



## Sunday, November 6, 2022

**Lesson Text:** Exodus 23:1-9; **Time of Action:** 1444 B.C.;  
**Place of Action:** Mount Sinai

**Golden Text:** "Keep thee far from a false matter; and the innocent and righteous slay thou not: for I will not justify the wicked" (Exodus 23:7).

**I. INTRODUCTION.** God requires justice and compassion. When we interact with others we are to be honest, avoid showing favoritism, and treat our enemies fairly. By living this way, we will stand out in society. Imagine our society without any rules. Yes, we have failed to enforce many of our existing laws, but a system of law and justice is vital if we are to have order in the world. In this week's lesson, we are given a few simple principles of just living, along with powerful motives that should encourage the fulfillment of these principles in our lives.

**II. BACKGROUND FOR THE LESSON.** Moses had led Israel to Mount Sinai where they would receive God's law (see Exodus 19:1-2). God then instituted the Mosaic Covenant with Israel declaring that they would be His people if they obeyed His law, and all the people agreed to do whatever the LORD commanded (see Exodus 19:5-8). But



before receiving the law, there had to be a period of spiritual preparation. Moses directed the people to sanctify or separate themselves from all sinful defilement. This inward purification was symbolized by the washing of their clothes (see Exodus 19:10-11). On the third day, the people were to be prepared because the LORD would come down before them on Mount Sinai (see Exodus 19:11). After receiving these instructions from the LORD, Moses went down from Mount Sinai to prepare the people to hear from God (see Exodus 19:14-19). Then the LORD called Moses back to the top of the mountain to remind him not to allow the people to break through the barriers that had been set up to keep them away from God's presence and Mount Sinai. Moses told the LORD that the people had already been warned so God told him to go back down to the people and Moses obeyed (see Exodus 19:20-25). At this point, God gives the people the Ten Commandments orally (see Exodus 20:1-17). These words were spoken by God and were heard by all the people (see Deuteronomy 5:22). Then, God gave Moses laws regarding master and servant relationships (see Exodus 21:1-11) and laws for judging personal injuries (see Exodus 21:1-27) including those caused by a person's animals (see Exodus 21:28-36). In Exodus 22:1-15, God gave laws designed to judge property rights, and in verses 16-24, laws were given to judge crimes committed against humanity including usury or charging exorbitant interest (see Exodus 22:25-27). Chapter 22 concludes with God commanding that offerings be made to Him (see Exodus 22:28-30). We should be reminded that at Mount Sinai the set of laws and regulations God gave Israel were for them to live by once they entered the Promised Land. These laws revealed the need for honesty and compassion in Jewish life. Even though



Christians are not under the law that God gave to Israel (see Romans 6:14), He still expects us to uphold the principles on which those laws were based because they reflect God's very nature. Our lesson this week comes from chapter 23.

### **III. DEMONSTRATING IMPARTIALITY IN LEGAL MATTERS (Exodus 23:1-3)**

#### **A. Be a truthful witness (Exodus 23:1-2).**

1. (vs. 1). This verse says **"Thou shalt not raise a false report: put not thine hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness."** The words **"raise a false report"** refer to listening to a lie and spreading it. The phrase **"put not thine hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness"** means that we are not to join others in spreading **"false reports"** or lies. Making up, or spreading **"false reports"** was strictly forbidden by God. This commandment referred primarily to lawsuits, but it's also a rule for just or right living. Being an **"unrighteous witness"** actually involves lying in court or lying in general on one's neighbor. One of the worst examples of this kind of injustice was when the Bible tells of two worthless men who lied against Naboth so that King Ahab could take his vineyard (see I Kings 21:1-15). Those lies also led to Naboth's death.

2. (vs. 2). This verse says **"Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil; neither shalt thou speak in a cause to decline after many to wrest judgment."**



This command forbids following a crowd to do wrong. The word "**decline**" here means to "*lean toward*," so the phrase "**neither shalt thou speak in a cause to decline after many to wrest judgment**" means that we are not to pervert justice by taking sides with the crowd or the majority. In other words, don't give in to peer-pressure. People of any age can be tempted to give in to peer-pressure. Contrary to what many believe, you don't have to be a teen-ager to fall to peer-pressure. It becomes easy to justify our wrong decisions by going along with what *everybody else* is saying or doing. Only those who have the inner strength and have mastered God's divine standards to do what's right can resist the pressure to go along with the crowd to do unjust things (see Proverbs 1:10-19). Romans 12:1-2 says "*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.*"

**B. Don't show favoritism to social classes (Exodus 23:3).** This verse says "**Neither shalt thou countenance a poor man in his cause.**" The word "**countenance**" here means "*approval*" or "*support*." So, the command here is not to support or show favoritism to "**a poor man**" in a "**cause**" or lawsuit just because he is "**poor.**" In legal matters, the social class of the people involved shouldn't have anything to do with the verdict or outcome. But more often than not it's tempting to favor the rich in court cases since they have the power to get back at



those who oppose them (see James 2:1-9). But because we may want to show compassion, it's also possible to show favoritism to the "**poor**" in a court case even if they are wrong. God's law is clear: justice must be blind to every social class whether rich or poor. Leviticus 19:15 says it this way: "*Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour*" (see also Deuteronomy 1:17). **Note: We might sympathize with the "poor man" who steals food to feed his family, but he's just as guilty of stealing as a rich thief. The law can't have a double standard for rich and "poor" people. We must always be sensitive and compassionate to the needs of the "poor," but this must never lead to compromising justice.**

#### **IV. DEMONSTRATING COMPASSION IN EVERYDAY BEHAVIOR (Exodus 23:4-5)**

**A. Showing compassion by returning property (Exodus 23:4).** This verse says "**If thou meet thine enemy's ox or his ass going astray, thou shalt surely bring it back to him again.**" The word "**enemy**" speaks of a broken relationship that could've been caused by any number of things. Regardless of what caused the people to be at odds with each other, God said that if we come across our "**enemy's**" animal straying away, out of compassion we should catch the animal and return him to his owner. Now let's be honest, it's very tempting for a person not to return



his or her **"enemy's"** animal thinking that they deserved to lose it because of the ill feelings they have toward each other. But this is not God's way of dealing with our **"enemies"** or those with whom we have issues. Believers are commanded to love our **"enemies,"** to live peaceably with them, and even provide for their daily needs (see Romans 12:17-18). As part of His sermon on the mount, in Matthew 5:44, Jesus said *"But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you."*

**B. Showing compassion when assisting in difficulties (Exodus 23:5).** Still dealing with one's enemies, in this verse God said **"If thou see the ass of him that hateth thee lying under his burden, and wouldest forbear to help him, thou shalt surely help with him."** The Israelites were also commanded not only to return lost property to an enemy, but they were to help him free his **"ass"** or donkey from a large **"burden"** or load that caused the animal to fall under the weight of the load. Again, there may be a strong temptation not to help and to turn away from the problem. This is the meaning of the phrase **"and wouldest forbear to help him."** One might reason that it was the owner's fault due to mistreating the animal by putting too heavy a load on it. But the law didn't support this attitude because the last part of this verse says **"thou shalt surely help with him."** This means that the person who sees his enemy struggling to get his donkey up should help to release the animal from the weight of **"his burden."** This would demonstrate compassion for both the animal and its



owner. It would also help erase any bad feelings the other man has toward the one who helped. Kindness and compassion have a way of removing anger and enmity. In his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul wrote *"And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you"* (see Ephesians 4:32).

**V. DEMONSTRATING INTEGRITY IN HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS (Exodus 23:6-9).** Now, in these verses, the principles of justice found in them can be applied to all our personal relationships, but they apply especially to those who have been given duties in the government.

**A. Show integrity by upholding the needy (Exodus 23:6).** This verse says **"Thou shalt not wrest the judgment of thy poor in his cause."** The word **"wrest"** means to *"pervert."* This verse commands that in hearing a dispute involving a **"poor"** person, the judge must not be bias against him. In verse 3, we were told not to rule in favor of a **"poor"** man just because he's **"poor"** which could result in him being treated too favorably. But here, we are told to do the opposite. The judge must not rule against the **"poor"** man simply because he is **"poor."** **Note: *It's easy for local officials to identify themselves with others of the same social class and take sides in court. They realize that the "poor" don't have the means to retaliate if they rule against them, nor can they reward the official if they rule in favor of the "poor." But the rich have the***



*money and the influence to retaliate for a decision made against them, and also to give a reward for a decision made in their favor. God expressed repeatedly how much He cared for the "poor" in Israel (see Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 15:7-11). The "poor" were also special objects of Jesus' love (see Matthew 11:4-5), and He spoke against those who mistreated them (see Matthew 23:14). The apostles also stressed care for the "poor" (see Galatians 2:10; James 2:15-18).*

**B. Showing integrity when supporting the innocent (Exodus 23:7).** This verse says: **"Keep thee far from a false matter; and the innocent and righteous slay thou not: for I will not justify the wicked."** The words **"false matter"** refers to a **"false"** charge against an **"innocent"** person that could lead to an unjust decision and even an execution. How often have we heard about people being on death row only to find out at the last minute that they were innocent? This verse orders officials to keep themselves far away from such accusations. In fact, they shouldn't even think about such **"false"** charges. The phrase **"and the innocent and righteous slay thou not"** is a reference to condemning someone to death after they were unjustly sentenced. Capital punishment has its place (see Genesis 9:5-6), but those who have the power to exercise it must be very careful to inflict it justly and fairly. Otherwise, the innocent perish while the guilty go free. We can be assured that the guilty will not go unpunished, for God says in the last part of this verse, **"for I will not justify the wicked."** The word **"justify"** here means *"to declare someone not guilty."* God judges perfectly and He won't





allow **"the wicked"** to escape justice no matter what man's decision may be. Crooked politicians often ignore this fact. Some have deceived their constituents and preserved their reputations and have forgotten their guilt before God. He will surely repay them, for Romans 12:19 says *"Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but instead give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the LORD."*

**C. Showing integrity when refusing bribes (Exodus 23:8).** This verse says **"And thou shalt take no gift: for the gift blindeth the wise, and perverteth the words of the righteous."** This is a command not to take bribes, the corrupt practice of receiving **"gifts"** for favors rendered. This command is directed particularly to government officials who are in a position to give in to this powerful temptation. Bribery is one of the most common forms of political corruption (see Numbers 22:7, 16-17; I Samuel 8:1-3; Amos 5:12). The Scriptures repeatedly condemn bribery because it makes a mockery of justice (see Deuteronomy 16:19; I Samuel 12:3). Proverbs 17:23 says: *"A wicked man taketh a gift out of the bosom to pervert the ways of judgment."* This is because as God also said in this verse, **"for the gift (or bribe) blindeth the wise."** Taking a bribe will **"blind"** even **"wise"** leaders to doing the right thing. The judge who normally judges fairly and wisely can be dazzled by money dangled before him or her and can no longer see the issues fairly. God also said that a **"gift"** or bribes **"perverteth the words of the righteous."** In other words, bribes can affect the verdicts of normally **"righteous"** judges that can result in decisions denying



justice to those who are in the right. God is a **"righteous"** judge and is absolutely just and fair (see Genesis 18:25; II Timothy 4:8). No wonder taking **"gifts"** or bribes is an abomination to Him!

**D. Showing integrity when befriending the stranger (Exodus 23:9).** Our final verse says **"Also thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt."** In Jesus' day the Jews practiced prejudice and discrimination against Gentiles, but God had commanded in the law that Jews **"shalt not oppress a stranger."** The Gentiles, or **"strangers"** in Canaan had no inherited rights, but they were to be treated with hospitality and fairness (see Exodus 22:21). **"Strangers"** in Israel were to be treated fairly in court (see Deuteronomy 1:16; 24:17); if they were poor, they were to be cared for (see Leviticus 25:35). **"Strangers"** were also to have access to the cities of refuge (see Numbers 35:10-15) and were to be included in the celebration of Israel's festivals (see Deuteronomy 16:11, 14). In addition, at harvest time, grain was to be left for **"strangers"** in the corners of the fields (see Leviticus 19:10; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19). The Israelites were also commanded to love **"strangers"** (see Deuteronomy 10:19). The reason that Israel was to treat **"strangers"** kindly was because God said **"for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt."** Of all people, Israel should have understood what it meant to be **"a stranger"** because they had been **"strangers"** and slaves in **"Egypt"** for over 400 years (see Exodus 12:40-41). It was not a pleasant experience for Israel in **"Egypt"** since they



were sorely mistreated by the Egyptians. From that experience the Jews should've learned to treat the **"stranger"** as they themselves would've wanted to be treated. In fact, Jesus summed up all of God's laws regarding relationships whether in court or in our private lives when He said, *"And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise"* (see Luke 6:31). Simply put, Jesus was saying to treat folk the way we want to be treated. This is truly Christian love!

**VI. Conclusion.** God's instructions are clear: as His people we are expected to practice truth, justice and mercy. In order to practice justice, not only must we avoid doing wrong, we must also show compassion to those who really need it. This lesson, taken from Israel's law, teaches us some wonderful principles for righteous or just living: impartiality in court proceedings, compassion in our daily conduct, and integrity in all human relationships. Since these principles are part of the very nature of God, they are repeated for us in the New Testament in some form or another, but they mean the same thing. If we want to please God, we must practice these principles of justice and fairness in our lives.

**\*\*\*The Sunday School Lesson; Union Gospel Press Curriculum**