

Christian Manner of Justice

Devotional Reading: Luke 3:7–14

Background Scripture: Exodus 1:8–14; Amos 5:6–15;
Zechariah 8:16–17; 1 Timothy 6:17–19

Deuteronomy 24:14–21

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.

Ephesians 6:5–9

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.

1 Timothy 6:17–19

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.

Key Text

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

Social Teachings of the Church

Unit 3: Fulfilling Our Obligations to God and Society

Lessons 9–13

Lesson Aims

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

1. Identify themes of justice in each text.
2. Contrast God’s justice and impartiality with societal tendencies toward “-isms”(e.g., classism, racism, ableism, etc.).
3. List ways to care for others in and through our work.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Actions Speak Louder than Words
- B. Lesson Context

I. Generosity in Work (Deuteronomy 24:14–21)

- A. Fair Payment (vv. 14–15)
- B. Individual Responsibility (v. 16)
- C. Remember Past Justice (vv. 17–18)
- D. Leave Some for the Poor (vv. 19–21)

Licking the Bowl

II. Mutual Respect in Work (Ephesians 6:5–9)

- A. Obey as unto the Lord (vv. 5–7)
Busy Work
- B. Reward for Obedience (v. 8)
- C. Reciprocal Treatment (v. 9)

III. Future Rewards of Work (1 Timothy 6:17–19)

- A. Rightly Placed Hope (v. 17)
- B. Richness in Deeds (v. 18)
- C. Treasure to Come (v. 19)

Conclusion

- A. The Work of Faith
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

A. Actions Speak Louder than Words

At age 15, I started working at a fast-food restaurant. The job came with an unexpected perk: Bible discussions with my Christian manager. Nearly four decades later, I have forgotten most of our conversations, but an act of kindness he displayed has stayed with me. One morning, I found a man rummaging through the dumpster, looking for food and told my manager. I expected my manager to chase the man away. Instead, I was surprised. He brought the man inside, gave him a meal, and packed fresh food for him to take. That day, I saw an aspect of God’s character uniquely displayed through my manager. His single act of generosity, hospitality, and respect had a more significant impact on me than any of our discussions.

B. Lesson Context

The first Scripture text from today’s lesson comes from Moses’ second speech in Deuteronomy to the people of Israel. The speech begins by setting forth a general set of rules for God’s covenant people (Deuteronomy 4:44–11:32). The second part of the speech focuses on specific rules within God’s order for a new society (12:1–26:19).

Israel’s identity as God’s covenant people was supposed to shape their treatment of poor and marginalized people. Moses had already reminded the Israelites that poor people would always be part of the population (Deuteronomy 15:11). As a result, he commanded an openhanded policy toward these people, requiring generous giving without resentment (15:10; see lesson 2).

The second Scripture text comes from the apostle Paul’s letter to the church in Ephesus. In Ephesians 5:21–6:9, Paul includes a “household code,” a common form of social teaching in that day. These codes consisted of a list of obligations and duties in household relationships (compare Colossians 3:8–14; 1 Peter 2:18–3:7). He discusses each of the common roles in a household of his time, including family members and servants. Far from simply affirming the culturally accepted social order, Paul infuses every household role with the revolutionary story of Jesus.

The final Scripture text comes from the first letter that Paul wrote to Timothy. Timothy was likely dealing with false teachers who arose in the church in Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3–4). These false teachers glorified wealth (6:5–10). Paul outlines steps the community members can take to ensure they are not overcome by “love of money” (6:10).

I. Generosity in Work

(Deuteronomy 24:14–21)

A. Fair Payment (vv. 14–15)

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.

An Israelite who experienced economic difficulty might serve other Israelites as a *hired worker* (Leviticus 25:39–40). These workers committed to a set time of service. They would eventually receive their freedom (25:41; see Exodus 21:2; Deuteronomy 15:12).

God’s command to treat workers fairly does not depend on a worker’s place of origin. God expects his people *not* to *take advantage* of the *poor and needy*, whether those people are *fellow* Israelites or foreigners (non-Israelites living within the gates of Israelite 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.

One obvious way to practice justice toward workers is through the timely payment of *wages*. The hired workers described in this verse are equivalent to day laborers. They were usually paid for their work at the end of an agreed time (compare Matthew 20:8). Their situation was the ancient equivalent of living paycheck to paycheck. It was cruel and unlawful for a landowner to withhold a day’s wages from the worker (Leviticus 19:13). The text notes that causing these workers reason *to cry to the Lord* is *sin* (compare Malachi 3:5; James 5:4).

B. Individual Responsibility (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 in this verse differs from other law codes of the ancient world. The Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, for example, stated that if a builder built a house that collapsed, causing the death of the homeowner’s son, the builder’s son was to be killed. In contrast, the Law of Moses protects innocent family members who might otherwise be punished for a relative’s actions. The given stipulation in God’s law prevents a potentially endless chain of revenge.

This principle does not contradict the Scripture that speaks of God’s “visiting the iniquity of the *fathers* upon the *children* unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me” (Deuteronomy 5:9). Each person surely experiences the consequences of their sin, as do others close to them. Sin has a far-reaching effect but needs not include retribution or revenge.

C. Remember Past Justice (vv. 17–18)

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

The three groups of people most at risk of unfair treatment are *the foreigner* (non-Israelites living in the land), the *fatherless*, and widows (compare Exodus 22:21–22; Psalms 94:6; 146:9; Jeremiah 7:6; 22:3; Ezekiel 22:7; Zechariah 7:10).

This text contains a specific statute to protect



Visual for Lessons 9 & 11. *Display this visual as you review the verse-by-verse commentary associated with Deuteronomy 24:14–21.*

widows. Lenders could not take a widow's *cloak* as a *pledge* when lending. While the law includes rules for lenders to take clothing as collateral (Exodus 22:26–27), they are strictly forbidden to take it from the vulnerable (Deuteronomy 24:12–13).

What Do You Think?

What steps can your class take to help address the needs of immigrants, orphans, and widows in your community?

Digging Deeper

What specialized training will your class need to be effective in this ministry?

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.

The Israelites recall their history of enslavement in the land of *Egypt*. That history, along with God's redemptive act, serves as the foundation of Israel's identity (see Deuteronomy 5:15; 7:8; 15:15; etc.). The national memory of that enslavement and redemption was supposed to motivate the Israelites to compassionate treatment of the marginalized. Israel was to *remember* that *God redeemed* them and respond by caring for the most vulnerable around them.

What Do You Think?

How has your recollection of God's redemptive acts encouraged you to keep his commands?

Digging Deeper

In what ways do you strengthen your memory of God's redemptive acts?

D. Leave Some for the Poor (vv. 19–21)

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.

One practical way the Israelites could show justice to the most vulnerable was through practices at harvest time. Harvesters in a field would

cut bundles of grain and bind each bundle into a *sheaf*. The poor and vulnerable could collect the leftover grain in a process called "gleaning" (compare Ruth 1:22–2:3; see also Leviticus 19:9–10; 23:22). If the harvesters *overlook a sheaf*, the text directs them to leave it for the gleaners.

This practice reminds landowners that their land and the resulting harvest belong to the Lord (Leviticus 25:23; Deuteronomy 10:14; etc.). The phrase *that the Lord your God may bless you* occurs three times in the book of Deuteronomy: here, in 14:29, and 23:20. In all three cases, God's blessing depends on meeting the needs of others. The Lord promises to bless those who honor his laws and treat the marginalized with respect (15:10; 28:1–12).

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.

The ancient world prized olive trees for their fruit and the oil they produced. *Olives* also represented God's blessing (Jeremiah 31:12; Joel 2:19, etc.). Vineyards, too, were a sign of wealth and stability for their owners (Isaiah 65:21–22; Amos 9:14; etc.).

Cultivation and harvest of the olive *trees* and *vineyard* requires considerable time and energy. Landowners worked hard to prevent any wasted crops. In this verse, however, the law extends rules for gleaning to even the most valuable of harvests (compare Leviticus 19:9–10).

Licking the Bowl

When I was little, I loved to help my mom bake cakes. I would assemble all the ingredients while she prepared the bowl and mixer. After adding the ingredients to the bowl, she'd turn on the beaters, and I'd watch her whip everything together. Then came my favorite part.

After she poured the batter into a pan, she'd offer me one of the mixing beaters to lick (though I now know you aren't supposed to eat raw cake batter!). Before she could soak the almost-empty

bowl in soapy water, I'd quickly grab a spoon so I could scoop out any last remaining batter.

We often live in a way that leaves little room for any leftovers. In Deuteronomy 24, God reminds his people to "leave some batter in the bowl." We are called to live with margin and to share it with others. What would it look like for you to make room in your life to meet the needs of those around you? How could you leave space for spontaneous or intentional generosity? —B. R.

II. Mutual Respect in Work

(Ephesians 6:5–9)

A. Obey as unto the Lord (vv. 5–7)

5a. Slaves, obey your earthly masters

In many ways, slavery in the first-century world was unlike slavery in the pre-Civil War United States. For example, enslavement in the first century was not tied to a person's race. A person could become enslaved for many reasons. Some were taken captive in war, while others sold themselves into slavery to pay off debts. Further, during the time of the apostle Paul, it was possible for enslaved people, mainly males who worked in households, to gain a level of freedom.

Paul begins this text by addressing the less powerful party in the household relationship. He directs *slaves* to submit to earthly authority by being obedient (Colossians 3:22). Although an enslaved person is under an *earthly* authority, both the master and enslaved person have one Lord: Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28–29; Ephesians 4:4–6).

5b. with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ.

Fear of violence and cruelty was common in the lives of many enslaved people. This verse, however, does not indicate approval of such things. Intimidation and brutality have no place in a household that follows Christ (see Ephesians 6:9, below). Instead, the phrase *respect and fear* communicates a sense of reverent respect that household members must show one another (5:21; compare 1 Corinthians 2:3; 2 Corinthians 7:15).

An enslaved person's obedience should occur with complete *sincerity of heart* as if obeying *Christ* himself (see Colossians 3:22–24). Paul is

not saying that earthly masters are a "stand-in" for God. In fact, the servants themselves model Christ through their obedience to the authorities (see Philippians 2:7). Rather, Paul teaches that the authority of the Lord Jesus should govern all relationships within the household and in society (1 Peter 2:13; compare 1 Timothy 6:1–2). In Paul's context, this teaching is revolutionary.

6–7. 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. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people,

The opposite of working as if unto *Christ* is working only to please people. If someone works only to win favor in the public eye, then the attitude of their heart is wrong. Labor in any context should be completed as if in service to *Christ*, who knows the thoughts and intentions of the *heart* (see Colossians 3:23). Workers are free to serve others *wholeheartedly* for the sake of the Lord.

What Do You Think?

In what ways do you consider your work to be a service to Christ?

Digging Deeper

How will you adjust your approach to work so that others see Christ through your attitudes and actions?

Busy Work

When I was in college, I worked at my school's bookstore. My boss would often assign the task of dusting the bookshelves, something I saw as "busy work." My boss rarely assigned the task to more than one person at a time, because when we were allowed to work together, we'd inevitably begin talking instead of working. Admittedly, we were diligent in cleaning only when our boss was watching!

These days, I complete most of my work without anyone's direct oversight. I had to learn to be diligent without a supervisor present. Paul reminds us that all our labor should be done as if in service to the Lord, no matter who else is there to see it. Regardless of whether a supervisor

is watching, God is watching. I want to be diligent and hardworking to please him, no matter the task. Further, I now know that by being a faithful worker, I can display his goodness to my managers and clients. How does your view of your work change when you realize you are working for the Lord?
—B. R.

B. Reward for Obedience (v. 8)

8. because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.

When it comes to obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ, all people, *whether they are slave or free*, are under the same authority (1 Corinthians 12:13; Colossians 3:11). All people will stand before Christ to have their works tested, and all will have an opportunity to receive a reward (Matthew 16:27; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Revelation 22:12; etc.). Therefore, all people should aim to do *good* works in response to receiving the gift of grace (see Ephesians 2:10).

C. Reciprocal Treatment (v. 9)

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.

Paul now directs his teachings toward *masters*. In Paul's day, this turn would have surprised readers. Household codes rarely mentioned the obligations of masters to enslaved people. The apostle directs masters to *treat* others, including those enslaved under their authority, with respect out of reverence for Christ. This was to result in fair and just treatment of enslaved people (see Colossians 4:1). One way masters could practice justice was by refusing to *threaten* those under their authority.

Through these two directives, along with the commands to enslaved people in the previous verses, Paul overturns the slave-master dynamics of his day. The text promises enslaved people a reward for their work. Further, it directs enslavers to think of themselves as servants of the Lord, their *Master . . . in heaven*, and to treat others justly. Paul does not openly condemn slavery in this passage. He understood, however, that add-

ing Christ to such an unequal relationship would bring a God-honoring shift to the culture.

III. Future Rewards of Work

(1 Timothy 6:17–19)

A. Rightly Placed Hope (v. 17)

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.

Paul gives specific advice to Timothy for teaching those in his faith community who are *rich in this present world*. These people seem to have many reasons to *put their hope in* their own judgment, abilities, and *wealth*, but these things are not guaranteed to last (Proverbs 23:5; 27:24; Luke 12:20–21; James 4:13–14). All people need to trust in the Lord.

The wealthy must also remember that God is the source of their wealth (Deuteronomy 8:18; Ecclesiastes 5:19). He is the creator and sustainer of the world, and all wealth comes from his provision and generosity (see Deuteronomy 8:17–18; 1 Samuel 2:7; etc.). This is true of both material and spiritual wealth. The church in first-century Laodicea is an example of a community that did not recognize its poor spiritual state despite having material wealth (Revelation 3:14–18).

What Do You Think?

What preventative measures can Christians employ to avoid placing trust wholly in material wealth?

Digging Deeper

How can Christians oppose cultural narratives that encourage the accumulation of material wealth?

B. Richness in Deeds (v. 18)

18. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.

After Paul warns the wealthy members of the community, he provides them with a positive direc-

tive. Wealthy people have an opportunity to use their resources to *do good* for the body of Christ (Galatians 6:10; Hebrews 13:16). Paul engages in wordplay by using the word *rich*, a word often associated with earthly possessions, to describe the practice of doing *good deeds* for others.

This verse refers to the attitude behind a person's good works. Paul emphasizes that the wealthy should be eager to serve others, not to hold on to their material wealth. These commands align closely with his commands for giving among specific New Testament churches (Romans 15:25–27; 2 Corinthians 8:1–7).

What Do You Think?

What barriers prevent believers from showing generosity with their material wealth?

Digging Deeper

In what ways will you be "rich" in good deeds in the upcoming week?

C. Treasure to Come (v. 19)

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.

Some commentators believe that Paul's exhortation to *lay up* wealth reflects Jesus' teaching on storing treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19–21; 19:21). The image of laying up *treasure* implies that when believers give to others, they are not losing their wealth but transferring it from earth to heaven. *The coming age* that Paul has in mind might be a time of economic distress in the near future, or it might be the time of Christ's return. At any rate, people who have shared their wealth with the faith community are promised a secure future, if not in this life, then through receiving eternal life—*life that is truly life*.

Paul does not suggest that a person can earn eternal life through good works. His words are consistent, however, with James's teaching that true faith is evidenced by works (James 2:14–26). When people show generosity, they build a *firm foundation* of faith in their lives (contrast 5:1–5).

Conclusion

A. The Work of Faith

These three texts teach that God's people must display generosity, mutual respect, and rightly ordered hope. Deuteronomy 24 identifies the generosity and justice God commanded of the ancient Israelites. We ought to show generosity and act justly in our homes, neighborhoods, and workplaces. When we do so, we reflect God's character to everyone around us, including the most vulnerable.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians reminds us of the "level playing field" on which we stand before Christ. His authority governs all earthly relationships. Our faith demands that we treat others with respect, recognizing that we are all equal in Christ.

Finally, Paul's letter to Timothy encourages us to order our hopes rightly. The truth that our security comes from God, not our material possessions, remains especially relevant in the twenty-first century. As we place our hope in God, we should be openhanded and generous with our resources.

Lives that do not prioritize the world's measures of money, status, and power are living testimonies to God's life-transforming grace. Because our lives have been transformed by God, we seek to practice justice, respect all people, and share generously.

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, help us never to neglect the most vulnerable members of our communities. Give us eyes to see how we can act justly and generously meet needs. May we do this to reflect your love to the world. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Serve God by serving others with justice, respect, and generosity.

How to Say It

Ephesus	Ef-uh-sus.
Hammurabi	Ham-muh-rah-bee.
Laodicea	Lay-odd-uh-see-uh.