 Kings 21). When such conditions as these exist within a society, it is not long before people become accustomed to calling "evil good and good evil" (Isaiah 5:20). Justice according to God's standard becomes harder and harder to find in such a morally corrupt environment.

## **Conclusion**

### **A. Operation Greylord Revisited**

The 14-year period 1980–1994 was bittersweet for the American judicial system as Operation Greylord began and ended. Greylord was the name of an undercover FBI investigation into alleged corruption in the judicial system in Cook County, Illinois. The "bitter" part was that the allegations proved to be true. In the end, 15 judges were convicted on various counts of bribery, mail fraud, racketeering, income-tax violations, etc. The depth of the systemic corruption was underlined as dozens of others—including lawyers, deputy sheriffs, policemen, and court officials—were also convicted.

The "sweet" part was that an accountability system existed to expose and correct such corruption. Despite that, we will never know how far and to whom the ripple effects of the corruption extended.

Work toward a just system begins by acknowledging the need for four distinct kinds of justice: (1) *distributive justice* to ensure economic fairness (see Deuteronomy 24:14–15; 2 Thessalonians 3:10; James 5:4), (2) *restorative justice* to require restitution by an offender (see Exodus 22:1–15; Luke 12:58–59; 18:3–5; 19:8), (3) *retributive justice* to punish offenders because they deserve it (Deuteronomy 25:2; Romans 13:4–5), and (4) *procedural justice* for ensuring fairness in application of rules by due process (see Exodus 23:3 [lesson 7]; James 2:1–9). The fourth of these is the starting point, the one the other three depend on as a prerequisite. Humans have a duty to work for all four, but our work begins with the fourth. This obligation has been unchanged since today’s lesson text was penned. Our efforts here form part of the salt and light that Jesus commanded us to be (see Matthew 5:13–16). We do so as citizens of the kingdom that is “not of this world” (John 18:36), as we honor the ruler of that heavenly kingdom.

Whereas previous lessons on justice have examined justice alongside various qualities such as kindness and righteousness, today’s lesson considers justice alongside some of those officials who were supposed to administer it in Old Testament Israel, namely, judges and priests.

### **B. Prayer**

God of justice, our world often voices its desire for justice; yet how we need to return to your Word for a true understanding of this principle! Show us your justice in the world. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

### **C. Thought to Remember**

No one is exempt from practicing justice!<sup>1</sup>

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