

Exodus 23:1-9

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/exod/exod-23/exodus-231-9/>

The LORD explains statutes that specify how to deal justly with one's neighbor. These statutes give more information relating to the ninth commandment prohibiting lying (Exodus 20:16). The Israelites were to treat all people justly regardless of their station in life: rich and poor, citizen and stranger, friend and enemy.

Verses 1 – 3 deal with honesty, both in judicial and non-judicial settings. In the first verse, the LORD told His people that they *shall not bear a false report* (v. 1), meaning they were commanded not to spread untrue information so as to perpetrate injustice. The second part of the verse describes the idea further—they were told to *not join your hand with a wicked man to be a malicious witness*. The phrase *join your hand* is literally “set your hand with” in the Hebrew. Setting your *hand with a wicked man* is a picture of conspiring to aid and endorse acts that are evil.

In a judicial setting, this would mean that the *wicked man* wants injustice to be done to another person. No one was to support such injustice. The word translated *malicious* in the phrase *join your hand with a wicked man to be a malicious witness* (Hebrew “ḥāmās”) implies injustice that included violence. A person was not only prohibited from slandering or falsely testifying against another person—a person was not to *follow the masses in doing evil*. No one should “go along with the crowd” to do *evil* to another person (v. 2).

In addition, a person should not *testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after a multitude in order to pervert justice*. This passage acknowledges the psyche of mobs, and proactively prohibits incitement of a mob to ends that are *evil*.

In the previous two verses, a person was prohibited from treating someone else in an unjust and untruthful manner so as to cause harm. In v. 3, no one was to *be partial to a poor man in his dispute* (v. 3). In this covenant, no one was allowed to be dishonest either to hurt (vv. 1 – 2) or help (v. 3) someone in a manner that was unjust. Everyone was to be truthful and just at all times with all people, without partiality. *To be partial to a poor man* meant to side with someone just because they are poor. This prohibits deciding a verdict based on “the other person can afford to lose.” Justice is to be served

completely apart from who someone is, regardless of rich or poor, powerful or humble.

Verses 4 – 5 make the switch from honesty and justice in making testimony to taking responsibility to protect the property of others, even to one's enemy. There are two examples given in these verses. First, v. 4 states that *If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him* (v. 4). Livestock, especially oxen and donkeys, were a means to support one's livelihood and create wealth because they were work animals. It would be normal to help a friend by returning the wandering or lost animal to them, but one might be tempted not to do the same for one's enemy. The motive might be revenge or simply to see one's enemy suffer a loss.

But this law stated that a person should help one's enemy as well as one's friend. In God's self-governing community, property is to be respected and cared for regardless of personal feelings toward the owner. Each person is to respect and care for the property of others. Private property is a key pillar of self-governance, and this provision to return wandering livestock of an enemy makes clear its importance. The principle of private property is to be held above one's feelings for the person. Justice is communal harmony, and caring for the property of others, even enemies, is a key means to bring about harmony. In this instance, obedience to this provision might even provide a means to make an enemy a friend.

The second case is a variation of the previous one in v. 4. It stated that *if you see the donkey of one who hates you lying helpless under its load, you shall refrain from leaving it to him, you shall surely release it with him* (v. 5). In v. 4, one was to return a lost animal to one's enemy. Here, a person was to help an enemy's animal that was in distress. The grammar here can be confusing, deciding who *him* refers to, the owner or the donkey. This verse is likely intended to command the same thing as [Deuteronomy 22:4](#), which states:

“You shall not see your countryman's donkey or his ox fallen down on the way, and pay no attention to them; you shall certainly help him to raise them up”

This would indicate that the phrases *to him* and *with him* refer to the donkey's owner. The verse could then be paraphrased thusly:

“If you see an enemy with a donkey lying helpless under its load, go help the man unload his donkey so the poor animal can quickly get relief.”

This command also brings about communal harmony, and could turn an enemy to a friend. In this instance, welfare of the animal, which the enemy depends upon for his livelihood, is a higher principle than personal feelings among humans. Again, the principle is that justice should be administered impartially, apart from personal considerations.

Kindness to one's enemies is commanded in other Old Testament passages, such as [Proverbs 25:21 – 22](#). In the New Testament, Jesus commanded that His followers not only love their enemies but also “pray for those who persecute you” ([Matthew 5:43 – 44](#)). This principle, to love your enemies, creates unilateral responsibility to defuse animosity. There is no place for revenge to fuel blood-feuds within God's self-governing economy.

The next section (vv. 6 – 9) returns to the topic of justice among citizens, similar to vv. 1 – 2. Three topics are mentioned here. First (v. 6), *you shall not pervert the justice due to your needy brother in his dispute*. V. 3 instructs to not be *partial to a poor man*. Here, the *needy brother* (Heb. “ebyôn”, which emphasizes one in material need) is to be given *justice* the same as someone who is well to do. There is to be no siding against someone because they are *needy*, which likely means they are unable to benefit the one testifying. There would be a human tendency to favor those who can “scratch my back.” This is to be strictly avoided. Justice is to be served apart from personal preference.

This avoidance of partiality is now stated as a general principle, and God asserts He will enforce it. *Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent or the righteous, for I will not acquit the guilty* (v. 7). Implied in this verse is a false accusation against an innocent person which results in their execution. The power of life and death is in the hands of one judging, and God has delegated this moral authority to the individual Israelites. God makes it clear He will not tolerate irresponsible stewardship of this solemn duty of passing judgement. The seriousness of doing injustice can be seen in the fact that the LORD Himself *will not acquit the guilty*, meaning that the perpetrator will not escape His judgment.

In v. 8, the topic changes. Here, no one should *take a bribe* (v. 8). Bribes can result in injustice and in turn can cause social upheaval. The verse goes on to state the consequences of taking *a bribe*. Specifically, it *blinds the clear-sighted* (literally, “the open eyes”) *and subverts* (literally, “twists”, “perverts”) *the cause of the just*. The point seems to be that bribes were a strong temptation even for the righteous (and still are today). Therefore,

accepting bribes is to be strictly avoided. The clear point is that one cannot take a bribe and remain impartial in their judgment.

It is worth noting that the prohibition was against taking a bribe. There was no prohibition for offering a bribe. This could have been to make clear that the responsibility rested with the judge to ensure they were impartial, and avoid temptation to be swayed otherwise. Offering payment for service was an accepted part of life, and a way for the community to transact commerce. It was the burden of the one being offered a payment to decide if accepting payment constituted a *bribe*.

Verse 9 repeats what was said in [Exodus 22:21](#) with slightly different wording. It states again that no one was permitted to *oppress a stranger*, the reason being that *since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger, for you also were strangers in the land of Egypt*. The Hebrews were *strangers* in Egypt, meaning they were unassimilated immigrants living in a foreign land. The *stranger* in this verse indicates an unassimilated immigrant living in Israel. The repetition was the LORD's way of stressing the importance of this concept of ensuring the *stranger* received impartial justice as well. It also was meant to emphasize that Israel was to be a beacon of justice in an unjust world.

These laws—dealing with honesty, justice, and proper treatment of others—were meant to arouse moral behavior within the covenant community. Each individual Israelite was responsible to live as a loyal, self-governing citizen in order to please the Suzerain (Ruler) God. The resulting harmonious community would thrive. The forbidden behaviors such as bearing false report, showing partiality in judgment, and abusing the weak would erode justice, and open the door for tyranny, and a decay of freedom and prosperity in Israel. Adhering to self-governing care for others and their property, as well as providing impartial justice would reflect the standard of the Suzerain (Ruler) God who is compassionate, holy, and loving. The resulting blessing and prosperity would be an example to surrounding nations and serve the priestly function intended by God ([Exodus 19:6](#)).

Biblical Text:

¹“You shall not bear a false report; do not join your hand with a wicked man to be a malicious witness.²You shall not follow the masses in doing evil, nor shall you testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after a multitude in order to pervert *justice*; ³nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his dispute.

⁴“If you meet your enemy’s ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him.⁵If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying *helpless* under its load, you shall refrain from leaving it to him, you shall surely release *it* with him.

⁶“You shall not pervert the justice *due* to your needy *brother* in his dispute. ⁷Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent or the righteous, for I will not acquit the guilty.

⁸“You shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the clear-sighted and subverts the cause of the just.

⁹“You shall not oppress a stranger, since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger, for you *also* were strangers in the land of Egypt.