

Exodus 18:13-23

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The day after Jethro, Moses, Aaron, and the elders celebrated a sacrificial to honor the LORD, Moses went about his usual duties in managing the affairs of the people. On this day, his job was to mediate disputes and dispense justice when there was an issue between Israelites. This was an extremely burdensome task to Moses because it lasted all day. Jethro saw what it was doing to Moses and spoke to him about the wisdom of training others to share the responsibility of governing.

Jethro then suggested that Moses select godly men of integrity to take over most of the cases that come up. Jethro suggested that there be several layers of these judges to deal with the minor disputes, which would mean that only the major cases make their way to Moses. By doing this, Moses does not wear himself out, and the people would get justice more quickly.

Verses 13 – 16 describe the day after the meal with Jethro, Moses, Aaron, and the elders. It was the day *that Moses sat to judge the people*. Naturally, in a group as large as the Israelites, there would be disputes and disagreements between individuals or groups. All of these disputes, large or small, major or minor, would come before Moses so he could decide the best course of action. Because of the number of cases that existed, *the people stood about Moses from the morning until the evening*. In other words, the entire day would be spent listening to both sides of a dispute and then deciding what should be done to resolve it. The text does not say how many days a week Moses did this. However often it was, it was enough to cause Jethro to conclude it was not sustainable.

It happened that Jethro, *Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people*. Jethro was a priest and must have had some experience in managing the affairs of his people. So *he said, "What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge and all the people stand about you from morning until evening?"* Jethro knew right away that it was not good that Moses do all of the judging "alone."

In vv. 15 – 16, *Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, it comes to me, and I judge between a man and his neighbor and make known the statutes of God and*

His laws.” The judicial system at this time consisted of one man – Moses. Israelites would appear in front of Moses with a “dispute” that needed to be settled. Since he was the only one that would “sit as judge,” there appeared to have been a huge crowd of people around him all day, waiting for their turn to plead their case. Moses not only had to decide these cases but also be the one who educated the people about the LORD’s “statutes” (rules and guidelines that were to set boundaries in human behavior) and His “laws” (Heb. *torah*, a set of pronouncements given to teach the people about situations that occur in life).

Jethro’s advice is in vv. 17 – 23. Seeing what was happening and sensing how inefficient it was for one person to be the only judge the people’s issues, *Moses’ father-in-law said to him, The thing that you are doing is not good. He explained to Moses, You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone.* The word translated “wear out” literally means “to fade” or “to wither.” Jethro saw that Moses would waste away trying to judge every dispute, large and small and the people would wither waiting for their case to be heard. In light of the fact that there probably around two million Israelites, it is entirely possible that the waiting time for one’s case to be heard by Moses would be extremely long and frustrating.

Jethro then detailed his solution in vv. 17 – 23 to the problem he saw in vv. 15 – 16. He told Moses, *Now listen to me: I will give you counsel, and God be with you.* It is as if Jethro took Moses aside by the arm in order to impress upon his son-in-law the seriousness of the problem. Jethro told Moses to “listen to me,” literally “hear my voice.” He wanted Moses to pay attention to his counsel, and he was confident that God would be with him. His solution involved several things:

First, he listed the things for which Moses should be responsible. Moses should first concentrate on being *the people’s representative before God.* He has been this for some time now, and he should continue to be so in the future.

Also, Moses should continue to *bring the disputes to God.* He had been performing this role for a while as well, but Jethro suggested a limit to this in the following verses. The word “disputes” can be translated “matters,” implying that what came before Moses might have been more than judicial issues. It probably included asking Moses’ advice on issues that were not judicial in nature.

Another focus of Moses should be to *teach them the statutes and the laws, and make known to them the way in which they are to walk and the work they are to do*. The word translated “teach” can also mean “warn,” implying that obeying the “statutes” and “laws” (Heb. *torah*) was to be taken very seriously. In addition to this, he was to “make known” (lit. “cause to know”) the “way” (i.e. lifestyle) they were to live as the LORD’s covenant people and the “work” they were supposed to do in light of their status with the LORD.

In verses 21 – 23, Jethro shared his plan on how to implement a new justice system for the Israelites. In order to lighten the load of Moses’ judicial activities, and spread knowledge and governance among a broad group of leaders. Jethro suggested that Moses should *select out of all the people able men* who had the following qualities:

- They were to *fear God*, not be pagans or mix the worship of the LORD with other deities.
- They were to be *men of truth*, meaning they were to be men who knew the truth and strove to judge in light of it instead of listening to deception or falsehoods.
- They were also to be *those who hate dishonest gain*. They were to be incorruptible and not weak or vulnerable to the lure of money. They were not to be men who would take kickbacks in order to get a favorable judgment.

These men were to be organized into a hierarchy, placing them *as leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens*. Presumably, if a matter was too serious for a leader of “tens,” he would pass it up to the leader of “fifties,” and so on. That way, Moses would only have to judge the most serious of disputes rather than all of them. These “leaders” were to *judge the people at all times*, but it should be that *every major dispute they will bring to you, but every minor dispute they themselves will judge*. Jethro seemed to be confident that *it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you*. He also predicted that if Moses did *this thing (v. 23) and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people also will go to their place in peace*. It would lighten the load on Moses, and he would have the energy and vigor to take on the more important matters that the LORD wanted him to do. The people would be trained to govern themselves, and also see justice done in a more timely manner, resulting in a more efficient system.

Biblical Text:

¹³ It came about the next day that Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood about Moses from the morning until the evening.¹⁴ Now when Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit *as judge* and all the people stand about you from morning until evening?"¹⁵ Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. ¹⁶ When they have a dispute, it comes to me, and I judge between a man and his neighbor and make known the statutes of God and His laws."

¹⁷ Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing that you are doing is not good. ¹⁸ You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone.¹⁹ Now listen to me: I will give you counsel, and God be with you. You be the people's representative before God, and you bring the disputes to God, ²⁰ then teach them the statutes and the laws, and make known to them the way in which they are to walk and the work they are to do. ²¹ Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place *these* over them *as* leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens. ²² Let them judge the people at all times; and let it be that every major dispute they will bring to you, but every minor dispute they themselves will judge. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear *the burden* with you. ²³ If you do this thing and God *so* commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people also will go to their place in peace."