Worship that Does Justice

Deuteronomy: Choose Life | Week Eighteen | Deuteronomy 16:18–17:20

THE BIG IDEA

Justice opens this passage and obedience closes it, and humility is what holds the two together. God's people judge fairly because God is the righteous Judge, and they keep his Word close because even the king had to write it out by hand and read it every day. Only the humble can do either, and the humility we need is not something we work up on our own. It is what we receive from Jesus, the King who is gentle and humble in heart, who was judged unjustly in our place so that we could stand forgiven. Less of you, more of others, and all of him.

01 SHARE LIFE

Take a few minutes to catch up before you open the passage. Everyone gets a turn.

1. What was a high point and a low point from your week?
2. Where have you seen God at work this week, and where has it been hard?
3. When we last met, we each named one step to take. How did it go, and what got in the way?

02 SETTING THE SCENE

We are in the middle of Deuteronomy, in the section of the series about worship and community life. Moses is preaching to a new generation camped on the edge of the Promised Land, and he keeps calling them to remember. Last week the passage shaped Israel's calendar around the great festivals. This week Moses turns from the calendar to the courtroom and the throne. Israel has no government yet, so God sets up the structure for justice before they need it: judges in every town, a court for hard cases, and instructions for a future king. The passage opens with a call to justice (16:18–20) and closes with a call to obedience (17:18–20), and the quality that makes both possible is humility. Even the king is told not to consider himself better than his brothers.

03 READ THE WORD TOGETHER

Have one person read the passage aloud, slowly. If you can, read it a second time with a different person reading.

Deuteronomy 16:18-17:20 CSB

18 Appoint judges and officials for your tribes in all your towns the LORD your God is
giving you. They are to judge the people with righteous judgment. 19 Do not deny
justice or show partiality to anyone. Do not accept a bribe, for it blinds the eyes of the
wise and twists the words of the righteous. 20 Pursue justice and justice alone, so that
you will live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you. 21 Do not set up an
Asherah of any kind of wood next to the altar you will build for the LORD your God, 22
and do not set up a sacred pillar; the LORD your God hates them. 17:1 Do not sacrifice to
the LORD your God an ox or sheep with a defect or any serious flaw, for that is
detestable to the LORD your God. 2 If a man or woman among you in one of your towns
that the LORD your God will give you is discovered doing evil in the sight of the LORD
your God and violating his covenant 3 and has gone to serve other gods by bowing in
worship to the sun, moon, or all the stars in the sky, which I have forbidden, 4 and if you
are told or hear about it, then investigate it thoroughly. If the report turns out to be
true that this detestable act has been done in Israel, 5 you are to bring out to your city
gates that man or woman who has done this evil thing and stone them to death. 6 The
one condemned to die is to be executed on the testimony of two or three witnesses.
No one is to be executed on the testimony of a single witness. 7 The witnesses' hands
are to be the first in putting him to death, and after that, the hands of all the people.
You must purge the evil from you. 8 If a case is too difficult for you, concerning
bloodshed, lawsuits, or assaults, cases disputed at your city gates, then go up to the
place the LORD your God chooses. 9 You are to go to the Levitical priests and to the
judge who presides at that time. Ask, and they will give you a verdict in the case. 10 You
must abide by the verdict they give you at the place the LORD chooses. Be careful to
do exactly as they instruct you. 11 You must abide by the instruction they give you and
the verdict they announce to you. Do not turn to the right or the left from the decision
they declare to you. 12 The person who acts arrogantly, refusing to listen either to the
priest who stands there serving the LORD your God or to the judge, must die. You must
purge the evil from Israel. 13 Then all the people will hear about it, be afraid, and no
longer behave arrogantly. 14 When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you,
take possession of it, live in it, and say, "I will set a king over me like all the nations
around me," 15 you are to appoint over you the king the LORD your God chooses.
Appoint a king from your brothers. You are not to set a foreigner over you, or one who
is not of your people. 16 However, he must not acquire many horses for himself or send
the people back to Egypt to acquire many horses, for the LORD has told you, "You are
never to go back that way again." 17 He must not acquire many wives for himself so
that his heart won't go astray. He must not acquire very large amounts of silver and

gold for himself. 18 When he is seated on his royal throne, he is to write a copy of this instruction for himself on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. 19 It is to remain with him, and he is to read from it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, to observe all the words of this instruction, and to do these statutes. 20 Then his heart will not be exalted above his countrymen, he will not turn from this command to the right or the left, and he and his sons will continue reigning many years in Israel.

First impressions

4. What word, phrase, or image stood out to you as the passage was read?
5. What did you notice, or what surprised you, about how much God cares about courts and kings?

04 STUDY THE SCRIPTURE

The sermon walked through this passage in three movements: judge fairly, write it down, and walk humbly. Reread the verses for each part as you go.

JUDGE FAIRLY *Read 16:18-20 again.*

18 Appoint judges and officials for your tribes in all your towns the LORD your God is giving you. They are to judge the people with righteous judgment. 19 Do not deny justice or show partiality to anyone. Do not accept a bribe, for it blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous. 20 Pursue justice and justice alone, so that you will live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you.

God tells Israel to appoint judges and officials in every town, tribe by tribe. There is no government yet, so this command is how God builds a structure for justice before the people ever need it. The standard comes straight from the text: righteous judgment, no partiality, no bribes, and justice and justice alone. Moses says a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise. It does not only tempt bad people. It quietly changes what good people are able to see.

The two halves of this point belong together. Israel's trust was never in the judges themselves but in the God who holds the whole structure together. At the same time, they were to take their part in it seriously. For us that includes how we take part in appointing leaders, but it reaches much further, into the hundreds of small judgments we make every week about who gets the benefit of the doubt, who gets our time, and whose side we take.

6. What does a bribe that blinds the eyes look like today? Where are you most tempted to show partiality, whether at work, at home, or at church?

7. How can we trust God with the structure and still take our part in it seriously? What does that balance look like in your life right now?

WRITE IT DOWN *Read 17:18-19 again.*

> 18 When he is seated on his royal throne, he is to write a copy of this instruction for himself on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. 19 It is to remain with him, and he is to read from it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, to observe all the words of this instruction, and to do these statutes.

When Israel's king takes the throne, the first thing he is told to do is pick up a pen. He writes out a copy of God's instruction for himself, in the presence of the priests, so that he is copying God's words and not his own. Then it stays with him, and he reads it all the days of his life. The stated purpose is that he will learn to fear the Lord and carefully do everything in it.

The sermon pressed this into a simple practice. The path from reading the Word to doing the Word runs through writing it down. Each of us can write out the commands and takeaways we find in a passage, keep that list where we will see it, and come back to it. We may feel we do not need to, but God was explicit that it matters, even for a king.

8. Why do you think God had the king copy the law by hand instead of simply having it read to him? What does writing do that hearing does not?

9. Which command or takeaway from this passage will you write down first, and where will you keep it so you actually read it?

WALK HUMBLY *Read 17:14-17 and 17:20 again.*

> 14 When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, take possession of it, live in it, and say, "I will set a king over me like all the nations around me," 15 you are to appoint over you the king the LORD your God chooses. Appoint a king from your brothers. You are not to set a foreigner over you, or one who is not of your people. 16 However, he must not acquire many horses for himself or send the people back to Egypt to acquire many horses, for the LORD has told you, "You are never to go back that way again." 17 He must not acquire many wives for himself so that his heart won't go astray. He must not acquire very large amounts of silver and gold for himself. 20 Then his heart will not be exalted above his countrymen, he will not turn from this command to the right or the left, and he and his sons will continue reigning many years in Israel.

Before God tells the king about the scroll, he puts limits on him. No stockpiling horses, which was military power. No collecting wives, which was how kings built alliances and pleased themselves. No piling up silver and gold. And no sending the people back to

Egypt for any of it. Power, pleasure, and wealth are the three things that pull a leader's heart away, and God names all three. The result of a king who reads the scroll is a heart that is not exalted above his brothers. The whole passage comes down to this: only the humble can judge without partiality, and only the humble will keep reading and doing the Word.

The sermon drew one distinction worth carrying into the week. We can compare ourselves with others, which measures us against people and leads to pride or envy. Or we can compare ourselves to Jesus, which puts all of him in view and leads to humility. A humble people is also a visible people. When a church deals fairly, plays no favorites, and cares more about others than about its image, the city notices. Less of you, more of others, and all of him is not only a private posture. It is how the people around us come to see what Jesus is like.

10. Where do you most often compare yourself with others, and what changes in you when you compare yourself to Jesus instead?

11. What would it look like this week for the people around you, at work, at home, or in your neighborhood, to experience less of you and more of others through you?

05 BACK TO JESUS

How does this passage point us back to Jesus?

Israel's kings did not keep this law. Solomon, the wisest of them, multiplied horses, wives, and gold, and his heart went astray exactly as Moses warned. But God sent a true King. Jesus had the Word written not on a scroll but on his heart, and when he was tested in the wilderness he answered every temptation with words from this very book. He did not consider himself better than his brothers. He stooped to wash their feet. And then he stood before judges who showed partiality and a witness who took a bribe of thirty pieces of silver, and he was condemned on false testimony. The one person who ever judged with perfect justice was judged unjustly in our place, so that the Judge of all the earth could declare us righteous. That is why we can judge fairly and walk humbly. We are not working for a verdict. We are living from one.

12. How does knowing that Jesus was judged unjustly in your place free you to judge others fairly and to walk humbly this week?

APPLICATION

What is God telling me to do today? Write down one specific step you will take this week.

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06 PRAY TOGETHER

Share one request with the group and pray for one another, naming the step each person wrote down.

Prayer requests

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A PRAYER TO CARRY WITH YOU

Father, you are the righteous Judge, and you hold every structure together. Forgive me for trusting people and power more than you, and for the ways I have shown partiality and compared myself with others. Jesus, you are gentle and humble in heart. Write your Word on my heart the way the king wrote it on his scroll, and let me read it and do it all the days of my life. Make me a person of less of me, more of others, and all of you, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Before we gather again

Before we gather again, take these three steps on your own.

- Read Deuteronomy 16:18–17:20 again on your own and ask God what he is saying to you. Then write down the commands and takeaways you find and keep the list where you will see it every day.
- Take the one step you named and tell someone in the group you have done it.
- Reach out to the person God brought to mind this week. We will talk about how it went next time.

07 NOTES AND REFLECTIONS