

Living Word Small Group Study Guide

August 30-September 5, 2020

Sermon Series: Who is My Neighbor?

Week Two: "And Justice for All"

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week's Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday's sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

Suggested Opening Prayer:

Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.

Almighty God, You have sent Jesus to take our nature upon Himself and to be for us both sign and Savior. Grant that by the power of Your spirit, Christ may be born within us today, so that our ministry may be pleasing to You and helpful to Your people. We pray in the name and spirit of Christ, Amen.

Sermon Series Theme:

Jesus' response to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" is to tell the story of the much unliked foreigners from Samaria. We will look at this story as the backdrop for a series about loving our neighbor in real and certain ways.

This Week's Sermon Theme:

What does neighborly behavior look like in the midst of cross racial relations? How can we serve not only as those who refuse to participate in racial injustice but who also promote "Justice, and only justice...?"

Sunday Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 16:18-22 (A group member should read the passages aloud).

For Group Discussion:

What does the text actually SAY?

The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.

What does God expect the "judges and officials" in the tribes of Israel to do as their primary responsibility? (16:18)

What two activities are forbidden of judges in the first part of verse 19? (16:19a)

What additional activity is forbidden of judges in the second part of verse 19? (16:19b)

What happens as the result of accepting a bribe? (16:19c)

What principle is to be followed and pursued above all others? (16:20a)

What will happen for the Israelites if they pursue this principle wholeheartedly? (16:20b)

What two things are forbidden to erect next to God's altar? (16:21-22)

What questions does the text raise for us?

The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Encourage participants to simply ask any questions they have about the passage. The questions below are only suggestions, representative of the kinds of questions that might be asked. The goal is not necessarily to provide answers, but to ask questions of the text! Open discussion about the questions raised below, or by the class, is encouraged.

We might wonder if there was a difference between "judges" and "officials," and if so, what their respective jobs were in ancient Israel.

Similarly, we might wonder who actually made these "appointments," in every town and tribe.

Different translations talk about not "perverting," "delaying," "wresting," "distorting," and "twisting" justice in verse 19. That might make us wonder just what specific kinds of problems were being addressed.

We might also wonder if further guidance was given on the forbidding of partiality or favoritism – were specific groups in mind here?

We probably wonder about the connection drawn between pursuing justice (or righteousness) and the ability of the Israelites to "live long and possess the land."

Finally, we might wonder if it is intentional that the command to avoid setting up sacred trees and stones next to the altar follows immediately after the commands to do justice. Is there a connection?

Commentary on the text:

The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.

See also: Deuteronomy 1:15-18; Exodus 18:13-27; 2 Chronicles 4:4-7; Deuteronomy 17:14-20; Deuteronomy 10:17; Deuteronomy 17:2-7; Deuteronomy 19:15-21; Amos 5:21-24

From the opening chapter of Deuteronomy, it is clear that issues of justice will have a place of prominence on the book. Even in chapter one, verses 15-18, Moses recalls how, during the wilderness wanderings, he appointed leaders to judge disputes between members of the community, and the importance of making fair judgments (see the original story in Exodus 18:13-27). Now, in chapters 16 through 19 of Deuteronomy, more attention is given to the functioning of ancient Israel's court system than any other matter. We often associate an emphatic demand for justice with the biblical prophets like Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, but in Deuteronomy we find that their concerns are deeply rooted in the demands of this book, and the laws that God laid forth as Israel was about to gain possession of the Promised Land.

The point that is being made here in Deuteronomy is this: a good, long life in the Promised Land will only be possible if there are workable systems to ensure fairness, and to provide redress in situations of unfairness, in the community. The starting point for such a system, as we read here in Deuteronomy 16:18, is the appointment of "judges and officials." The Hebrew word translated "officials" or "officers"

in most biblical translations is more literally “record-keeper” – so these two leaders worked together to make the actual decisions in legal matters, and to maintain official records of these judgments.

In 2 Chronicles 19:4-7, we see King Jehoshaphat, king of the southern kingdom of Judah in the ninth century BC, setting up a judicial system in Judah that reflects the demands of Deuteronomy. This demonstrates clearly that the requirements of Deuteronomy were being ignored prior to that time. But we also see that the way Jehoshaphat interpreted the expectations of Deuteronomy was that he, the king himself, made the judicial appointments. Remember, though, that Deuteronomy itself reflects the time period just before Israel took possession of the Promised Land, and well *before* the kingship was established in Israel. The book of Deuteronomy has the people of Israel as its intended audience, so while the command to “appoint judges and officials for each of your tribes in every town” does not appear to make clear just who is to make these appointments, in fact, it is the book’s audience, the people of Israel, who are to do this appointing. There is no hint within Deuteronomy’s laying out of the role of the king in Deuteronomy 17:14-20 that making judicial appointments is part of the king’s duties. Thus, there is a certain democratic expectation within Deuteronomy’s command to “appoint judges and officials” – the duty rests with the people.

Realizing that the intended audience for these words is *all* the people of Israel helps us to also recognize that there is actually only one requirement given specifically for these judges and officials – they are to “judge the people fairly.” The subject of the additional commandments concerning showing partiality, accepting bribes, and perverting justice is the same as the subject as the command to appoint judges and officials – *all the people!* Certainly, the judges and officials are to be obedient to these commands as well, but the point is that the expectation of justice is on the entire community. The system of courts will not produce fairness, justice, and righteousness if the judges alone are fair and resist bribes. *All* who participate are under the same expectations. This is such an emphatic requirement, that verse 20, concluding the paragraph setting forth these requirements, demands “justice and justice alone” of everyone, so that life in the land will be livable.

As mentioned, three specific requirements are set forth for the people after the appointment of judges and officials. First, they are not to “pervert” justice. Depending on the biblical translation used, this word is translated “pervert” (NIV), “delay” (CEB), “wrest” (KJV), “distort” (NRSV, NAS), and “twist” (NLT). Whenever we encounter a word translated in so many different ways, we can be sure the underlying Hebrew word has numerous meanings. In fact, the Hebrew word used here, “natah,” can mean to extend or stretch out (as a hand), to spread out (as a blanket), to bend down or tilt (as a water pitcher), or to turn aside (as in avoiding something). When the word was used with “heart” as its object, it meant “to give one’s loyalty to.” When it was used with “ear,” it meant “to listen to.” Different Bible translators choose to follow one of these various meanings in their translation here, where the word is used with “justice” – the CEB assumes the primary meaning of “extend,” so translates “do not delay justice,” while others focus more on the sense of bending, or turning, and translate “distort” or “twist.” Whichever translation is chosen, it seems clear the intent is to maintain honesty and honor within the judicial system.

The second requirement is to avoid partiality or favoritism. The original Hebrew here is interesting, too – an idiom is used which translates literally, “do not recognize faces.” In other words, don’t allow prior relationships – whether or not you “recognize someone’s face” – to influence your administration of justice. The third requirement is to never accept a bribe. What is interesting about these two specific

prohibitions is that according to Deuteronomy 10:17, they characterize God Himself – “the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes”! Because this is the way God Himself acts toward His people, the community must follow suit. There can be no partiality or bribery among those responsible for justice in the community because the community is God’s representative, and God shows no partiality and accepts no bribes.

The theme of justice continues through the following chapters of Deuteronomy as well. Procedures for establishing the truth and carrying out the court’s decisions are given in Deuteronomy 17:2-7 and 19:15-21. A central court is established for handling difficult cases in Deuteronomy 17:8-13. In each of these Scriptures, two concerns are clearly most important – fairness and responsibility/accountability. The truth must be sought for diligently, and an adequate number of witnesses must agree before there can be a conviction. Of course, the requirement for witnesses is not an infallible guarantee of justice, but it is the foundation of a system designed to maintain justice in the face of the potential for either human fallibility (forgetting what was really witnessed) or outright human sin (lying about what was really witnessed).

It is also interesting to note that within this biblical justice system, the witnesses are to be the first to carry out the sentence, followed by “the rest of the people” (see Deuteronomy 17:7). The members of the court and the witnesses are not allowed to separate themselves from the implications of their actions, and the community as a whole is responsible for the *whole* process. Thus, it is they who maintain integrity within the process by being the ones responsible not only for a conviction, but for the execution of the sentence. This point is underscored in Deuteronomy 19:16-20, where a false witness receives the punishment he or she would have inflicted upon the one they testified falsely against!

A full study of Deuteronomy’s emphasis on justice would take weeks. The point is – God is concerned about justice, and God’s people are to be just as concerned. In between the commands to be fair in applying justice, and the case study in Deuteronomy 17:2-7, come two commands forbidding the setting up of sacred poles, or trees, and sacred stones, or obelisks (16:21-22). The implication is that the distortion of justice is, itself, a form of idolatry. There is no room within the community’s system of justice for partiality, bribery, or any twisting, distorting, delaying, or perverting of justice, just as there is no room within the community’s system of worship for idolatry. The two go hand in hand. Justice and righteousness alone are to define community life under the God of Israel, just as worship of God and God alone are to define worship life under the God of Israel. Doing justice honors the God of Israel, and, as the later prophets loudly exclaimed, is the essence of *true* worship (see Amos 5:21-24, for example).

Final Thoughts for Discussion:

The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.

What evidence of partiality or favoritism in our national systems of justice have you seen? When have *you*, as an individual, been guilty of using partiality or favoritism in making a personal judgment?

Do you feel a sense of holy indignation when you are made aware of a miscarriage of justice?

How do you think Deuteronomy's system of biblical justice would work in modern society? Is it realistic to place the carrying out of justice in the hands of the witnesses who have testified to the crime, and on the hands of "all the people"?

In our society, many judges are elected by the people. This may be a close representation of Deuteronomy's mandate for *the people* to appoint judges. How seriously do you take the election of judges at election time? How do you justify your answer?

What connection is there in our society between "living well in the land" and the carrying out of justice? How does miscarriage of justice impact society as a whole?

How does the doing of justice in our private, interpersonal relationships affect the doing of justice on a broader, systemic, scale? Are they related?

How important to you, as a Christian, is justice? Will this week's sermon and study impact that level of importance? If so, how will that impact be demonstrated in your words and actions?

Suggested Closing Prayer:

Lord, we pray for justice. Help us to recognize injustice in our lives, and in our world, and to take the steps we need to take to correct it. We give You thanks for instilling a longing for justice in our very souls and pray that You would form us into the kind of people who work tirelessly to bring it about. We pray in the holy name of Christ our Lord, Amen.