

Let Justice Be Your Guide
Deuteronomy 16:18-17:13
Series: Loving God in Every Way

Introduction: Take your Bible and turn with me to Deuteronomy 16, Deuteronomy chapter 16.

As we continue through this wonderful book of Scripture, let me remind you of the big picture once again so that we can get our bearings for this text. This book is a series of sermons delivered by an aging Moses. The people of Israel have just finished their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness in which they were burying the previous generation who were dying off because of their rebellion against the Lord. Now, this younger generation is poised and ready to enter the Promised Land. But before they go in, they need to be reminded of the covenant that they have made with God. So, Moses is reminding them through these sermons about their unique relationship to the one and only God. And he has been calling them to love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. The core truth of the book of Deuteronomy is that there is One God and none other. The core command to God's people is that this God must be loved in every way. This love is rooted in God's redeeming work. They should love him because he freed them from slavery in Egypt. And this love is exemplified in obedience to His law. They must listen to Him and walk in humble obedience as an expression of their love for Him.

In this way then, they will rightly display God to the nations around them as they walk in His ways out of love for Him. And as they are blessed by the fruits of obedient faith, they will be a blessing to all the other nations of the world. They will be God's people in God's land underneath God's law living in loving obedience to Him. Last week we looked at the prescribed rhythm of feasts which helped them to return to God's presence, remember God's work, and rejoice in God's blessing. Now, in verse 18 the text turns to consider four offices of leadership they will have when they get into the Promised Land – judge, king, priest, and prophet. Moses will cover them in somewhat of an ascending order. His instruction about each office will be centered upon how these leaders are to function in their role in accordance with God's Word. So, the judge is to rule over legal matters in accord with God's Law. The King is to be guided by God's Word as he humbly obeys and is blessed because of it. The priest is to serve before the Lord as a leader of the people's worship, which must also be according to God's prescribed ways given in His word. And the prophet is to come and speak to the people only the words which are given to him by God. So, these four offices are all dependent upon and directed by the Word of God.

And the people of God will be greatly influenced then by these four offices. If the judges, king, priests, and prophets are harmoniously following the Lord in faith-filled love, then the people most likely will do the same. But woe to them if they depart from God's way and pollute justice, or use power to their own ends, or worship other gods, or speak authoritatively for God with

words that aren't from God. This will most certainly lead the people to also turn from loving worship and obedience of God. So, these are crucial roles of leadership in the Promised Land.

Let's start reading in verse 18, and we will read down through verse 13 of chapter 17.

God is completely right and morally pure in all His nature and in all his ways. His very divine essence is one of complete purity from evil and wickedness. As the Creator of all then, He determines what is right and what is wrong in accord with his own character and nature. And this is then to be followed and upheld by mankind. You know that we haven't, ever since the Garden of Eden experience of Adam & Eve. They turned from God's righteous ways and God brought justice to them as the consequence of their choice. And that is the pattern we see throughout Scripture. The people of God in the Old Testament are called to order their steps individually and their practices as a society by the Law code of God. When that is broken they are given clear instructions for bringing justice to bear upon the law breaker. So, what we have in our text is God's prophet, Moses, teaching God's people about how this should work in the Promised Land. In verses 18-20 they are exhorted to this justice, and then in verse 21 down through 17:7 they are given an example of this justice in action. And in 17:8-13 they are given an explanation of how this justice should work. So, let's consider first how justice is exhorted in verses 18-20.

I. Justice Exhorted – 16:18-20

- a. The key verse to this whole section is verse 20 in which he says “Justice, only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the Lord your God is giving you.” In other words, their dwelling together as God's people must be marked by justice. They must call good good, and evil evil. The good obedience to the Lord must thrive among them and the evil disobedience must be dealt with swiftly and justly. More specifically, when they enter the land, this justice must be local.
- b. *Local – 18a*
 - i. We see that right away in verse 18. In all their towns that God is giving to them they are to establish this authority of a judge who is to oversee their social life with righteous judgment. This puts the opportunity for justice on the local level. They will not need to travel far away to seek justice, but they will have access near them. This is in contrast to the rhythm of the public feasts of the previous text. There they were instructed to gather in God's presence at the place where he would choose to place his name. But here, they are called to put judges in place in all of their towns so that these matters of right and wrong can be dealt with locally and swiftly.
- c. *Righteous – 18b*
 - i. But for this to work, this justice must not just be local, it must also be righteous. That should go without saying because justice isn't just if it isn't righteous. And by righteous the Scriptures are meaning something that conforms to a set standard of right and wrong. It is the moral and ethical standard presented throughout Scripture as God reveals more and more of his own character. He calls his people to act in accordance with

his righteousness. As Psalm 145:17 says, “The Lord is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works.”

- ii. So, this justice administered locally is to be in line with the revealed truth of God about what is right and wrong. This seems so very simple, and yet, mankind has always struggled with calling good evil and calling evil good. But God demands here that these local judges be defined by righteousness. They must be tethered to the revealed will of God and they must be unbending in their commitment to judge accordingly.

d. *Pure – 19-20*

- i. And this righteous judgment is further defined in verses 19-20 as pure. If the judge judges righteously then he will be pure. But to guarantee this righteous judgment Moses says that he must not pervert justice in any way. Specifically, they must not show partiality and they must not accept bribes. The word for perverting justice gives the idea of bending or stretching or warping something. Instead of the clear view of justice that should be reflected in the mirror of a righteous judge, this perversion would be like justice walking through the hall of funny mirrors at the fair where it's image is twisted and contorted and stretched in all kinds of strange ways.
- ii. That is done most often through partiality and through bribes. You ought to stop here and just reflect on how good and true the Scriptures are. God knows the human heart and the tendencies of human ways. He knows that mankind's perversion of justice will come most often in these forms. Either justice will be perverted because the judge will be a respecter of persons and will stretch the rulings of righteousness because of his partiality toward the one on trial. Or justice will be perverted by a bribe given to the judge to lure them to leniency. So, justice is twisted either by someone's reputation or by their riches. The wise eyes are blinded and the righteous cause is thwarted all because the judge is lured into being a respecter of persons or a lover of money rather than an upholder of the Law.
- iii. And this is the story of injustice all around the world in every generation. Justice is thwarted by those who are tasked with upholding the Laws of God and of their nation because they show partiality, or they take a bribe. The Great Wall of China was built at a great cost of human lives and money to protect the empire from invaders from the North. It is a 4,000-mile-long wall that truly is impregnable. But some 1200 years after it was built it finally gave way to its first set of attackers. But they didn't climb over it or defeat the warriors who defended it. Rather, they bribed a general who then opened the gates and let them through! This is a vivid picture of God's justice. An impregnable wall between right and wrong. It cannot be overcome or overthrown, but it's gates can be thrown open through bribery and partiality.

- iv. And this is especially serious for the nation of Israel because their practice of justice in the land will directly reflect on the character of the God whose people they are. In 10:17 it says, “For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe.” So, they, as God’s people, must also be impartial and take no bribe as they carry out pure justice.

II. Justice Exemplified – 16:21-17:7

- a. This exhortation to justice in the land is furthered by the example of justice given starting in verse 21. At first reading it seems like we are changing subjects to false worship. But when you take it in context you realize that Moses is giving the people an example of a breach of justice and righteousness that will happen to them when they get into the Promised Land. They are not to have false worship in their midst and they are not to worship God in false ways. But in verse 2 – if they do find someone who does that, then this is what they are to do. What Moses is doing here is he is taking the first commandment and he is saying that when someone breaks this law they are to be dealt with justly. And this serves as an example for how justice is to be meted out when someone breaks any of the other commandments as well. And here is what that justice should look like – is what he is saying.
- b. *Investigated – 4a*
 - i. First, it should be investigated in verse 4. When these rulers and judges hear of this false worship and idolatry they are to investigate the matter diligently. They are not to act rashly or quickly without establishing the charge.
- c. *Verified – 6*
 - i. Then this diligent investigation should produce eye witnesses who can verify the sinful and idolatrous activity. This investigation must go forward with the presumption of innocence until guilt can be established. And that guilt can only be established based upon the testimony of two or more witnesses. One person seeing it and reporting on it is not enough in the eyes of God’s Law. God knows the limitations of the human experience and he knows that one person can get it wrong and he knows that one person can create a scenario of supposed guilt so as to get someone else in trouble. So, as protection on the truth and on the accused, the charge must be established by more than one witness.
- d. *Judged – 7*
 - i. And then this verified guilt that has been diligently investigated is to be brought to judgment. It is not enough for justice to be fought for and considered, but it must also be carried out. The wrong of idolatrous worship must be met with the right of punishment. And notice that this condemnation is to be carried out by the witnesses themselves. This obviously adds another layer of sobriety to the role of the witness. They cannot make up a story because it will have to be confirmed by another

eyewitness. And they cannot play around with the law because it will require them throwing the first stone of judgment.

- ii. But it is not just the eyewitnesses who bring this judgment upon the head of the guilty. Rather, the whole community gathers and takes part in this stoning in verse 7. So, the judgment verdict is reached by the judges and the eyewitnesses are the first to carry out the judgment and then everyone joins in. This is a sober and serious approach to justice in the local community that elevates the holiness of God and exposes the wickedness of sin.

III. Justice Explained – 17:8-13

- a. Then in verses 8-13 Moses moves to an explanation of justice in these local communities. Their judges are to carry out justice that is local and righteous and pure. And this should look like a case being investigated and verified and then the verdict being carried out. But now in verse 8, the reality is there will be some tough cases which are not easily decided.
- b. *Complexity – 8-9*
 - i. The complexity is stated in verses 8-9. There will be decisions between whether a death was intentional murder or unintentional murder. There will be decisions between one kind of assault and another. In other words, there will be situations where the Law is clear, and the facts are cloudy or don't fit neatly into the black and white nature of the Law. And when that happens, they are to go to the presence of God and appeal to Him through the Levitical priests and through the judge who will be in office during that time. It's not clear here how this highest judge in the land and the priests would work together to solve the case, but this is where they were to go. The key point here is that they are working together in God's presence to seek God's wisdom and will for these cases.
- c. *Commission – 10-13*
 - i. And then once these complex cases are decided the commission to the people is to uphold the decision made. Just look at the string of commands in verses 10-11. "You shall do according to what they declare." "You shall be careful to do." "You shall do." "You shall not turn aside from the verdict."
 - ii. This is a necessary commission to the people because the tendency of the human heart is to judge a matter and then to stick with it no matter what anyone else says. So, the people would be prone to form their own opinion in this complex matter and if the court did not decide as they thought they should then the temptation would be to buck the ruling and disregard it completely.
 - iii. But the text calls this posture toward ruling authorities presumptuous – or filled with arrogant pride that they know better. And in fact, if they refuse to follow the court's order they too are to be stoned to death so that the rebellion of their actions does not spread to others.

IV. Justice Established

- a. So, how did the children of Israel do with this commandment to establish justice in the Promised Land? Well, the short answer is – not very well. Just like they didn't do very well in maintaining fidelity to worshipping God alone. They also didn't do very well in following God's Law and carrying out justice in their towns. In fact, go with me on a small tour of the Scriptures to see this. Turn to Judges 2.
 - i. **Judges 2:10-13** – I am skipping over some evidences of the people following the Lord's clear commands for justice – so the story of Achan and his sinful taking of the spoils of Jericho would be one example. The nation dealt with him before the Lord with the kind of justice described in Deuteronomy 16. But when they actually get in the land and get established, this is what happens – *read Judges 2:10-13*. And so, this sends the nation on a path of needing God to raise up judges to rule over them and rescue them – which is what the rest of the book is about. But if we kept reading in chapter 2 the summary statement is that they didn't listen to the judges either but kept going after other gods.
 - ii. Then in 1 Samuel we read of the rise of Israel's greatest and best judge – Samuel himself. He speaks for God as his prophet and he rules for God as his judge. And he acts for God in that he anoints the first 2 kings of Israel. But this just governing by Samuel didn't even last through to his own sons. And then we come to the period of the kings of Israel. And there are notable highlights – namely David and Solomon and Jehoshaphat and Asa and Josiah – to name a few. But for the most part, the period of the kings is marked by men in leadership who are not themselves righteous and who therefore do not establish nor care about justice in the land.
 - iii. One of the most remarkable examples of this is Ahab and his unjust killing of Naboth simply so that he can seize his vineyard. That whole account in 1 Kings 21 is dripping with the perversion of justice that is condemned in Deuteronomy 16 and 17. And during the time of the kings God raised up prophets who spoke out against the idolatry and injustice that was prominent in the people of God. Not every man who claimed to speak on behalf of God was indeed speaking for God. But the ones who were, were speaking words of judgment and coming destruction because of the evil and injustice carried out by the leaders. Turn with me to Isaiah 1.
 - iv. **Isaiah 1:21-26** - Isaiah is prophesying in the days of decline just before the Assyrians would come and overthrow and overpower the Israelites. And as part of this coming judgment Isaiah says this in Isaiah 1:21-26.
 - v. **Micah 3:8-12** – Micah is a contemporary of Isaiah but is prophesying to the southern 2 tribes known as Judah. In contrast to the so-called prophets that the people are listening to, he says this in verse 8 of chapter 3.

- vi. And as the years pass this chosen people of God was cast into captivity once again, in part because of their rebellion against God's just ways. Their rulers refused to uphold God's Law and the whole nation was filled with the fruits of iniquity. But you'll remember that God allows them to return and to re-establish themselves as a nation once again. After 70 years in Babylonian captivity a remnant is sent back to Jerusalem. The temple is rebuilt and worship of God is restored. And as the pages of the New Testament open we find the people of God back in the land but they are under the thumb of a pagan empire. And it is an empire they are convinced is unjust and wicked – which it was. And so the national hope is for God to keep His promise and send his anointed one to rule and reign in righteousness and with justice. They anticipate the Messianic kingdom in which the oppressors of Rome will be cast off and God's own anointed King will sit on David's throne and rule over God's people with righteousness and peace. Remember that this is what the prophets promised them. While they prophesied certain doom and destruction, they also proclaimed the hope of a coming righteous branch of David who would wear the belt of righteousness and who would deal wisely and execute justice and righteousness in the land.
- vii. And the Gospel accounts make it very clear that this Jesus of Nazareth who was born to the virgin Mary is indeed this promised Messiah. He fits all the prophetic requirements and he proves his divine authority through one miraculous sign after another. And yet, all the while, the ruling class of God's people – the experts in the Law of God, the Scribes and Pharisees – is in unbelieving conflict with this Jesus. They are threatened by His authoritative teaching and by how he exposes their own sinfulness. They are concerned about losing their own power because the crowds are determined to follow him. And this all comes to a head at the Feast of Passover. Through the resurrection of Lazarus about six weeks earlier the Messianic fervor is at a record pitch. The people are convinced that this Jesus is their Messiah – their king. And so, when they find out that he will enter Jerusalem on Sunday morning, they line the roadway and cry out Hosanna! Hosanna! God save us! God save us! Finally the king who will deal with all the injustices of Rome had finally come!
- viii. But what happened next? Over the next few days Jesus was in the Temple courtyard teaching and confronting. He was answering every charge and hard question brought to him by the Scribes and Pharisees. As they tried to trip him up in public and humiliate him in front of the crowd, they found again and again that they were rightly condemned by the Son of God. And all of this led to Jesus pronouncing a series of woes against the leaders of God's people in Matthew 23. *Read Matthew 23:23-28.*
- ix. **Matthew 23:23-28** – And then, this very charge carries itself out in the next few days. As Jesus exposes the evil of their hearts they proceed to display that evil with the greatest miscarriage of justice ever known on

Planet Earth. Rather than fall down in humble repentance before the incarnate Son of God – they plotted how to murder him and get him out of their way.

- x. And so, if we kept reading in Matthew's gospel into chapters 26 and 27, you know what we would find? The rules of justice that were laid out for us in Deuteronomy 16 and 17 are all thrown away. They assumed Jesus was guilty and sought his destruction in light of it. They investigated the case, but they did so with the bias of their own power hanging in the balance. They sought after eyewitnesses, but they couldn't find any who actually had anything to say. These trials were not to be convened at night, but Christ's trial was held in the cover of darkness. Almost every practice of jurisprudence commanded in the Mosaic law was flouted by the Sanhedrin in the case of Jesus. Thus, they cried out before Pilate – crucify Him! Crucify Him!
- xi. And in this they made clear that the greatest challenge they were facing was not the injustice of the Roman Empire. The greatest threat to their well-being was the wicked injustice which resided in their own soul! They didn't need someone to overthrow Rome, they needed someone to overthrow their own hearts.
- xii. And that is why Jesus died – to give mankind a new heart by grace through faith. Turn with me to Romans 3. Paul explains for us in 6 short verses the glory of the work of Christ to make us righteous before God.
- xiii. **Romans 3:21-26** – God's righteousness is brought to us – not through the keeping of laws which we have never kept. But rather through the person and work of His Son. This injustice and wickedness which has marked the people of God since Moses' day is dealt with in only one way – and this is through the satisfaction of God's wrath. Either the sinner is condemned under that wrath, or Jesus Christ, God's Son, is condemned in his or her place. Where the work of Christ is believed upon and received by faith, it is in that heart that grace has given that person justification and redemption from sin.
- xiv. Every last one of us in this room has been the victim of some kind of injustice. We have been mistreated as someone else has broken God's law and hurt us in the process. And in our world it is easy to get caught up in thinking that this is our greatest problem. As a victim we have rights and we should fight for those rights. The oppressed should fight against the oppressor and take the fight to the bully – that is the message of our culture. But friend – your greatest problem is not someone else's injustice toward you. Your greatest problem is the injustice of your own heart. You are just like the Pharisee and the Scribe of Matthew 23. You need to be washed and cleansed from your sin so that you can be declared right with God and at peace with God! That is what is available to you in the Cross of Jesus Christ. He has made peace through the blood of His cross for all who will believe. Do you have peace with God?

- b. But what of the church then as it relates to this idea of justice in the world? Having been justified before God in Christ Jesus our Lord are we to then be warriors of justice in our world? That is what so many have said in the past, and it is a popular message taking hold in many Christian's hearts these days. The idea is that we have been shown mercy through the justice of the Cross and therefore we should be about the work of fighting for justice for the oppressed in our society. Listen, by all means, you as a follower of Christ should do everything in your realm of influence and authority in a way which upholds the righteous standards of God's Holy Word. Where you are given the privilege to lead others and to rule over others, you must do so with the greatest fidelity to the ethical and moral code of God. And you should be concerned about the injustices which abound in the world around you. Where you have opportunity and can wisely help, you should seek to help those who are suffering because of the moral evil of someone else's choices.
- c. But should this be the mission of the church? Should the church seek to change the world by being warriors for justice in society at large? The short answer is – no, we shouldn't. The reasons are many, but the basic reason is that we have not been commissioned to bring justice and righteousness to all through social reform and programs and initiatives. Rather, we are commissioned as ambassadors to go and tell a broken world that there is hope in the midst of all of this unrighteousness. We are not to seek to implement righteousness, but we are to be ministers of reconciliation showing people how they can be right with God even though they have rebelled against His Law and gone their own way.

Conclusion: May God help us to be a church family who is ever growing in our own conformity to God's holy and right ways. But may we also be a church who never loses sight of her commission from the Lord – to be ambassadors for the Righteous Servant of the Lord who is soon returning to deal once and for all with all Law-breakers!