

The Book of Deuteronomy, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 15: Justice, Mercy, and Firstfruits

Deuteronomy 24:1–26:19

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, these chapters unveil the heart of God for justice and mercy. He watches over the poor laborer, the widow, the sojourner, and the fatherless, and He builds their protection into the very laws of justice and commerce. He demands honest weights and measures, treating dishonesty in business as an abomination, and He restrains even deserved punishment so that a brother is not degraded. He is a God of justice who is also a God of mercy, and these are not in tension but are two facets of His single righteous character.

Two doctrinal points deserve special care. First, Deuteronomy 24:16, “each one shall be put to death for his own sin”, is a cornerstone text for personal accountability and stands squarely against the idea of inherited guilt; we become guilty when we ourselves sin, as Ezekiel 18:20 makes plain. Second, the certificate of divorce in 24:1–4 must never be presented as God’s ideal. Jesus Himself teaches that Moses permitted it “because of your hardness of heart”, but “from the beginning it was not so” (Matthew 19:8). God’s design, established at creation, is the lifelong, one-flesh union of one man and one woman. The regulation restrained an existing evil; it did not bless it.

Beyond doctrine, the lesson aims at the student’s heart and hands. It asks whether we notice and care for the vulnerable, whether our business dealings are honest to the last ounce, whether our giving back to God is grateful firstfruits or grudging leftovers, and whether we rest in the truth that righteousness and holiness flow from belonging to God rather than from earning His favor. The climax, “you are a people holy to the Lord”, is the key: we are merciful and just and grateful because we are His.

Question 1

Student Question:

Deuteronomy 24:14–15 commands paying the poor, needy laborer his wages “each day before the sun sets”, “for he is poor and counts on it”, and 24:17–18 forbids perverting justice due the sojourner, fatherless, and widow. What do these laws reveal about God’s heart toward the vulnerable?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God’s concern for the vulnerable runs through these chapters like a bright thread. “You shall not oppress a hired worker who is poor and needy... You shall give him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets, for he is poor and counts on it” (24:14–15). The day laborer lived hand to

mouth; to withhold his pay even one night could mean his family went hungry. God will not allow it, and warns that the worker might “cry against you to the Lord, and you be guilty of sin”.

The same tenderness shapes the courts. “You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow’s garment in pledge” (24:17). These were precisely the people most easily wronged, the foreigner with no kin to defend him, the orphan with no father’s protection, the widow with no husband’s standing. God appoints Himself their advocate and writes their protection into His law.

This reveals the very heart of God. He is not indifferent to how the powerful treat the powerless; He hears the cry of the wronged laborer and the defrauded widow. The God of all the earth bends down with special attention toward those the world steps over. His justice is not cold or abstract; it has a face turned toward the weak.

And this heart does not change. James defines pure and undefiled religion as visiting “orphans and widows in their affliction” (James 1:27), and the whole of Scripture testifies that the Lord “executes justice for the fatherless and the widow” (Deuteronomy 10:18). To know God truly is to share His concern for the vulnerable; a heart that grows callous toward the weak has drifted from the heart of God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Wages paid promptly because the poor laborer depends on them
- Justice protected for the sojourner, fatherless, and widow
- God as the advocate of the easily wronged
- The Lord hearing the cry of the defrauded
- God’s unchanging heart for the vulnerable (James 1:27)

Discussion Prompts

- What do these laws reveal about God’s heart toward the weak?
- Why does God appoint Himself the advocate of the vulnerable?
- How should knowing God shape our concern for the overlooked?

Question 2

Student Question:

These laws place God’s special concern on the poor laborer, the widow, and the sojourner. Where is God calling you to notice and care for someone vulnerable whom you have been overlooking?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

These laws single out the people most easily overlooked, the poor laborer, the widow, the sojourner, the fatherless, and place God’s special concern on them. The striking thing is that

these are people the world tends not to see. They have nothing to offer the powerful, no leverage, no voice, and so they fade from view. But God sees them, and He asks His people to see them too.

We all have our blind spots, the people who quietly drop out of our notice because they cannot do anything for us. The lonely, the struggling, the outsider, the one with no standing, these are easy to overlook, not out of cruelty but out of inattention. The first step toward caring is simply noticing, letting our eyes rest where God's eyes already rest.

So the question presses gently. Who is the vulnerable person I have been overlooking, the one God may be calling me to notice and to care for? It may be someone near at hand whom I have stopped really seeing. To be formed by these chapters is to let God reorder our attention, to turn our gaze toward those He loves, and then to let that gaze move our hands.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's concern resting on the easily overlooked
- The vulnerable fading from view because they offer nothing
- Inattention rather than cruelty as our common failure
- Noticing as the first step toward caring
- Letting our eyes rest where God's eyes rest

Discussion Prompts

- Who is a vulnerable person you have been overlooking?
- Why do the powerless so easily drop out of our notice?
- What would it look like to truly see and care for them?

Question 3

Student Question:

Deuteronomy 24:16 declares that "each one shall be put to death for his own sin", forbidding fathers and children to be put to death for one another. What does this reveal about personal accountability for sin, and how does it stand against the idea of inherited guilt?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Deuteronomy 24:16 lays down a principle of justice with far-reaching weight: "Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin". In a world where rulers often destroyed a man's whole family for his crime, God forbids it. Guilt is personal. Each person answers to God for his own sin, not for another's.

This is a cornerstone text for personal accountability. It teaches that I bear the responsibility for my own choices, and I am not condemned for sins I did not commit. The justice of God is exact

and personal; He does not lay one person's guilt on another in the matter of moral responsibility before Him.

The principle stands directly against the notion of inherited guilt, the idea that we are born already guilty of someone else's sin. Scripture is clear and consistent: "The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son" (Ezekiel 18:20). We are not guilty because of Adam's sin or anyone else's; we become guilty when we ourselves sin. We do inherit a world broken by the fall and feel its real consequences, but guilt itself is personal. Jesus held up a little child as the very picture of the kingdom (Matthew 18:3; 19:14), which would be unthinkable if children were born already guilty before God.

This truth is both sobering and freeing. Sobering, because no one can hide behind another's righteousness or blame his sin on his ancestry; each of us must answer for ourselves. Freeing, because no one is doomed by another's failure; the door of repentance and grace stands open to every person on his own account. God deals with each of us personally, justly, and graciously, and calls each of us by name to turn to Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Guilt as personal, not transferred between persons
- "Each one shall be put to death for his own sin" (24:16)
- The standing rebuke of inherited guilt (Ezekiel 18:20)
- We become guilty when we ourselves sin
- Inheriting a fallen world yet not another's guilt
- Children as a picture of the kingdom, not of born guilt (Matthew 18:3; 19:14)
- Personal accountability as both sobering and freeing

Discussion Prompts

- What does 24:16 teach about personal responsibility for sin?
- How does this stand against the idea of inherited guilt?
- Why is personal accountability both sobering and freeing?

Question 4

Student Question:

Deuteronomy 24:19–22 commands leaving the forgotten sheaf, the olives, and the grapes for the sojourner, fatherless, and widow, recalling that "you were a slave in the land of Egypt". How does remembering your own deliverance shape the way you give to others?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The harvest laws are full of deliberate generosity. “When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf... you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow” (24:19). The same applies to the olive trees and the vineyard: do not go over them a second time, but leave what remains for the needy (24:20–21). God builds margin into the harvest so the poor can gather with dignity.

And He grounds it in memory. “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this” (24:22). Israel’s generosity was to flow from gratitude for her own deliverance. Once they had nothing and were oppressed; God rescued them and gave them a land. Remembering that, how could they clutch their harvest tightly while the poor went hungry?

This is a profound pattern for giving. We give freely because we ourselves have received freely. The memory of our own rescue softens the grip of our hands. A person who forgets what God has done for him becomes stingy and entitled; a person who remembers becomes generous, knowing that all he has was once gift.

The same logic shapes Christian giving. “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). Having received such mercy, we extend mercy; having been rescued, we leave margin for others. Remembering our own deliverance is the surest cure for a tight-fisted heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Deliberate margin left in the harvest for the poor
- Gleaning that preserved the dignity of the needy
- Generosity grounded in remembering deliverance from Egypt
- Memory of rescue loosening the grip of our hands
- Christian giving flowing from the grace received in Christ (2 Corinthians 8:9)

Discussion Prompts

- How does remembering your own deliverance shape your giving?
- Why does forgetting God’s mercy make us stingy?
- Where could you leave more margin for the needy?

Question 5

Student Question:

Deuteronomy 25:13–16 commands “a full and fair weight” and “a full and fair measure”, declaring that “all who act dishonestly are an abomination to the Lord your God”. Why does God regard dishonesty in ordinary business as so serious, and what does it reveal about Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God turns to the marketplace. “You shall not have in your bag two kinds of weights, a large and a small. You shall not have in your house two kinds of measures, a large and a small. A full and fair weight you shall have, a full and fair measure you shall have” (25:13–15). The dishonest merchant kept rigged weights, a heavy one for buying and a light one for selling, cheating his neighbor in small, hidden increments. God forbids it utterly.

Then He attaches startling language: “all who act dishonestly are an abomination to the Lord your God” (25:16). Abomination is strong language, often reserved in Scripture for idolatry and gross immorality. Yet here it falls on a merchant’s rigged scale. God regards the quiet fraud of dishonest business as deeply offensive to Him, no small or excusable thing.

Why does God care so intensely about weights and measures? Because honesty in the ordinary, unseen transactions of life reveals the true character of a person and reflects the character of God Himself. He is a God of truth, and He cannot abide deceit, especially deceit that preys on a neighbor’s trust in small, deniable ways. The rigged scale is a lie made of brass, and God hates the lie.

The principle is timeless. “A false balance is an abomination to the Lord, but a just weight is his delight” (Proverbs 11:1). The believer formed by this law is scrupulously honest in business, in the unwatched details, in the things easy to fudge. Integrity to the last ounce is not pedantry; it is holiness in the marketplace, a reflection of the God of truth in the very places where it is easiest to cheat.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Rigged weights and measures forbidden outright
- Dishonest business called an abomination to God
- The quiet fraud that preys on a neighbor’s trust
- Honesty in small transactions revealing true character
- Integrity in business as a reflection of the God of truth (Proverbs 11:1)

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God call dishonest business an abomination?
- What does honesty in small dealings reveal about a person?
- Where are you tempted to fudge in ways no one would notice?

Question 6

Student Question:

Deuteronomy 25:1–3 limits the punishment of a guilty man to forty lashes so that your brother is not “degraded in your sight”. How does this restraint, even in justice, challenge the way you treat someone who has genuinely done wrong?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Even in punishing the guilty, God sets a limit of mercy. When a wrongdoer deserves a beating, the judge may have him flogged “with a number of stripes in proportion to his offense”, but “forty stripes may be given him, but not more, lest, if one should go on to beat him with more stripes than these, your brother be degraded in your sight” (25:2–3). The punishment was real, but it was capped, so that justice would not slide into cruelty.

The reason God gives is striking: lest “your brother be degraded in your sight”. Even the guilty man is still your brother, still a human being made in God’s image, still possessed of a dignity that punishment must not erase. Justice may give him what he deserves, but it may not strip him of his humanity. There is a line beyond which discipline becomes degradation, and God forbids crossing it.

This restraint challenges the way we treat someone who has genuinely done wrong. When a person has clearly wronged us or others, the temptation is to pile on, to crush, to degrade, to treat them as less than human because of their guilt. But God’s law says even the offender remains a brother whose dignity must be respected. Justice without mercy curdles into cruelty.

The heart of this carries into the New Testament’s call to correct “with gentleness” and to restore a wrongdoer rather than destroy him (Galatians 6:1; 2 Timothy 2:25). To be formed by this law is to hold justice and mercy together, to address wrong honestly without ever losing sight of the wrongdoer’s humanity, refusing to let the satisfaction of being right harden into the cruelty of degrading another.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A cap on punishment so justice does not become cruelty
- Even the guilty man still a brother
- Human dignity that punishment must not erase
- The temptation to degrade the one who has done wrong
- Justice held together with mercy and gentleness (Galatians 6:1)

Discussion Prompts

- What does this limit reveal about God’s view of even the guilty?
- Why must justice never slide into degrading another?
- How do you treat someone who has genuinely wronged you?

Question 7

Student Question:

In Deuteronomy 26:1–11 the worshiper brings the firstfruits and recites, “A wandering Aramean was my father”, retelling the story of God’s deliverance with rejoicing. Why does God tie giving the firstfruits so closely to remembering and retelling what He has done?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The firstfruits ceremony is one of the loveliest moments in Deuteronomy. The worshiper takes the first of his harvest, puts it in a basket, brings it to the place God chose, and sets it before the Lord (26:1–4). Then he recites his people’s story: “A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt... and the Egyptians treated us harshly... Then we cried to the Lord... and the Lord brought us out of Egypt... and he brought us into this place and gave us this land” (26:5–9).

Notice how tightly God binds giving to remembering. The firstfruits are not offered in a vacuum; they are offered while retelling the whole story of God’s deliverance. The worshiper does not simply hand over produce; he rehearses grace, naming where he came from and what God has done. Then he sets the basket down and worships “and you shall rejoice in all the good” (26:11).

This teaches that grateful giving flows from remembered grace. When we forget what God has done, giving feels like loss, a grudging surrender of what is ours. But when we remember that we were once slaves brought out by His mighty hand, that everything we have began as His gift, giving becomes worship, the glad return of the first and best to the One who gave it all. Gratitude is the soil in which generosity grows.

The pattern is timeless even though the ceremony belonged to Israel. We too are people with a deliverance story, rescued not from Egypt but from sin and death by the mighty hand of God in Christ. Remembering and retelling that story turns our giving into worship and our worship into joy. The basket of firstfruits is, at heart, a confession: all of this was gift, and I gladly give the first of it back to the God who saved me.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Firstfruits offered while retelling the story of deliverance
- Giving bound tightly to remembering grace
- Worship and rejoicing as the setting of the offering
- Grateful giving flowing from remembered mercy
- The believer’s own deliverance story in Christ shaping worship

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God tie giving the firstfruits to retelling His acts?
- How does remembering grace change the way we give?
- What is your own deliverance story, and how does it shape your worship?

Question 8

Student Question:

The firstfruits liturgy turns giving into worship and remembrance, offering God the first and the best with gratitude. How grateful is your own giving back to God, and what would it look like to give Him your firstfruits rather than your leftovers?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The firstfruits were exactly that, the first of the harvest, not the leftovers. The worshiper did not wait to see what remained after his own needs were met and then offer the scraps. He brought “the first of all the fruit of the ground” (26:2), giving God the first and the best as an act of trust and gratitude. The order of giving revealed the order of his heart.

This presses a searching question about our own giving. Is it firstfruits or leftovers? Do we give God the first and best of our resources, our time, our attention, our money, trusting Him with the rest? Or does He receive only what happens to be left after everything else has had its claim? The difference is not mainly the amount but the heart, whether God comes first or last.

Leftover giving betrays a heart that does not quite trust God, that must secure its own needs before risking generosity. Firstfruits giving is an act of faith and gratitude, a declaration that God is first in our priorities and worthy of the best we have. It says, in effect, I trust You with what remains, because I know all of it came from You. To grow in this is to let gratitude reorder our priorities, so that the One who gave us everything receives the first of it, gladly, and not the last.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Firstfruits as the first and best, not the leftovers
- The order of giving revealing the order of the heart
- Leftover giving as a sign of distrust
- Firstfruits giving as faith and gratitude
- Letting gratitude reorder our priorities toward God

Discussion Prompts

- Is your giving back to God firstfruits or leftovers?
- What does the order of your giving reveal about your heart?
- What would it look like to give God the first and best?

Question 9

Student Question:

Deuteronomy 24:1–4 regulates a certificate of divorce, but Jesus explains this was permitted “because of your hardness of heart”, adding “from the beginning it was not so” (Matthew 19:8).

How do we rightly understand this regulation, not as God's ideal but as a concession, while holding to God's true design for marriage as the lifelong, one-flesh union of one man and one woman?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Deuteronomy 24:1–4 regulates a man who divorces his wife by writing her “a certificate of divorce”; the law’s actual concern is to forbid him from taking her back again after she has married another. We must read this passage with great care, because it is easily misunderstood as God endorsing or even instituting divorce. It does no such thing. It regulates a practice that already existed in a hard-hearted world, placing a restraint upon it, without ever presenting it as God’s will or design.

Jesus Himself tells us exactly how to read it. When the Pharisees pointed to this very text and asked why Moses “command one to give a certificate of divorce”, Jesus answered, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so” (Matthew 19:7–8). The regulation was a concession to human hardness, a limit set upon an existing evil, not a blessing upon it. Moses permitted; God did not approve.

Then Jesus points us back past the concession to the design. “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?... What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matthew 19:4–6). God’s true and unchanging will for marriage was set at creation: the lifelong, one-flesh union of one man and one woman. That is the ideal; the certificate of divorce was never the ideal but a sad accommodation to sin.

This distinction matters enormously for how we handle the Old Testament. Not every law God permitted reflects His heart’s desire; some laws restrained evils in a fallen, hard-hearted people without endorsing them. Deuteronomy 24:1–4 is one such law. We honor it as Scripture and read it as Jesus read it, as a concession to hardness of heart, not a charter for easy divorce. To present it as God’s ideal would be to contradict the Lord Himself.

So we hold firmly to God’s design. Marriage is meant to be the lifelong, faithful, one-flesh union of one man and one woman, and that design has not changed. The God whose heart fills these chapters with mercy toward the vulnerable is also the God who guards marriage, and His mercy and His high view of marriage are not in conflict. We point people, as Jesus did, back to the beginning, to God’s good and beautiful design, while extending the grace of the gospel to all who have been broken by sin’s hardness, our own and the world’s.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The certificate of divorce as regulation, not endorsement
- Jesus reading it as a concession to hardness of heart (Matthew 19:8)

- “From the beginning it was not so” as the key interpretive word
- God’s design: the lifelong one-flesh union of one man and one woman (Matthew 19:4–6)
- Not every permitted law reflecting God’s ideal
- Pointing back to the beginning while extending gospel grace

Discussion Prompts

- Why must we not read this regulation as God’s ideal?
- How does Jesus’ phrase “from the beginning it was not so” guide us?
- What is God’s true and unchanging design for marriage?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back across Deuteronomy 24 to 26, which climaxes with “you are a people holy to the Lord”, name one specific way Jesus is forming you, whether in mercy to the vulnerable, integrity in your dealings, grateful worship, or the assurance that righteousness flows from belonging to God.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

These three chapters reach their climax in a single, weighty declaration. After all the laws of justice and mercy, after the firstfruits and the tithe confession, God says, “you are a people holy to the Lord your God”, and He has chosen you “to be a people for his treasured possession”, set “high above all nations” for praise and honor (26:18–19). Everything that came before flows from this. They are merciful, just, honest, and grateful because they belong to Him.

This is the heart of the matter. The justice toward the laborer, the mercy to the widow, the honest weights, the firstfruits, none of these earned God’s favor. They flowed from a relationship already given. God first claimed Israel as His own, and their righteousness was the response of a people who belonged to Him, not the price of belonging. Holiness was the fruit of grace, not its root.

We who are in Christ are gathered into the same truth. “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” (1 Peter 2:9), Peter writes, taking up the very language of Deuteronomy and applying it to the church. We do not become God’s people by piling up good deeds; we are made His people by His grace in Christ, and then mercy, justice, and grateful worship flow out as the natural marks of those who belong to Him.

As you look back across these chapters, let the climax settle the rest. The God whose heart for the vulnerable, whose demand for honesty, whose call to grateful firstfruits fills these pages, has made us His own. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you through this passage, perhaps a fresh mercy toward someone overlooked, a new scrupulousness in your dealings, a more grateful giving, or simply the deep assurance that your righteousness is the fruit of belonging to

God and not the means of earning Him. Walk in that one thing this week, as a people holy to the Lord.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The climax: “you are a people holy to the Lord” (26:18–19)
- Justice, mercy, and gratitude flowing from belonging to God
- Holiness as the fruit of grace, not its root
- The church as a people for God’s own possession (1 Peter 2:9)
- Righteousness as response to grace, not the price of it

Discussion Prompts

- How does belonging to God ground the justice and mercy of these chapters?
- Why is holiness the fruit of grace rather than its root?
- What one way is Jesus forming you through this whole passage?