

Justice and Obedience to the Law

Printed Text • Deuteronomy 5:1–3; 10:12–13; 27:1–10

Devotional Reading • Matthew 22:36–40

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will UNDERSTAND the importance of justice and explore God’s commandments, APPRECIATE the blessing God promises as a benefit of obedience, and PRAY for wisdom to know what is right and perseverance to carry it through.

In Focus

Brandon Johnson stood under the canopy of the Jefferson Monument in Washington, DC, with his son Trevor and the rest of Trevor’s high school history class. He had taken a day off work so that he could chaperon his son’s field trip to the National Mall and nearby monuments. Brandon knew his son would have questions about the nation’s heritage and his own.

The tour guide pointed out the famous words inscribed around the top of the rotunda: “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.”

Trevor loudly remarked, “And that’s why Jefferson recognized Sally Hemings’s equal status with himself, right? And allowed her the full freedoms of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?” Trevor’s teacher gave him a look to check his attitude.

As the group continued on their way, passing the Japanese cherry trees to the FDR memorial, Brandon put his arm around his son. “I’m glad you brought up Hemings, son. What do you think that means for us today that a man like Jefferson kept one of his slaves as his mistress?”

“That the people who think they’re the best and most enlightened people are still full of it,” Trevor replied. “You just can’t trust anything,” he said, full of teenage cynicism.

“Not anything, huh?” Brandon asked. “Not anything we humans make, you mean. Trevor, that’s why I’m so glad to be a Christian. America is nice enough; sure is nicer now than when my pops had to fight tooth and nail just to vote. But it still ain’t the way it oughta be. That’s why I’m glad I follow God’s Law. It’s always been and will always be perfect and just, and so is the God who administers it.”

How do we respond when our country’s laws are not in line with God’s law of justice?

Keep In Mind

¹² “And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? He requires only that you fear the Lord your God, and live in a way that pleases him, and love him and serve him with all your heart and soul. ¹³ And you must always obey the Lord’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good.” (Deuteronomy 10:12–13, NLT)

Words You Should Know

A. Peace Offering (Deuteronomy 27:7) shelem (Heb.) — A voluntary sacrifice of worship that represented thankfulness to God

B. Take heed (v. 9) sakat (Heb.) — To be quiet

Say It Correctly

Horeb. HOAR-ebb

Ebal. EE-ball

KJV

Deuteronomy 5:1 And Moses called all Israel, and said unto them, Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak in your ears this day, that ye may learn them, and keep, and do them.

² The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. ³ The Lord made not this covenant with our fathers, but with us, even us, who are all of us here alive this day.

10:12 And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, ¹³ To keep the commandments of the Lord, and his statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good?

27:1 And Moses with the elders of Israel commanded the people, saying, Keep all the commandments which I command you this day. ² And it shall be on the day when ye shall pass over Jordan unto the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, that thou shalt set thee up great stones, and plaister them with plaister: ³ And thou shalt write upon them all the words of this law, when thou art passed over, that thou mayest go in unto the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, a land that floweth with milk and honey; as the Lord God of thy fathers hath promised thee. ⁴ Therefore it shall be when ye be gone over Jordan, that ye shall set up these stones, which I command you this day, in mount Ebal, and thou shalt plaister them with plaister. ⁵ And there shalt thou build an altar unto the Lord thy God, an altar of stones: thou shalt not lift up any iron tool upon them. ⁶ Thou shalt build the altar of the Lord thy God of whole stones: and thou shalt offer burnt offerings thereon unto the Lord thy God: ⁷ And thou shalt offer peace offerings, and shalt eat there, and rejoice before the Lord thy God. ⁸ And thou shalt write upon the stones all the words of this law very plainly. ⁹ And Moses and the priests the Levites spake unto all Israel, saying, Take heed, and hearken, O Israel; this day thou art become the people of the Lord thy God. ¹⁰ Thou shalt therefore obey the voice of the Lord thy God, and do his commandments and his statutes, which I command thee this day.

NLT

Deuteronomy 5:1 Moses called all the people of Israel together and said, "Listen carefully, Israel. Hear the decrees and regulations I am giving you today, so you may learn them and obey them!

² "The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Mount Sinai. ³ The Lord did not make this covenant with our ancestors, but with all of us who are alive today.

10:12 "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? He requires only that you fear the Lord your God, and live in a way that pleases him, and love him and serve him with all your heart and soul. ¹³ And you must always obey the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good.

27:1 Then Moses and the leaders of Israel gave this charge to the people: “Obey all these commands that I am giving you today. ² When you cross the Jordan River and enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, set up some large stones and coat them with plaster. ³ Write this whole body of instruction on them when you cross the river to enter the land the Lord your God is giving you—a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you. ⁴ When you cross the Jordan, set up these stones at Mount Ebal and coat them with plaster, as I am commanding you today. ⁵ “Then build an altar there to the Lord your God, using natural, uncut stones. You must not shape the stones with an iron tool. ⁶ Build the altar of uncut stones, and use it to offer burnt offerings to the Lord your God. ⁷ Also sacrifice peace offerings on it, and celebrate by feasting there before the Lord your God. ⁸ You must clearly write all these instructions on the stones coated with plaster.” ⁹ Then Moses and the Levitical priests addressed all Israel as follows: “O Israel, be quiet and listen! Today you have become the people of the Lord your God. ¹⁰ So you must obey the Lord your God by keeping all these commands and decrees that I am giving you today.”

The People, Places, and Times

Burnt Offering. A sacrifice that was burned entirely to God was called a burnt offering. One might sacrifice a bull, goat, lamb, or dove, but it had to be a male animal without defect. As you entered the Tabernacle, you had to lay your hand on the animal’s head and dedicate it as a burnt offering (Leviticus 1:1–17). The Israelites were to perform these offerings with certain purification rituals, and the priests were to administer them daily, weekly, monthly, and during festivals. This was the most common form of sacrifice and was meant to show one’s complete devotion to God.

Peace Offering. A peace offering proceeded much like a burnt offering, but the animal could be male or female, and instead of the entire animal being burned up on the altar, only the animal’s entrails were burned (Leviticus 3:1–17). Sacrificing the animal’s liver and kidneys to God was indeed a sacrifice at the time, as those organs are dense with fats and nutrients. At the time, the liver (and often the kidneys, too) were used regularly in divination, as they had sacred significance in Egypt and Babylon. Israelites set themselves apart by simply disposing of these organs. The meat of the animal would then be distributed to the priests and those bringing the offering (Deuteronomy 12:27).

Background

he people of Israel—who had been eyewitnesses to the ten plagues that visited their oppressors, seen God part the Red Sea so that they could escape an advancing army, heard God’s voice at Mount Sinai, received His commandments, dined on food from heaven, and drank water from a rock—failed to believe that God could take them into the land He had promised them. Fearful, they believed it was better to die in a wilderness than enter God’s Promised Land. God gave them what they wanted. Instead of moving forward, they wandered in a wilderness for 40 years until unbelief died out and a new generation was at the threshold of actualizing God’s promise. Moses, knowing that he would not be going into the promised homeland, used a farewell address to remind this new generation of God’s greatness and holiness. Moses conveyed God’s desire for them to have just relationships with each other and foreigners, and the need to remember their history so they would not repeat it.

At-A-Glance

1. A Promise to Everyone (Deuteronomy 5:1–3)
2. A Promise to Live By (10:12–13)
3. A Promise to Remember (27:1–10)

In Depth

1. A Promise to Everyone (Deuteronomy 5:1–3)

The people who listened to Moses speak from a hilltop in Moab were very young, or perhaps not even born, when their parents camped at Mount Sinai and agreed to obey God's commandments. Sadly, that former generation failed to trust God's ability to secure the promised homeland. Now, a new generation was on the threshold of receiving God's promise. Moses wanted them to understand that God's promise was made, not only to the previous generation, but also to all who had been delivered from Egypt, even those who were yet to be born. The people standing before Moses were heirs of a promise that God had made to Abraham and then passed on to Isaac, Jacob, and his descendants. Now the promise was theirs. They were within sight of the homeland, and Moses wanted them to know they would experience the blessings of God's promise as they trusted and loved God and lived with each other according to the just ways God had ordained.

What did Moses want his listeners to do with the message they heard?

2. A Promise to Live By (10:12–13)

To prepare the people to live in their homeland, Moses detailed God's design for a good relationship with God and others. They were to love God with their whole hearts, avoiding idolatry. They were to follow God's commandments for living with each other. Though they were free, following God's just laws would keep them from actions and behaviors that would harm the well-being of the entire community. After a time of speaking, Moses summarized God's desire in the form of a question. What did God want? The answer was uncomplicated: God wanted a loving relationship with His people and for His people to have just relationships with each other. The laws Moses shared were to be seen as protections, not prohibitions. God knew the way to a blessed life was to follow His loving and just instructions. The defining characteristic of God's people was their love for God and each other.

Name the five requirements God expected from the people listening to Moses' speech.

3. A Promise to Remember (27:1–10)

When the Israelites would finally enter the land of Canaan, Moses did not want the land's abundance to distract them from their relationship with God. Their first priority was to write the commandments on whitewashed stones and build an altar at Mount Ebal. The city of Shechem was at the base of Mount Ebal. This was where the Lord had appeared to Abraham, promising him that his descendants would have a land they could call their own (Genesis 12:6–7). Those entering Canaan would be fulfilling that promise. Writing the commandments for all to see would be a reminder that they had agreed to have a loving relationship with God and had chosen to obey God's just laws.

What does the public display of the law mean for the common citizen?

Search the Scriptures

1. What are the responsibilities and benefits of following God's commandments? (Deuteronomy 5:1–21, 32)
2. Why did Moses say that the people of Israel were supposed to treat foreigners fairly? (Deuteronomy 10:19)

Discuss the Meaning

Words like commandments, laws, and decrees can leave some readers with the opinion that God is more concerned about people following rules than having an abundant life based on a relationship with Him. Yet, from the time of God's visits with Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening to His embodiment in Jesus Christ, God has desired a loving relationship with people. One reason the laws were given was for the people's good, to uphold justice in relationship with others and with God.

What are some examples from the lesson's Background and Focal Verses that indicate God's desire for a loving relationship with people?

What is the role of God's commandments, laws, and decrees in the lives of individuals who desire to develop a loving and just relationship with God and with other people?

Liberating Lesson

When a middle-aged woman refused to give up her seat on a public bus in Montgomery, Alabama, she was agreeing with God that her life possessed intrinsic value. No longer would Rosa Parks allow herself to be unfairly treated. On December 1, 1955, she began a journey that secured for herself and countless descendants of African slaves the freedoms promised in the Constitution of the country which was now their homeland. Her lived experience was going to align with the truth that all people were created by God with equal worth. Justice, she believed.

Application for Activation

For each generation, there are justice issues that selfless men and women need to address on the behalf of others. Some of our current issues include mass incarceration, child and senior care, affordable health care, adequate education, and immigration pathways. Make a commitment to visit, talk with, or serve with a local organization that ministers to people who are impacted by inequitable systems.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Deuteronomy 5:1–3; 10:12–13; 27:1–10

1 And Moses called all Israel, and said unto them, Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak in your ears this day, that ye may learn them, and keep, and do them.

Moses, leader of the Hebrew people and messenger of God, consistently communicated commands, laws, instructions, guidance, judgments, and information to everyone in Israel. Here, Moses ensures everyone receives God's communication of statutes and judgments. Statutes and judgments are formally written enactments of an authority that legally governs a people, city, state, or country. Statutes and judgments are laws, commands, and decrees whether moral, ceremonial, or judicial. The authority in this chapter, without question, is God. Moses calls Israel together to hear a restatement of the Ten Commandments, which had already been given to the people of Israel. In His commandments, God cited what was just and His children promised obedience.

Restatement of the Law is significant for three major reasons. First, the original call to hear the statutes was for the generation of Israelites who went through the Red Sea. The sins of that generation caused them to wander and die in the wilderness before reaching the promised land of Canaan. Their children, the survivors, were a new generation of people, and Moses needed to share the statutes and judgments with them before entering the Promised Land. Secondly, the restatement of the statutes shows the significance of hearing, learning, keeping, and doing the requirements of God. The statutes are worthy of repeating, so they will become embedded in the hearts of the people that would enter the Promised Land. Finally and most importantly, the current people of Israel need to understand how to live, prosper, and prolong their days in the land they are to possess (Deuteronomy 5:33).

2 The LORD our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. 3 The LORD made not this covenant with our fathers, but with us, even us, who are all of us here alive this day.

A covenant is a contract or agreement between God and His people. In the covenant, God makes promises to His people either unconditionally or based on a certain conduct from them. There are many covenants throughout the Bible. For example, God made covenants with Noah, Abraham, the Israelites through Moses, David, and all people through Jesus Christ.

The Noahic Covenant, given to Noah, was unconditional and promised that God would never again destroy the world with water. He created the rainbow as a sign of this covenant (Genesis 9:12–17). The Abrahamic Covenant was a promise made by God to Abraham, that Abraham's descendants would inherit the Promised Land and from his lineage, all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 13:14–16; 15:18–21; 17:7; 22:18). Circumcision was used as a sign of the covenant between Abraham and God. The Mosaic Covenant was a conditional covenant of Law. God promised Israel that He would make them a chosen people, a holy nation, and His treasured possession. He promised to bless them abundantly in every way, but only if they kept His Law (Exodus 19:5–8).

The Davidic Covenant was a promise by God to establish David's dynasty forever. David's descendants would be kings, including King Jesus.

The word Horeb (Heb. khoreb, khor-ABE) means waste or desert, and was a general name for the whole mountain range of which Mount Sinai was one of the summits. This mountain range formed a huge mountain block in the southern Sinai peninsula and had a very spacious plain at its northeast end where the Israelites camped. This is where Moses originally came down the mountain with the

revelation of God's Law. In verse 3, Moses emphasizes that he was speaking to the current generation of living Israelites. Even though this group's parents were the adults making covenant vows at that time, Moses reminds the current generation of Israelites that they are bound to the same covenant. Their parents had sworn for themselves, but this oath covered both the adults and the children of the household.

Deuteronomy 10:12–13

12 And now, Israel, what doth the LORD thy God require of thee, but to fear the LORD thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, 13 To keep the commandments of the LORD, and his statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good?

These verses ask the question, "What does God require of you?" The Israelites knew quite well that God commanded many things in the Book of Leviticus and the Mosaic Law. There were purity laws, rules for daily living, and regulations for family responsibilities, sexual conduct, and relationships. All of which were external observances that could be monitored and enforced. But respect and true love for God must come from the heart and can only be discerned by God. He and He alone can look into the motives and intent of the mind, soul, and spirit. God, in His love for us, deposited a free will in our spirits and then asked us to love Him, the Creator and lover of our soul. How astonishing that God requested our love. He did not make us robots or mechanical beings that were forced to love Him. He made us independent human beings who must choose to love Him as an act of our will. Moses exhorted God's people to love, serve, and obey Him with every inch of their being, for their own good. God's laws were not designed to spoil their fun or make life difficult for them. They were designed for the people's good, to protect them from their own evil inclinations and to uphold justice within the community of faith.

God has the same desires and requirements for us today. How amazing that we can have the forgiveness of our sins and eternal life with God as a free gift from Jesus Christ our Lord. What a joy to show our gratitude by loving, serving, and obeying God with all our heart, mind, and spirit.

Deuteronomy 27:1–10

1 And Moses with the elders of Israel commanded the people, saying, Keep all the commandments which I command you this day. 2 And it shall be on the day when ye shall pass over Jordan unto the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, that thou shalt set thee up great stones, and plaister them with plaister:

In this verse, the elders joined Moses in exhortation for the first time in this book. Seventy elders formed the council of the Israelite nation. They were serious in their commands to the people to obey God's Law. The people deemed God as their King and vowed allegiance to Him. The people heard their command: as soon as the people took possession of the Promised Land, they were to set up an altar and erect a stone monument on which the Law would be inscribed. The stone monuments were plastered to ensure a smooth surface so the inscription would be more easily read.

3 And thou shalt write upon them all the words of this law, when thou art passed over, that thou mayest go in unto the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, a land that floweth with milk and honey; as the LORD God of thy fathers hath promised thee.

The engraved monument would serve as a reminder to the Israelites and all others that the land of Canaan was dedicated to God's service. Repeatedly in the Old Testament, the Promised Land is described as the land of milk and honey (Exodus 3:8; Numbers 14:8; Deuteronomy 31:20; Ezekiel 20:15). This poetic description the Promised Land as "a land flowing with milk and honey" is a beautifully picturesque way of highlighting the agricultural richness of the land that awaited God's chosen people. The reference to "milk" suggests that many livestock could find pasture there, and the mention of "honey" suggests the vast farmland available, where bees had plenty of plants to draw nectar from. God brought His people out of slavery in Egypt to a prosperous land of freedom, blessings, and the knowledge of the Lord. However, the land flowing with milk and honey was home to the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, all of whom were great in number and valued the land high enough to fight and die for it.

4 Therefore it shall be when ye be gone over Jordan, that ye shall set up these stones, which I command you this day, in mount Ebal, and thou shalt plaister them with plaister.

Once the Israelites passed over the Jordan River, they were to erect the stone monument and plaster the surface for easy inscribing. Years later, Joshua followed all of Moses' instructions from God (Joshua 8:30–35). He wrote all the laws and had them plastered as Moses ordered. Half of the people stood at Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal. Joshua read all the words of the Law. He read the blessings at Mount Gerizim and the curses at Mount Ebal, written in the Book of the Law. God wanted to show His people the stark contrast between the blessings for those who obeyed His commands, and the curses for those who disobeyed His Law. The key point is that God is just, whether one decides to obey or disobey. His justice stands forever, but we, like the Children of Israel, decide if we want to be showered with His blessings or suffer His wrath for disobedience. Either way, God is just.

5 And there shalt thou build an altar unto the LORD thy God, an altar of stones: thou shalt not lift up any iron tool upon them. 6 Thou shalt build the altar of the LORD thy God of whole stones: and thou shalt offer burnt offerings thereon unto the LORD thy God:

God required an altar of stones and had previously explained why iron tools should not be used on them: "for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it" (from Exodus 20:25). The Lord also required "whole stones" that were not broken, or hewed out, but rough as they were when taken out of the quarry, because carved stones with figures and ornaments might lead to superstition. God knew His people were prone to making graven images and idolatry. He wanted sincere worship of Him without distractions.

This command was given during their temporary wilderness state and stayed in force until the Tabernacle was built. As the Israelites traveled, they had altars that were erected quickly and taken down with speed, designed for when circumstances required a hasty move. Some altars were even made of turf from the earth or dirt. The Israelites did not leave behind their altars when they moved camp. The altars they made either traveled with them or were destroyed to avoid abuse and superstitious uses. Although future altars in the Tabernacle and Temple were exquisite, durable, and majestic, they were still in stark contrast to the altars of idolaters, which were gaudy spectacles.

Jesus Christ, our altar, is a stone cut out of the mountain without hands (Daniel 2:34–35). He became our chief cornerstone (Matthew 21:42). Jesus made it possible for Christians to worship God in any place, as long as our worship is in spirit and truth. Our altar is present each time we pray and come boldly before the throne of grace, in Jesus' name (Hebrews 4:16).

7 And thou shalt offer peace offerings, and shalt eat there, and rejoice before the LORD thy God.

The Hebrew word for “peace offering” is shelem (SHEH–lem), which is from the same root as shalom, meaning peace, prosperity, and longevity. The peace offering was a voluntary sacrifice of worship and contribution given to God that represented thankfulness and gratitude in three specific instances: 1) blessings received; 2) the fulfillment of a vow; or 3) God’s unsought generosity. The contribution was bread for thanksgiving or meat for a vow or freewill gift. The peace offering is described in detail in Leviticus 3 and 7:11–21.

Those who gave peace offerings had regard for God as the giver of all good things. The peace offerings were offered by way of prayer. If a person were in pursuit of mercy, a peace offering would be added to their prayer. The offerings were divided among the altar (for God), the priest, and the person bringing the sacrifice, including his family and friends. The peace offering represented God and His people feasting together, in love and friendship. This is why shelem is sometimes translated as “fellowship offering.” The peace offerings were times of feasting, drinking, talking, singing, and enjoying salvation as a great gift from God. The peace offerings were the only kind that allowed the worshiper and his family and friends to participate. How wonderful that God included the family in this festive time of rejoicing and thanksgiving. On this occasion, the passage of Jordan and the arrival of Israel in the heart of the country, would be solid reasons for giving thanks to God. Certainly, a peace offering was warranted.

God’s Law required a “burnt offering” in order that a peace offering could follow. Being in alignment with God’s will, as represented by the burnt offering, meant the worshiper would be in a position to fellowship with God and with family in sharing the peace offering. Details about the burnt offering are found in the People, Places, and Times section of this lesson. Today, Christ, our Prince of Peace, is our “burnt offering,” having made peace through His blood, shed on the Cross (Isaiah 9:6; Colossians 1:20). Isaiah prophesied about Jesus’ taking our sins to satisfy the wrath of our just God against us, “He shall see the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied” (from Isaiah 53:11). Through Jesus, the believer is reconciled to God; and having the peace of God in our hearts, we are disposed to pursue peace with all people. Through Jesus alone, we can obtain an answer of peace to our prayers. As we offer God our worship, praise, and fellowship, we too can engage in peace offerings.

8 And thou shalt write upon the stones all the words of this law very plainly. 9 And Moses and the priests the Levites spake unto all Israel, saying, Take heed, and hearken, O Israel; this day thou art become the people of the LORD thy God. 10 Thou shalt therefore obey the voice of the LORD thy God, and do his commandments and his statutes, which I command thee this day.

The laws on the stones were written clearly so everyone could read and understand them. The priest assisted Moses in urging the people to pay attention and seriously internalize the meaning of God’s words and the solemn renewing of their covenant with Him. They were charged with attending to and executing God’s plan for them. The Israelites are ordered to “take heed” (Heb. *sakat*, saw–KOT)—which means to be quiet—so that they can follow the second command here, “hearken” (Heb. *shama*, shaw–MAW), which means not only to listen, but also to obey.

The importance of this day had to be articulated. This day was the official, ceremonial day that Israel became God’s people. Of course, they were His people before. He had chosen them to be His special people above everyone else; He had redeemed and delivered them out of Egypt; He led them through the wilderness, and provided and protected them; He gave them just laws and statutes to live by; all of which showed them to be His peculiar people. But now, in a very formal and solemn manner they were officially declared by God to be His people, and they had solemnly vowed and declared that He was their God and King.

This event was comparable to the day they entered into covenant with Him. God provided justice and His children promised obedience. Such power and privilege are overwhelming to the believer. Certainly, they were compelled to obey the voice of the Lord, just as we are urged by the Holy Spirit to follow Jesus' example.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

The Law of Justice
(Deuteronomy 5:6–21)

TUESDAY

Follow the Path of God's Law
(Deuteronomy 5:23–33)

WEDNESDAY

Discern the Good, Acceptable, and Perfect
(Romans 12:1–2, 9–21)

THURSDAY

The Written Law and the Ark of Wood
(Deuteronomy 10:1–11)

FRIDAY

Jesus Fulfills the Law
(Matthew 5:17–20)

SATURDAY

Curses upon Disobedience
(Deuteronomy 27:14–26)

SUNDAY

Obey the Statutes and Ordinances
(Deuteronomy 5:1–3; 10:12–13; 28:1–10)