

Christian Manner of Justice

Devotional Reading: Luke 3:7–14

Background Scripture: Exodus 1:8–14; Amos 5:6–9; Zechariah 8:16–17;
1 Timothy 6:17–19

Today's Scripture: Deuteronomy 24:14–21; Ephesians 6:5–9;
1 Timothy 6:17–19

I. Generosity in Work 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.

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.

14. An Israelite who experienced economic difficulty might serve other Israelites as a *hired worker*. These workers committed to a set time of service. They would eventually receive their freedom.

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. 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. The text notes that giving these workers a reason *to cry to the Lord is sin*.

16. 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. 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.

17. The three groups of people most at risk of unfair treatment are *the foreigner* (non-Israelites living in the land), the *fatherless*, and widows. This text contains a specific statute to protect 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, they are strictly forbidden to take it from the most vulnerable.

18. 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. The 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.

19. One practical way the Israelites 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." 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.

20–21. The ancient world prized olive trees for their fruit and the oil they pro-

duced. Vineyards were a sign of wealth and stability for their owners. Cultivation and harvest of the olive *trees* and *vineyard* requires considerable resources. Landowners worked hard to prevent any wasted crops. In this verse, however, the law extends rules for gleaning to include the most valuable of harvests.

II. Mutual Respect in Work 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.

5. In many ways, slavery in the first-century world was unlike slavery in the pre-Civil War United States. During the time of the apostle Paul, it was possible for enslaved people 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 through obedience. Although an enslaved person is under an *earthly* authority, both the master and enslaved person have one Lord: Christ Jesus.

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. The phrase *respect and fear* commu-

nicates a sense of respect that household members are to show one another.

6–7. The opposite of working as if unto *Christ* is working 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*. Workers are free to serve others *wholeheartedly* for the sake of the Lord.

8. When it comes to obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ, all people, *whether they are slave or free*, are under the same authority. All people will stand before Christ to have their works tested, and all will have an opportunity to receive a reward. Therefore, all people should aim to do *good* works in response to receiving the gift of grace.

9. Paul 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. One way masters could practice justice was by refusing to *threaten* those under their authority.

III. Future Rewards of Work

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.

17. 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. All people need to trust in the Lord.

The wealthy must also remember that God is the source of their wealth. He is the creator and sustainer of the world, and all wealth comes from his provision and generosity. This is true of both material and spiritual wealth.

18. After Paul warns the wealthy members of the community, he provides them with a positive directive. Wealthy people have an opportunity to use their resources to *do good* for the body of Christ. 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.

19. 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.

Involvement Learning

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Into the Lesson

Brainstorm a list of jobs. How can workers complete these jobs with the intention of caring for or blessing people?

Into the Word

Read Deuteronomy 24:14–21. Write down ways that modern-day believers can demonstrate fair and just treatment of the poor, needy, fatherless, foreigners, and widows.

Read Ephesians 6:5–9. How does Paul's message encourage us to act justly and treat others fairly in our labor?

Read 1 Timothy 6:17–19. How will you use your material blessings to be rich in good works in the upcoming week?

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

Into Life

List people you interact with in and through your work. Identify them by their roles, not their names (examples: coworkers, clients, supervisors, customers, etc.). Next to each example, brainstorm a way you could care for them.

Thought to Remember

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