

Deuteronomy 23:24-25

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Moses told the Israelites that they could eat from their neighbors' vineyard or standing grain. They were, however, prohibited from gathering more fruits or grain than was necessary to meet their immediate need.

In another example of loving one's neighbor and not stealing from them, Moses told the people that *when you enter your neighbor's vineyard, then you may eat grapes until you are fully satisfied* (v. 24). In ancient times, people often would pass through (or pass by) fields belonging to others as they traveled. In this case, someone who passed by another person's *vineyard* was allowed to pick *grapes* and eat as many as he needed to satisfy his hunger. However, the person was not allowed *put any in his basket*. Such an action is tantamount to stealing because it implied that the grapes that were taken could be used later or sold, thus allowing the one who took them to steal the profits that the owner would ordinarily receive.

The same principle applied if someone was to *enter his neighbor's standing grain* (v. 25). The traveler was allowed to *pluck the heads with his hand* and eat them immediately in order to satisfy his hunger. However, he could *not wield a sickle in his neighbor's standing grain*, for doing so would result in too much grain being taken and would amount to theft.

Both laws allowed for generosity and hospitality among the Israelites. At the same time, however, they protected the owner from being taken advantage of. The reason for this was that the Suzerain (Ruler) had given them everything that they owned, including all material possessions such as vineyards and grain fields. Ultimately, it all belonged to the LORD since He was the one who gave them to His people (Deuteronomy 6:11). Therefore, brotherly love and generosity were to be practiced at all times. The field was to be a place of hospitality, but the ownership of the fruit of the farmer's labor was to be honored, and not be harvested by others.

This law can be seen in action in the New Testament. For example, Jesus and His disciples were hungry and went through a field of grain and ate (Matt. 12:1-8). The first two verses of this passage read, "At that time Jesus went

through the grain fields on the Sabbath, and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat. But when the Pharisees saw this, they said to Him, 'Look, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath.'" The Pharisees did not complain about them picking the grains and eating them, for they knew this passage in Deuteronomy allowed it. Their complaint was that Jesus's disciples were doing it on the Sabbath.

To take more than one needs to fill their immediate hunger was the same as stealing from one's neighbor and was a violation of the eighth commandment (Deuteronomy 5:19). But, in order to encourage generosity and to promote a sense of community among the LORD's covenant people, Moses allowed passers-by to enter their neighbor's fields and eat to meet their immediate need for food. The result would be a covenant community of the LORD's people being hospitable, but still trusting one another, looking out for one another, and honoring one another's property.

Biblical Text:

²⁴ "When you enter your neighbor's vineyard, then you may eat grapes until you are fully satisfied, but you shall not put any in your basket. ²⁵ "When you enter your neighbor's standing grain, then you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not wield a sickle in your neighbor's standing grain.