



Ruled by a Gracious God: Justice Upholds Life

(Deuteronomy 24:5-25:19)

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INTRODUCTION

We're told religion is a private matter. Believe what you want to about God. Just keep it personal, between you and God alone. Whatever you do, don't bring it up in the public square. Someone could get offended. Besides, you don't have to believe in God at all to be a decent person. Keep him out of your relationships with other people and everything will be just fine.

Many voices in our culture urge us to do as much. But there's a lie at the root of their logic. You can't separate the way you relate to God from the way you relate to other people. The nature of your relationship with him will inevitably **manifest** itself in your relationship with them. If you trust God, you will relate very differently to your coworkers, parents, and siblings than someone who does not. If you love God, you will relate very differently to your friends and fellow church members than someone who does not.

The book of Deuteronomy is filled with all sorts of laws, including the two chapters we just read. During Jesus' ministry, a Jewish religious leader asked him, "What is the greatest commandment in the law?" Listen to how Jesus replied in Matthew 22:37-39, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

What does he mean when he says, "And a second is like [the first]"? He means they are two sides of the same coin. If you do one, you'll do the other. They go hand in hand. They can't be separated. You'll never truly love your neighbor if you don't love God. And you'll never truly love God if you don't love your neighbor. 1 John 4:19-21 makes the connection crystal clear.

"We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom



he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.”

That’s the logic behind this entire section in Deuteronomy! At first glance, all these laws are about how the Israelites are supposed to love one another. But there are references throughout to who God is, what God has done, and what God will do. Why? Because the expressions of love for neighbor that Moses requires here are ultimately expressions of love for the Lord. Moses is essentially saying, “Israel, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and might, by loving your neighbor in every realm of your life.”

Friends, God requires us to love one another in the same way today. Yes, what Jesus did for us on the cross means we are no longer under the Mosaic law the way Israel was in a covenantal sense. But the spiritual principles behind every law, every case study, are rooted in the unchanging character of God! He’s the same, yesterday, today, and forever. And Jesus still requires us to love the Lord our God by loving our neighbor. That’s the very thing the person and work of Christ makes possible!

So what does it look like to love our neighbor according to Deuteronomy 24-25. It means practicing justice by upholding their life. Justice upholds the life of our neighbor, compelled by the fear of God, the Lord of Life. If upholding our neighbor’s life is the fruit, the fear of God is the root. They’re connected. If we fear the Lord who gives us life and upholds our life, then we will practice justice by upholding the life of our neighbor. God’s Word urges us to do as much in four categories.

1) UPHOLD LIFE AT WORK

If you have a full time job from age 22 to age 62, you will spend upwards of 80,000 hours of your life at work. That’s not a bad thing because God created us to work. Even in a fallen world, work is good. So it’s not surprising Moses spends significant time addressing the economic sphere in these chapters, including how Israelites must handle pledges.

A pledge is the security you put up for a loan. Modern equivalents include the down payment on your house, the title to your car or home, or some other financial asset that you put on the table and say, “You can keep this valuable item if I fail to repay the money you’ve loaned to me.”



So why does verse 6 say you can't "Take a mill or an upper millstone in pledge"? Because that's how families crushed grain to make bread. Take that from them as security for a loan, and you're essentially taking their life! It doesn't matter if their millstone is the only conceivable security they have left. Even if you have a financial right to take it, you may not. Why not? Because life is a sacred gift from the Lord, and you must uphold your neighbors' life even if the contract says you have the right to do otherwise.

Friend, if you work in the financial sector, be careful to not lend money, sell insurance or investment products, or practice business in ways that make people's conditions worse. Do not take advantage of people who are desperate. Uphold their life! In every vocation, refuse to do business in ways that pad your pockets at your neighbor's expense or that add to their suffering instead of helping them to flourish. It's why the Lord forbids involuntary slavery or man-stealing in verse 7. To force someone into slavery is to steal their life, no matter how much they owe you!

And it's not just your neighbor's life that matters. So does their personal dignity, which is why the Lord says in verses 10-13 that you must wait outside a debtor's home and let them bring their pledge to you. Even in poverty, even if you hold all the financial cards in a business relationship, uphold your neighbor's dignity by maintaining their agency.

It's the same reason you must not sleep in your neighbor's pledge if the only security he can put up is the cloak on his back! Return it as the sun goes down (v. 13) so he has something to sleep in. Translation? Be compassionate in the way you enforce contractual obligations. And then Moses adds one of the Godward motivation clauses I mentioned earlier. V. 13, "And it shall be righteousness for you before the LORD your God."

He's not talking about earning right standing with God. Israel's relationship with Yahweh was a pure gift of grace, as is ours, brothers and sisters. He's talking about ethical righteousness. Loving our neighbor at work means we imitate our righteous God in being compassionate and unselfish in what we require from people who owe us.

Friends, the gospel of Jesus Christ is not "Pay what you owe." It's good news of salvation! Good news of forgiveness! Good news that God himself has born the cost of our sins, the weight of our debt on the cross! I'm not saying it's wrong to enforce a contract. I am saying we must not do so in ways that only serve your own interests, even if you technically have a right to ignore a client or customer's concerns.



Be gracious to your neighbor at work as God has been gracious to you. If you're an employer, you will ultimately answer to him for whether you treat your employees with justice and compassion. So don't withhold their wages (verses 14-15). Pay them as soon as their work is finished so they can buy food to eat. Don't take advantage of them. "Lest he cry against you to the LORD, and you be guilty of sin." If your employees help make your company successful, they have a right to share in the reward of their labor! Hence the command in 25:4 to "Not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain."

Upholding life at work also means refusing to fudge numbers or inflate your material costs. Deuteronomy 25:16, "For all who do such things, all who act dishonestly, are an abomination to the LORD your God." Then and now - living justly in God's kingdom requires imitating the truthful character of our King. Pleasing him by upholding your neighbor's life at work!

2) UPHOLD LIFE FOR THE POOR

Practicing justice requires significantly more than "Do no harm." It means living in a way that adorns the gospel by showing mercy to the vulnerable, upholding life for the poor. Look at Deuteronomy 24:17-19, "You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner (think immigrants) or to the fatherless (think orphans), or take a widow's garment in pledge, but you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this. When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands."

Consider what the Lord commanded Israel to do and the reason or motivation he gave them for doing it. Let's start with the "What." Whether it's a field of grain, a grove of olives yielding oil, or a vineyard of grapes, do not consume every last resource available to you. Why not? So that you have something to share with those in need.

Brothers and sisters, the money in our checking, savings, retirement, and investment accounts is not ultimately ours. It's the Lord's. And he calls us to embrace a lifestyle of generosity where we are not just "Open" or "Willing" to help the poor, but careful and faithful to preserve a portion of all we earn, all we steward, to care for them.

That could mean guarding some of your grocery money to practice hospitality. That could mean sponsoring a child at the Casa de Esperanza orphanage that Fidel & Charro



run. That could mean giving a percentage of your paycheck every month to the Mercy Fund our deacons manage to provide for the poor inside and outside our local church.

The way God calls us to love as his people is easy enough to grasp. But the “Why” is where the redeemed people of God part ways with the Red Cross. It’s what makes our generosity distinctively Christian. Moses highlights two why’s in this passage.

First, uphold the life of the poor because justice requires it. But I thought we were talking about charity, what I decide to give out of the generosity of my heart, not what does the poor deserve or what does justice requires? What claim do they have to my money? The grammar of verse 19, “It shall be for” the sojourner, the fatherless, etc. is ownership language. In other words, Israel, the remaining sheaves, olives, and grapes might be in your field, but they’re not yours! They belong to the poor because God has reserved them for the poor as the True Landowner.

To exhaust all your resources on yourself and have nothing left to give is to “Pervert” the justice due them (verse 17), to deny the poor what is rightfully theirs in God’s sight. God has given us more than an opportunity to provide for the vulnerable, brothers and sisters. He’s given us a responsibility. He’s given us a solemn duty. It’s not an option for wealthy Christians. It’s God’s will for every believer.

But that’s not the “Why” the Lord emphasizes the most in this passage. Knowing you “Ought” to do something or that justice “Requires” something will never make a selfish woman generous, or a stingy man hospitable. There is only one motivation powerful enough to do that, my friends. Here’s the second reason. **Uphold the life of the poor because of the mercy God has shown us in Jesus.**

In verse 22, Moses repeats the “Why” of redemption in verse 18. The entire command to uphold the life of the poor is literally surrounded with the gospel! “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this.” What’s his point? Practice mercy because you have received mercy! How has God had mercy on us? In the greater exodus from sin and death he accomplished for us at the cross.

Christian, in giving you Jesus, the gift of himself, has the Lord not been exceedingly, marvelously, beyond-your-wildest-imagination generous to you? Has he not lavished on you one blessing after another in Christ that you do not deserve and could never earn? Are we not, of all people, intimately familiar with the mercy and kindness of God? Oh



that the world might taste and see the generosity of Jesus through our practice of the same! What a privilege to tangibly share with others the very grace we have received!

If you recognize you are not generous, you don't really care for the poor, or you're selfish and stingy with your wealth, I urge you, friend, to meditate on the gospel! Remember that you were a slave in the land of sin and death, without God and without hope in this world. And that is the very moment, Almighty God chose to give you not just some of his wealth, but his very life. He held nothing back. He gave all of himself to you.

Why should we uphold the life of the poor? 2 Corinthians 8:9, "For 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." Christopher Wright is spot on. "When Israel forgot its history, it forgot its poor." May it not be so with us.

3) UPHOLD LIFE IN THE CHURCH

Look at verse 5. Why would Moses require that a newly married man not be taken away from his bride for a whole year? Among other reasons, because it gave them an opportunity to have children. Being "Happy with his wife" includes the joy of physical intimacy and the gift of conception. Uphold the long-term life of my people by guarding their offspring, guarding their descendants.

And that's exactly why the Lord institutes the practice of levirate marriage in Deut 25. It's derived from the Latin word "Levir" which means "Husband's brother." Deuteronomy 25:5-6, "If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel."

Why would God do that? The protection for a vulnerable widow makes sense. Guarding the broader family from property loss in an agrarian society makes sense. But why is perpetuating an Israelite man's name (verse 7) as opposed to allowing his line to die or "Be blotted out" (verse 6) so important?

At this point in history, God's people were defined in an ethnic or national sense. He chose Jacob and his descendants out of all other peoples on earth. If the holy race died out, there would be no more people of God. Physical descendants were critical to God's



purposes, which is why the promise of offspring was at the heart of God's covenant with Abraham. Offspring was the means by which God promised to redeem and bless not just Israel, but all the nations of the world!

Genesis 15:5-6, "'Look toward heaven, and number the stars if you are able to number them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness." What did Abraham believe? That God would use his offspring to bring blessing to the entire world. It was the Lord's way of fulfilling the promise he made to Adam and Eve all the way back in Genesis 3:15. That their offspring would bruise the serpent's head, destroy the Evil One, and conquer the curse of sin.

Which offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would do that? Which offspring would fulfill the promise of blessing and salvation God made to Abraham and through him, to the entire world? Galatians 3:16, "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say (quoting Genesis 12:7), 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ."

That's the promise Abraham believed! Through his offspring, God would bring salvation. That's the promise every Israelite standing before Moses on the banks of the Jordan in Deuteronomy was also called to believe. It's the promise of the gospel! A failure to "Build up your brother's house" in a biological sense (Deuteronomy 25:9) was a refusal to build up God's house in a spiritual sense. It was a refusal to protect, nourish, and provide for the offspring of Israel through whom the Messiah would come. It was to treat God's covenant promises and their fulfillment as a light thing of little account.

Remember, Israel is called by God's name. So by saying, "I don't care about the endurance of Israel's name," the unwilling brother is essentially saying, "I don't care about the fulfillment of God's purposes or the endurance of his name." That perspective helps us recognize Levirate marriage isn't an awkward institution modern day Christians need to explain away. Levirate marriage is a powerful reminder that God has called us to treat the preservation and upbuilding of his people as a matter of utmost importance!

Who are God's chosen people today? It's not the nation of Israel, as much as Scripture suggests the gospel will advance in power among ethnic Jews before the end of the age. It's the church. It's us, KingsWay. And we uphold the life of the church not ultimately through physical descendants, but through spiritual descendants, not through the biological work of procreation, but the spiritual work of discipleship, helping those who don't know Jesus to discover the joy of relationship with him.



The people of God endure throughout the ages as one generation is faithful to disciple the next generation. Parents, that's why the priority you place on your kid's spiritual development must exceed the priority you place on their soccer skills. That's why, my single friend, the priority you place on telling your coworkers about Jesus must exceed the priority of remaining in their good graces socially. That's why I love the fact that so many retirees are serving in King'sKids even though their own children are grown and gone. Discipling the next generation in our church is an every-member responsibility.

May the Spirit guard us from the shame of living out our days, spending our time and money, as if all sorts of other interests and hobbies are more important than the life of God's people! Hunger and thirst for the health of our church. Spend your life contending for the beauty of the bride. Invest the best of your time, the best of your resources, in upholding the life of God's people. King'sWay is not a meeting we attend. It is a people to whom we make a covenant commitment as members. A commitment that requires sacrifice. A commitment that requires hard work. A commitment that requires willingness to be inconvenienced for the sake of building up God's people, no less than the men God called to take their brother's wife.

Almighty God has called and commissioned every believer not to attend church but to devote your life to building up the church. The preservation of God's people is a work of eternal significance. And that, by the way, is why injuring a man by grabbing him you know where in Deuteronomy 25:11-12 is such a big deal. Offspring are at stake. The future of God's people is on the line. May we protect and build one another up today with no less sobriety. Practice justice by upholding the life of your neighbor in the church.

4) UPHOLD LIFE IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

Throughout both chapters, Moses references a variety of legal situations where life must be protected. When the priests give instructions about how to handle cases of leprosy disease (which included homes plagued by mold or clothing riddled with mildew), pay attention, Israel! Why? Because protecting God's people from sickness and disease is really important! Obey the priests accordingly.

The Lord instructs us in Romans 13 to take our submission to governing authorities no less seriously today. Provided they are not telling us to disobey Scripture, that includes the authority they exercise in matters of public health. We express our trust in the Lord, and uphold the life of our neighbor, by submitting to their decisions accordingly.



The same concern for upholding life governs the prohibition in Deuteronomy 24:16 against punishing fathers for the sin of their children and vice versa. “Each one shall be put to death for his own sin,” the Lord declares. How might that principle apply today? It means we don’t blame other people for the wrongs we have done. And it means we don’t shun or scorn an entire family because of the actions of the parents or children. Nor do we hold an entire race responsible for the sins some members of their race have committed. The priority of personal responsibility is an expression of God’s justice.

And as a just God, he’s not capricious or unrestrained in the judgments he issues. He is perfectly and completely righteous in all his ways. That’s why the judicial punishments in Deuteronomy 25:1-3 must be carefully overseen, proportional to the crime, and remain within boundaries that protect human dignity. Verse 3, “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.”

May the Lord protect us from adopting a “Tough on crime” attitude where we support prison sentences that outweigh the seriousness of the crime. It may get you a round of applause on the campaign trail, but harsher is not always better or more biblical. In the consequences parents give children, no less than the consequences judges impose in the courtroom, we must contend for Jesus’ sake against excessive punishments that degrade our neighbor instead of upholding their life. The Lord of Life is not abusive or vindictive in the judgments he issues. May we follow his example.

CONCLUSION

Justice upholds the life of our neighbor – at work, for the poor, in the church, and in the public square. At the very end of the passage, however, the Lord explicitly tells Israel to not uphold life in a specific situation. Look at Deuteronomy 25:17-19.

“Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way when you were faint and weary, and cut off your tail, those who were lagging behind you, and he did not fear God. Therefore when the LORD your God has given you rest from all your enemies around you, in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget.”

The Amalekites actions toward Israel in Exodus 17 are a grievous example of an unjust war. Israel didn’t pose a direct threat to Amalek. They weren’t even trying to attack



Amalek. The Israelites were faint. They were weary. And not only did Amalek choose that very moment to take advantage of them. They also engaged them in the rear – attacking the weak and frail, likely including a preponderance of women and children. Why did Amalek do it? Verse 18, because they “Did not fear God.” They didn’t fear the Lord of Life.

Moses ends with a case study of injustice, reminding us that upholding our neighbor’s life ultimately comes down to this choice: will you fear God or not? Will you remain mindful of him? Aware of the life he has graciously given you? Aware of the mercy he has lavished upon you in Jesus? Aware that he’s watching? Aware that he’s listening? Aware that he will hold you accountable for whether you uphold your neighbor’s life or take it from them?

Why must Israel remember, and not forget, what Amalek did, and execute justice accordingly? Because God remembers. He doesn’t forget. He takes note of every injustice committed against you, friend. It might feel like no one sees. It might feel like no one knows. But that’s not true. The Lord of heaven and earth will not allow the guilty to go unpunished. You can trust him.

And here’s the most remarkable thing of all. If you step back and consider all the times we have sinned against the Lord, all the times we have not practiced justice by upholding the life of our neighbor, we are forced to confess with the psalmist, “If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?” (Psalms 130:3) I could not stand. You could not stand. We all deserve to have our name blotted out of the Book of Life no less than Amalek.

And yet that’s the exact image the prophet Isaiah uses to capture the riches of God’s mercy toward us in the gospel, at the cross of Christ, where justice and mercy meet. Isaiah 43:25, “I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.” How can a just God do that? It’s not because he plays favorites. It’s because Jesus endured the Father’s wrath against your injustice and mine, Christian. The cross is a monument to God’s absolute justice. He will not leave the guilty unpunished. And the cross is a monument to God’s unspeakable mercy because he takes the curse of our sin upon himself.

And that means the fear of God that compels us to practice justice by upholding the life of our neighbor is not a servile terror of messing up. It’s a trembling awe where confidence in his justice and amazement at his mercy frees us to joyfully follow the Lord



of Life in upholding life. That's the holy fear Amalek utterly lacked. That's the holy fear God delights to work in us through the power of the Spirit today.

And the Spirit accomplishes that very work, awakening our souls to God's justice and mercy in the gospel, when we share the Lord's Supper together as a church family. The bread represents his body justly broken for us. The cup represents his blood justly shed for us. It's then a monument to what Christ did in the past. It's what empowers us to practice justice by upholding our neighbor's life this week. The way Jesus upholds our life is what strengthens our weary hearts and hands to keep laying down our life.

Today, brothers and sisters, come taste and see God's justice. Come taste and see God's mercy. Look to him to give you life so that you might join him in giving others the same. If you are a member of our church or are visiting with us as a baptized member of another church that preaches the gospel, this meal is for you. Ushers, please come forward and distribute the elements as we sing. Then we'll partake together.