

Deuteronomy 24:14-15

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Moses warns the Israelites against oppressing a hired servant who is poor and needy by withholding his wages. Such an act can cause the poor man to cry out to God against his employer.

Moses now turns to issue of paying someone for services rendered. He specified that no one was allowed to *oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy* (v. 14). The word *oppress* (Heb. "āshaq") means to commit acts that are an abuse of power against someone who was lower in society. It also has implications of acting deceitfully, defrauding, and even being violent. A *hired servant* (Heb. "sakîr") refers to someone who is hired for a job, such as a hireling or day laborer.

In this case, the *hired servant* was one who was *poor and needy*. This would be an indication that the laborer was of lower social status than the one who hired him (the employer). To withhold pay is using power to abuse another. This violated the principle underlying the second half of the Ten Commandments, which was the principle of loving your neighbor as much as you love yourself (Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:31).

Someone who was *poor and needy* depended on his daily wages to provide the essentials for his family such as food and a place to reside. In ancient Israel, this precarious condition could happen because the *needy* man had lost family land or other means of independent income. As a result, he was reduced to hiring himself out as a laborer.

This rule applied to everyone who was hired as a laborer, *whether he is one of your countrymen or one of your aliens who is in your land in your towns*. The word *countryman* (Heb. "āḥ") literally means "brother" in the Hebrew language. This person was a fellow member of the covenant community. The *aliens* were those who were not Israelites but lived or traveled in the land of Israel. They were generally protected by the LORD against being abused (Leviticus 19:33-34), and this law protected them from being deceived into providing free labor.

Regardless of the ethnicity of the laborer, the employer was required to *give him his wages on his day before the sun sets* (v. 15). The reason given is that the laborer *is poor and he sets his heart on it*. The laborer's life depended on his wages each day. He lived from hand to mouth. His motivation (*sets his heart*) is based on getting paid at the end of the day. Loving a neighbor as you love yourself means edifying and lifting them up. To withhold what the other is longing for is to crush them.

The poor man was hired for the day to do a job and must be paid in the evening in order to give him what his *heart* is set upon, and because he needed the money to provide food for his family. To withhold his wages would be to *oppress* him by putting his family members at risk of not having their basic needs met.

The employer needed to pay the laborer his wages so that he will not *cry out to the LORD against* him. If the laborer appealed to the LORD, it would *become sin* to the employer. The LORD promises to judge the person who commits this type of sin (Malachi 3:5). In other words, the Suzerain (Ruler) God (the ultimate Employer of everyone) would hold the employer accountable for not paying his *poor* laborer on time. For this reason, any employer withholding the wages of his daily laborer was liable to judgment (Malachi 3:5).

This law also appears in the book of Leviticus but there it applied to all workers (Leviticus 19:13). Here in Deuteronomy, Moses's concern was for the *poor* and *the needy* since they were the ones who hardly had enough food or money to live on. In modern terms, we would say those poor people lived from paycheck to paycheck.

For an employer to promise to pay a hired laborer and then, once the work was done, refuse to pay him is to bear false witness to them. The promise of payment would be a lie. It would thus be a violation of the ninth commandment. It could also be a form of stealing from another person, and considered a violation of the eighth commandment. Both are part of the last five commandments, which fall under the general heading of loving one's neighbor as we love ourselves (Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:31).

This law, like so many others in the Mosaic covenant, was designed to protect the dignity of those in dire need. A similar treatment can be found in James 5:4. The Law was clear that there would always be people who were poor (Deuteronomy 15:11; Mark 14:7). However, the Mosaic law made it clear that

the poor were to be treated with dignity, and given every opportunity to get back on their feet. There was to be no permanent underclass in Israel (Deuteronomy 15:1-4).

Biblical Text:

¹⁴You shall not oppress a hired servant *who is* poor and needy, whether *he is* one of your countrymen or one of your aliens who is in your land in your towns. ¹⁵You shall give him his wages on his day before the sun sets, for he is poor and sets his heart on it; so that he will not cry against you to the Lord and it become sin in you.