

Deuteronomy 16:18-20

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Moses deals with the practical applications of the fifth commandment. Though the commandment refers to honoring parents (Exodus 20:12), the larger principle centers around authority. This discussion on authority extends to Deuteronomy 18:22.

Here, the Israelites are commanded to appoint judges and officers for themselves in all their towns. These judges and officers are to administer justice with equity in the Promised Land.

This section, which deals with the administration of social justice, is part of a larger section dealing with the offices of authorities, namely judge, king, priest, and prophet (16:18—18:22). In this section, Moses gave instructions to the Israelites that they should *appoint for themselves judges and officers*. God set up a self-governing system in Israel, for the greatest blessing of the nation. His system of self-governance was based on the rule of law, private property, and consent of the governed. The fact that the people chose the *judges and officers* meant that the governed gave their consent to those who governed.

God Himself established the law, and made it clear that no one was to supersede His commands. The concept of private property is embedded within the Ten Commandments, and is really part of a broader concept of respecting the person and possessions of others—to treat them as you would want to be treated. This provision, to *appoint for yourself judges and officers*, delegates the function of judicial administration to the people. They were to decide among themselves who should administer justice in Israel. They would decide for themselves who to invest the authority to wield the sword of justice. That means the judges would have accountability to the people, who had accountability to follow the covenant of their Suzerain King, the LORD.

The term *judges* (Heb. “shāpaṭ”) refers to those who preside over legal procedures in a society. The term *officers* (Heb. “shōṭēr”) refers to officials who served in different areas of the administration of government and the enforcement of law (Numbers 11:16; Deuteronomy 1:15). Modern police officers could be examples. These *judges and officers* were to be appointed *in all your towns which the LORD your God is giving you*. These authorities were

to be appointed to govern locally (lit. “within your gates”). They were also to be organized *according to* their *tribes*. In other words, the Israelites were to have an even distribution of local judges and officers who would come from inside each tribe. After the Promised Land is conquered, it will be divided into what we might call states, according to tribes. So the authorities were to be dispersed among the people. They were to be local, rather than central—although later verses will create an appellate system.

These local judges were commanded to *judge the people with righteous judgment*. The phrase *righteous judgment* is literally “judgment of righteousness.” The standard for *righteousness* was the LORD Himself ([Deuteronomy 6:25](#); [Psalms 119:106, 142](#); [Dan. 9:7](#)). In our context, it refers to conduct that is in accordance to what is right and just. The judges and officers were to execute justice in accordance to what is right in the eyes of the Suzerain God. The judges were not appointed to do as they saw fit. The judges were appointed to administer the Law of God equitably and justly.

Moses then described to the *judges* and *officers* what *righteous judgment* looked like, and he does this using three commands. The first command stated that the judges were to *not distort justice*. To *distort* (Heb. “nāṭā”) was to “bend” or “cast aside.” Justice was to be administered without favoritism or fear. The second command was that they were to *not be partial*. To be *partial* literally means to “regard faces” when judging or to render justice based upon the social status or affinity toward the parties involved.

The third command was that they were to *not take a bribe*. To *take a bribe* means to accept a payment to render a decision based on personal profit. When justice is for sale, there is no justice. The observation here was that taking *a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous*. These are in direct contradiction to the person and work of their LORD. Though bribery was common in the Ancient Near East, the LORD wanted His covenant people to be different and act in such a way as to reflect His just and righteous character, not to conform to the world around them ([Romans 12:2](#)).

Each of these requirements for the judges are consistent with the overarching desire of the Suzerain God, that each Israelite love their neighbor as themselves. No one wants to be treated inequitably. Everyone has a keen sense of fairness when thinking about themselves. The path to justice in Israel is to decide based on the facts and the law, not based on “what is in it for me,” whether that is monetary, social, or familial. Justice is to be impartial and uniform.

Moses concluded with an emphatic statement saying, *Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue*. The phrase *Justice, and only justice* is literally “justice, justice” in the Hebrew text. The repetition of the word conveys intensity, It is intended to imprint upon the minds of the judges and officers that dispensing the LORD’s justice is their top priority. God’s law sets forth how Israelites are to greatly benefit one another. But it will only serve its purpose if it is enforced. God delegates enforcement to be done democratically, by those whom the people appoint. Moses makes it clear that these authorities are accountable both to God, the Suzerain Ruler, as well as the people of Israel.

While the Suzerain Vassal treaty structure would have been a common pattern for the time, the actual content of God’s covenant with Israel was arguably unprecedented. Israel was to be a self-governing country who chose their own judges to administer the law God had given. They were to have a voluntary tax structure. Their national identity celebrated fellowship with one another and service to their God rather than the personality of a human ruler who sought glory at the expense of others. Israel was not to have a human king. It was not to have forced taxation. There is no provision for a standing military. There was to be a justice system accountable to the people, that established equal justice under the law for all citizens of Israel.

If justice was given this highest priority, then the people would be allowed to *live and possess the land which the LORD your God is giving you*. The word translated as *justice* (Heb. “šedeq”) here is usually translated as “righteousness” (v. 18). Each word carries the notion of things lining up with a standard. A written document that is “left justified” has all sentences begin by lining up with whatever margin is established for the left side of the text. To be just, or righteous, means to line up with whatever standard is established as the proper standard. In this case, the Bible defines justice based on God’s standard of treating one another in a manner that conveys neighborly love.

Moses’ purpose in commanding the judges and officers to administer social justice with equity was laying the foundation for Israel to govern themselves. This would be instituting something new in the world. Israel would not be like the other nations whose lifestyle was fundamentally exploitative, as demonstrated by the practices common in that era as detailed in [Leviticus 18](#). God intended for the people of Israel to serve one another in love and in obedience to His law.

He also wanted them to care for one another. Such a governance would cause Israel to stand as a unique nation among the other peoples. A nation

dedicated to mutual benefit and cooperation would stand above other nations in security, prosperity, and life-enjoyment. This would cause Israel to satisfy God's appointment that they should be a priestly nation to show a better way to surrounding nations. And it would elevate their Suzerain (Ruler) God and His ways, showing them to be the ways to life.

Biblical Text:

¹⁸ You shall appoint for yourself judges and officers in all your towns which the Lord your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. ¹⁹ You shall not distort justice; you shall not be partial, and you shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous. ²⁰ Justice, *and only* justice, you shall pursue, that you may live and possess the land which the Lord your God is giving you.