

## January 30 Lesson 9 (NIV)

### JUSTICE AND THE MARGINALIZED

**DEVOTIONAL READING:** Deuteronomy 24:10–21  
**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** Deuteronomy 24:10–21

#### DEUTERONOMY 24:10–21

<sup>10</sup> When 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. <sup>11</sup> Stay outside and let the neighbor to whom you are making the loan bring the pledge out to you. <sup>12</sup> If the neighbor is poor, do not go to sleep with their pledge in your possession. <sup>13</sup> Return 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.

<sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> 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.

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

<sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> 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.

#### KEY TEXT

*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*

#### JUSTICE, LAW, HISTORY

## Unit 2: God: The Source of Justice

LESSONS 5–9

### LESSON OUTLINE

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*Beware of Opportunism!*
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- A. Ignorance and Want, Today
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

### HOW TO SAY IT

Babylonian *Bab-ih-low-nee-un*.

Boaz *Bo-az*.

Hammurabi *Ham-muh-rah-bee*.

Malachi *Mal-uh-kye*.

Mediterranean *Med-uh-tuh-ray-nee-un*.

Torah (*Hebrew*) *Tor-uh*.

Zechariah *Zek-uh-rye-uh*.

# Introduction

## A. Ignorance and Want

In Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, the Ghost of Christmas Present guides Ebenezer Scrooge on a tour of various scenes around London. Some scenes highlight holiday celebrations, while others show poverty-stricken individuals, including Scrooge's own employee, Bob Cratchit.

Toward the end of the tour, the ghost reveals two destitute children beneath the folds of his robe, a boy named Ignorance and a girl named Want. The ghost warns Scrooge, "Beware them both ... but most of all beware this boy."

Through these characters, Dickens drew his readers' attention to issues of ignorance and want regarding the economic challenges of his day, which was mid-nineteenth-century England. Many people of that time and place experienced want and neglect and were otherwise marginalized. Those who were better off often adopted a stance of willful ignorance toward the situation. Scrooge's next words aptly describe that attitude: "Cover [the children Ignorance and Want]; I do not wish to see them." Unfortunately, many still react this way, avoiding issues of economic justice by looking the other way. Deuteronomy 24:10–21 has important things to say in this regard.

## B. Lesson Context

Previous lessons from this quarter focused on other aspects of God's law: his covenant with Israel (lesson 1), which served as the foundation for the law, and those individuals tasked with ruling on God's law (lesson 8). This lesson turns to the details of God's law for Israel. These laws make up the bulk of Deuteronomy's content and are a central theme of the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament.

The Hebrew word *torah* can mean "teaching" or "law," specifically God's laws for ancient Israel. These laws depicted how the Israelites were to live rightly with each other, with their neighboring peoples, and with their God.

Today's Scripture text comes from Moses' second address in Deuteronomy to the people of Israel, with the detailed covenant stipulations that God required for his people (Deuteronomy 12:1–26:19). Moses' address began with a detailed description of proper worship of God (12:1–16:17) and continued with descriptions of proper justice in law (16:18–20; 17:8–13), regulations regarding the handling of violent acts (19:1–21:23), and issues of marriage (22:13–30), among other things, as God provided an ordered description of a new society.

For Israel, part of being God's covenant people was the just and proper treatment of poor and otherwise marginalized individuals. Previously, Moses had reminded the Israelites that poor people would always be part of the population (Deuteronomy 15:11; compare John 12:18). As a result, Moses commanded an openhanded policy toward these individuals, requiring generous giving without resentment (Deuteronomy 15:10). Today's Scripture expands on this theme.

## I. Just Lending

(DEUTERONOMY 24:10–13)

### A. Respecting the Person (vv. 10–11)

**10–11. When 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. Stay outside and let the neighbor to whom you are making the loan bring the pledge out to you.**

Moses described a situation in which a *neighbor*—a fellow Israelite—needed a loan. Elsewhere, the law forbade Israelites from charging interest on loans made to other Israelites (Exodus 22:25; Deuteronomy 23:19–20).

However, lenders were allowed to receive collateral, or a *pledge*, as security for a loan. Even then, certain restrictions remained for what lenders could take as a pledge; taking as a pledge a person's method of livelihood was forbidden (Deuteronomy 24:6; compare Job 24:3), as was taking a widow's clothing (Deuteronomy 24:17; see commentary below).

To maintain the borrower's dignity, the lender was not permitted to enter the borrower's *house*. Instead, the lender was required to *stay outside* the borrower's dwelling, allowing the borrower to *bring the pledge out*. In this situation, the borrower controlled what was offered as pledge, with dignity and respect maintained.

As Old Testament history unfolded, the dangers of putting up security, or collateral, came to be recognized, but the practice was not outright banned for Israel (see Proverbs 17:18; 20:16; 22:26; 27:13).

### B. Respecting the Pledge (vv. 12–13)

**12. If the neighbor is poor, do not go to sleep with their pledge in your possession.**

The law added extra clarification for loans made to *poor* individuals. Such lending stipulations were required because of the extra vulnerability poor individuals may have faced. Furthermore, the law specifically prohibited lenders from charging interest on loans in these situations (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:35–37).

**13. Return 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.**

Additionally, lenders were limited on what could be done with a pledge of a borrower's *cloak*. If that was all a poor individual could provide as a pledge, then the lender was prohibited from keeping it overnight (compare Leviticus 19:13); the clothing had to be returned by *sunset*. This limitation protected the borrower's health during the night (Exodus 22:26). Lenders were to be compassionate in their lending practices because God is compassionate (22:27; Psalm 116:5).

The lender's act resulted in two outcomes. First, the borrower would *thank* the lender. One can picture the borrower, preparing for a good night's sleep, offering a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the lender's kindness.

Second, the lender's gesture would be judged by the *Lord* and deemed as *a righteous act*. Such acts were considered right standing in God's eyes and conformed to the demands of God's law and covenant (see Genesis 15:6; Deuteronomy 6:25; Isaiah 56:1; compare Luke 1:6). God desired his people to live in this manner because his own nature is one of righteousness and justice (see Psalms 9:8; 11:7; 33:5; 36:6; 103:6; Isaiah 33:15; Jeremiah 9:24; compare 1 John 3:7). Lending practices as prescribed by the law served as an example of the just and equitable actions the Lord wants his people to pursue, especially toward the marginalized.

## II. Just Labor (DEUTERONOMY 24:14–15)

### A. Oppression Forbidden (v. 14)

#### **14a. Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy,**

The concern for justice among the *poor and needy* extended to hired hands. After their experience of slavery in Egypt, Israelites were not permitted to be sold as slaves (Leviticus 25:42). However, an Israelite who experienced economic difficulty to the point of losing everything might serve other Israelites as *a hired worker*, or “stranger” (25:35). Such individuals had the expectation of eventually receiving freedom (25:40; see also Exodus 21:2; Deuteronomy 15:12). The status of such a person is sometimes known as indentured servant.

#### **14b. whether that worker is a fellow Israelite or a foreigner residing in one of your towns.**

Prescriptions to protect hired hands were enacted to maintain the economic livelihood, dignity, and ability of impoverished individuals, *Israelite* or not, to continue to live among the people of God (Leviticus 25:35–36).

Most requirements also extended to *a foreigner residing in the towns* of Israel. Qualifying this with “most” admits the exception found in Leviticus 25:44–46a. Without just treatment, these workers could become further marginalized.

God’s people, however, were not to mistreat these individuals. Even in (or especially in) hiring and working practices, God’s people were to practice justice. The most obvious way to do so was through the timely deliverance of wages (next verse).

### B. Opportune Wages (v. 15)

#### **15a. Pay them their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor and are counting on it.**

Workers were paid for their labors at the end of an agreed time of work. However, the hired worker who was *poor* was to receive their agreed upon wages at the end of each day, before *sunset*. This worker, perhaps living a hand-to-mouth existence, depended on such timely pay to provide for daily necessities (see Leviticus 19:13; Matthew 20:8).

#### **15b. Otherwise they may cry to the LORD against you, and you will be guilty of sin.**

If workers were treated unjustly, it would be within their power to *cry out to the Lord* for help and justice (Exodus 22:22–23; James 5:4). As failing to return a poor person’s pledge at the end of the day would be considered unrighteous (see commentary on Deuteronomy 24:13, above), withholding pay from a poor person at the end of the day would be considered a *sin*.

Centuries later, the prophet Malachi warned Israel that God would “come to put you on trial ... against those who defraud laborers of their wages” (Malachi 3:5). God would deal decisively and swiftly with those who did not show justice to their workers.

### III. Just Community (DEUTERONOMY 24:16–18)

#### A. Commanding Punishment (v. 16)

**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.**

The principle described here stands in contrast to other law codes of the ancient world. The Babylonian law code of Hammurabi prescribed that if a builder built a house that collapsed, causing the death of the homeowner's son, the builder's son was to be put to death.

In contrast, Hebrew law required certain parameters to allow for just treatment of innocent family members who were vulnerable to harm because of the actions of a relative. The given stipulation would prevent a potentially endless chain of revenge.

However, this principle does not contradict what is found elsewhere regarding God's "punishing the *children* for the sin of the *parents* to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me" (Deuteronomy 5:9). While each person will surely experience the consequences of their *sin*, the repercussions of those sins are often experienced by others. We may think of a parent today who is justly sent to prison for a crime, with side effects of their family suffering destabilization in their relationships and finances.

#### B. Caring for the Needy (v. 17)

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

All Israelites were tasked with looking out for the marginalized and the defenseless among them. The Hebrew words translated *foreigner*, *fatherless*, and *widow* occur together in triads in 11 verses in the book of Deuteronomy, emphasizing God's concern for these vulnerable people (see also Psalms 94:6; 146:9; Jeremiah 7:6; 22:3; Ezekiel 22:7; Zechariah 7:10; Malachi 3:5).

To *take the cloak of the widow as a pledge* is in the same category as taking the garment of a poor man—*forbidden* (Deuteronomy 24:12–13, above). Furthermore, lenders who had wrongly taken such garments in pledge sometimes worsened the offense by taking those items to pagan worship (see Amos 2:8).

The law provided numerous reminders to God's people to uphold justice for those who needed it most (Exodus 23:6, 9; Leviticus 19:33–34; Proverbs 22:22). Concern for these three groups extends into the New Testament as well (see Matthew 25:35–36; Acts 6:1–5; 1 Timothy 5:3, 16; Hebrews 13:2; James 1:27).

God desires justice for needy individuals and his people are to desire the same. Following God's commands for just living requires extra attention to vulnerable people.

#### C. Corporate Memory (v. 18)

**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.**

Moses reminded the second generation of Israelites of their history as slaves in the land of *Egypt*. That along with God's redemptive act served as the foundation for Israel's identity (see Deuteronomy 5:15; 7:8; 9:26; 13:5; 15:15; 16:12; 24:22).

The corporate memory of that bondage and their following redemption was to motivate the Israelites to compassionate treatment of the marginalized. That would happen as the Israelites remembered their own suffering and marginalization as slaves in Egypt. To treat others as they had been treated by God was the watchword for Israel (compare Matthew 18:23–35). They were to remember that *God redeemed* them from that situation and provided justice where injustice reigned.

## IV. Just Harvest (DEUTERONOMY 24:19–21)

### A. Regarding Grain (v. 19)

**19a. 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,**

In addition to justice in lending practices, justice to the vulnerable was also to be seen in agrarian practices at harvest times. Often the poorer Israelites would work in the fields during the annual harvest time (compare 2 Kings 25:12). The work of *harvesting* was completed with a hand sickle, cutting bundles of grain and binding each into a *sheaf*. Written in terms of what the landowner did *overlook* should have encouraged the underprivileged to boldness in retrieving the grain accidentally left behind. There should have been no worry that the landowner would later demand it back.

Furthermore, the law made clear that the edges of the fields be left unharvested and only a single harvest occur so that “the poor and *foreigner*” might harvest from the fields for their own sustenance (Leviticus 19:9–10; 23:22). This legislation is seen enacted in the narrative of Ruth, a foreign widow who gleaned the leftover grain from the fields of her Hebrew relative, Boaz (Ruth 1:22–2:3).

**19b. so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.**

The phrase *that the Lord your God may bless you* occurs three times in the book of Deuteronomy: here and in 14:29 and 23:20. In all three cases, God's blessing is contingent on meeting the needs of others. The Lord will bless those who honor his laws and treat the marginalized with respect and compassion (see Proverbs 19:17).

### B. Regarding Produce (vv. 20–21)

**20–21. 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. 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.**

Grape and olive crops were often planted together using a method called polyculture, the practice of growing several crops side by side, which was made popular in the Mediterranean region. Each crop contributed to the health and well-being of the other.

Harvesting olives required that a harvester beat the *branches* of the olive *trees* with a long stick. Most ripe olives would fall to the ground; and any olives remaining on the branches were to be left for the *foreigner*, the *fatherless*, and the *widow*. The same generous harvesting principle was applied to the gathering of *grapes*. What remained following the first harvest was to be left for the needy. The people of God should cultivate not only their crops but also the same kind of generous spirit that the Lord had shown to them.

## Conclusion

### A. Ignorance and Want, Today

The physical needs of others confront us daily. Applying God's principles for an ancient culture, where 98 percent of people lived on farms, to our modern culture, where only 2 percent do, is a challenge. But a common-ground starting point is that people of God in all times should live in such a way as to respect the dignity of those in need. Granted, it may take some challenging conversations and creative thinking on our part to apply these principles in specific and helpful ways. This lesson's Scripture text provides principles of justice that each and every follower of God should model and help enact.

Ignorance and want continue to manifest themselves today. Unlike Scrooge, we should not desire that injustice be hidden from our eyes. Our heavenly Father has made it clear that his heart and his compassion are with those in need. Are ours?

### B. Prayer

Father, we pray that you will help us always to see our neighbors as you see them, especially those who are often ignored or treated with contempt. Help us to treat them justly, with the mercy that you have shown us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

### C. Thought to Remember

Remembering how God has treated us should always govern how we treat others.<sup>1</sup>

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