

The Book of Deuteronomy

Lesson 15: Justice, Mercy, and Firstfruits -- Deuteronomy 24:1–26:19

Some laws tell you what God forbids; these laws tell you what God loves. Walk through Deuteronomy 24 to 26 and a portrait emerges of the heart of God Himself, a God who watches over the poor laborer waiting for his wages, the widow with nothing left to pledge but her garment, the sojourner far from home, the fatherless child with no one to defend him. These are not the powerful or the prominent. They are the easily overlooked, and God has His eye on every one of them.

Here God will not let a poor man's cloak be kept overnight, because he sleeps in it (24:12–13). He commands that wages be paid before the sun goes down, "for he is poor and counts on it" (24:15). He tells the harvester to leave the forgotten sheaf, the overlooked olives, the gleanings of the vineyard, for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow (24:19–21). He limits even deserved punishment to forty lashes, lest a brother be "degraded in your sight" (25:3). This is a God who builds dignity and mercy into the very machinery of justice.

And then, near the end, comes one of the most beautiful liturgies in all the Old Testament. The Israelite brings the firstfruits of his harvest, sets the basket down before the Lord, and recites his story: "A wandering Aramean was my father", who went down to Egypt, was oppressed, and was brought out by the mighty hand of God into a good land (26:5–9). Gratitude takes the form of giving back the first and the best, remembering that everything began as gift.

It all builds to a climax. "You are a people holy to the Lord your God" (26:19). Justice toward the vulnerable, integrity in business, gratitude in worship, these do not earn God's favor; they flow from belonging to Him. We who have been gathered into Christ are likewise "a people for his own possession" (1 Peter 2:9), and the same heart of justice, mercy, and grateful worship is meant to mark us, because we belong to the God whose heart these chapters reveal.

Group Discussion: Deuteronomy 24 to 26 reveals God's heart for the vulnerable, the poor laborer, the widow, the sojourner, the fatherless, building mercy right into the laws of justice and business. What does this portrait of God's heart call us to in the way we treat those most easily overlooked around us?

Personal Reflection: These chapters call for justice and mercy toward the vulnerable, integrity in business ("a full and fair weight"), and gratitude that gives God the firstfruits. In which of these (mercy to the weak, honesty in your dealings, or grateful giving back to God) is the Lord most calling you to grow?

Read Deuteronomy 24:1–26:19

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Matthew 19:8, Jesus teaches the certificate of divorce was permitted for hardness of heart but from the beginning it was not so; Ezekiel 18:20, the soul who sins shall die and the son shall not bear the guilt of the father; James 1:27, pure religion is to visit orphans and widows in their affliction; Proverbs 11:1, a false balance is an abomination to the Lord but a just weight is his delight; 1 Peter 2:9, you are a chosen race, a holy nation, a people for his own possession

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