

Justice, Judges, and Priests

Deuteronomy 16:18-20; 17:8-13

SS Lesson for 01/23/2022

Devotional Scripture: Matt 18:15-20

OUTLINE

LESSON BACKGROUND AND KEY VERSE

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Key Verse: Deut 16:18

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

MAJOR THEME ANALYSIS

REQUIREMENTS AND APPOINTMENT OF JUDGES (DEUT 16:18-20)

Requirement of being just (18)

The Just are honest and cannot be shaken (Ps 15:2-5)

The Just are judged by God and is pleased if they have integrity (1 Chron 29:17)

The Just are guided by Integrity (Prov 11:3)

The Just must be trustworthy (Luke 16:11-12)

The Just do not judge by appearances, but by righteousness (John 7:24)

Requirement of having integrity (19)

Integrity sets a good example for others (Titus 2:7)

Integrity protects and provides hope (Ps 25:21)

Integrity helps our lifestyle to be secure (Prov 10:9)

Integrity is guarded by righteousness (Prov 13:6)

Integrity keeps one from being punished (Prov 17:26)

Requirement of obedience (20)

Obedience is better because it delights God (1 Sam 15:22)

Obedience leads to righteousness (Rom 6:16)

Obedience leads to the praise of God by others (2 Cor 9:13)

Obedience keeps us remaining in God's love (John 15:10)

Obedience leads to the reward of blessings (Deut 28:1-6)

Obedience brings the reward of freedom (James 1:25)

SETTLEMENT OF JUDGMENTS (DEUT 17:8-13)

Settlement between people (8)

Settlement between people should be separated by simple and difficult (Exodus 18:26)

Settlement between people be divided between judges to solve workloads (Deut 1:13-17)

Settlement between people should start with a warning then comes punishment (2 Chron 19:10)

Settlement between people should have multiple steps to resolve (Matt 18:15-18)

Settlement by priest (9)

Settlement by priest because God commanded it (Hag 2:11)

Settlement by priest because they are messengers of God (Mal 2:7)

Settlement by priest because God is also present (Deut 19:17)

Settlement by priest because they are charged to keep the law (Ezek 44:24)

Settlement acceptance (10-11)

Acceptance of settlement because God established authorities as His servants (Rom 13:1-6)

Acceptance to be obedient to God (Titus 3:1)

Acceptance because God uses authorities to punish the wicked and commend the righteous (1 Peter 2:13-15)

Acceptance because God knows how to rescue the godly and punish the unrighteous (2 Peter 2:9-10)

Acceptance because defying authorities is slandering God's power (Jude 1:9-11)

Settlement when there is disobedience (12-13)

Disobedience caused by bad choices (Prov 1:29-31)

Disobedience causes one to not be in the will of God (Jer 18:9-10)

Disobedience causes one to not know God (Titus 1:16)

Disobedience causes one to be stubborn and to forsake God's word (Jer 9:13-14)

Disobedience causes one to violates God's covenant (Deut 17:2-5)

CONCLUSION AND OTHER THOUGHTS

COMMENTARY THOUGHTS FROM JOHN GILL

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS FROM THE NIV STANDARD LESSON COMMENTARY

Lesson Background and Key Verse

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Becoming a judge is a rigorous and demanding (not to mention expensive!) process. The process includes specialized, post-graduate education at a law school to earn a JD (juris doctor) degree, passing the bar exam, completing a judicial clerkship, and practicing law by prosecuting and/or defending cases in court. Only at that point does one stand a chance of being elected or appointed to the bench. The entire process often takes decades. The education, training, and experience a potential judge receives during years of preparation provide the necessary foundation needed to render right judgments based in law. Becoming a judge in Old Testament Israel was radically different from the process required nowadays. But a necessary element for continuing as a judge remains the same as it did some 34 centuries ago—a key issue in this week’s lesson.

Moses himself appointed the first judges (Exodus 18:24–26), but no formalized program existed for training to become a judge in the Israel of Moses’ day (about 1447 BC). There was a certain kind of “bar exam” that an individual had to pass before being appointed to judge. The first stated criteria for passing were four in number: (1) capability, (2) fear of God, (3) trustworthiness, and (4) hatred of dishonest gain (18:21). Moses received these criteria from his father-in-law, Jethro, shortly after leading the Israelites out of Egypt but before reaching Mount Sinai (19:1, 20). The individuals who met these criteria assisted Moses as judges, providing rulings on the legal cases of the people brought before them (18:26). During Israel’s sojourn to the Promised Land, they received many more instructions that distinguished just from unjust behavior. Some are recorded in Exodus 23:1–12. The focus of the book of Exodus is on the first generation of the new nation of Israel. But as the book of Deuteronomy opens, 40 years had passed, and a new generation of Israelites needed to hear the law expounded (Deuteronomy 1:1–5). This included reiterating the characteristics of a proper judicial system in general and the requirements of judges in particular (1:16–18). The exact steps of appointment processes for judges isn’t clear. Hundreds of years after Moses, Absalom used subversion to get himself appointed as judge by popular acclamation (2 Samuel 15:1–6). Later, King Jehoshaphat (reigned 872–848 BC) appointed judges personally (2 Chronicles 19:4–7). In 458 BC, Ezra was charged with appointing judges in his capacity as a priest and an expert in the law (Ezra 7:25). Stricter, more specific requirements for serving as a judge are found in Ezekiel 44:15–27. This lesson considers how the leaders of Israel, namely judges and priests, were to advocate for and implement justice among the people of Israel. This week’s lesson comes from the portion of Deuteronomy where Moses spoke on various leadership positions and how they were to function. Judges (Deuteronomy 16:18–17:13), kings (17:14–20), priests (18:1–8), and prophets (18:14–22) are among those groups described by Moses. Today’s lesson will illustrate how the Lord demands just judgment and desires his covenant people to be led by individuals who exhibit the ability to practice just judgment among them.

Key Verse: Deut 16:18

You shall appoint judges and officers in all your gates, which the Lord your God gives you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with just judgment

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

The preceding sections (12:1-16:17) were mainly concerned with laws related to the worship of the Lord by His people. This section (16:18-18:22) deals with the responsibilities of the officials to maintain pure worship within the Promised Land and to administer justice impartially.

16:18-20. At this time in his sermon Moses did not specify *how* **judges and officials** would be appointed. In the wilderness Moses at first had been the only judge of the people. But when the judicial burden became too great for him he appointed “leading men” of the **tribes** as military leaders (“commanders”), officials, and judges (1:15-18; cf. Ex. 18). Probably these men were the chief elders in each tribe. So the judges appointed in each city were probably taken from that city’s council of elders (the elders functioned as a judicial body; cf. Deut. 19:12). The “officials” were probably assistants to the judges, probably functioning as clerks. These leaders were to **judge the people fairly** (lit., “righteously”; cf. 1:17; Prov. 18:5; 24:23). Their verdicts were to conform to the righteous standards set forth in the Word of **God** (which meant at that time the five books of Moses). They were **not** to **pervert justice**. This implies that God had

given them a heavenly pattern for their actions toward each other. If their actions did not conform to this pattern, those actions were to be changed or punished. Any nonconformity to the pattern of justice was a perversion. Nor were they to **show partiality** (lit., “do not recognize faces”). Ideally the judges were to treat each person as though they had no prior knowledge of him or her. Accepting a **bribe** was obviously wrong for it perverted (**blinds** and **twists**) the ability of judges to act in fairness to the parties in the litigation. Moses summed up the requirements for the judges and officials with an emphatic command to **follow justice and justice alone** (lit., “righteousness, righteousness you must pursue!”). These words imply that impartial justice could be an elusive goal because of the weakness of human nature. Therefore it was absolutely essential that the standard set forth in the Law be followed precisely. Their lives and prosperity (Deut. 16:20) depended on their establishing impartial justice in the Promised **Land**.

16:21-17:1. The first responsibility of the judges was to prevent impure worshiping practices in the land. Anything that might lead to syncretism (accommodating worship of the Lord to pagan systems of worship) was prohibited. This included **any wooden Asherah pole** (symbolic of Asherah, goddess of fertility and consort of Baal) or a **sacred stone**, a stone pillar symbolic of male fertility (cf. 7:5; 12:3; Ex. 34:13). To take a defective **sacrifice to the LORD** (Deut. 17:1; cf. 15:21) was to bring something into the sanctuary that was foreign to the worship of **God**, just as Asherah poles and sacred stones were foreign to genuine worship. Such a sacrifice was **detestable to the Lord**. To offer less than the best to God was to “despise” His name (Mal. 1:6-8). Offering a less-than-perfect sacrifice was, in effect, failing to acknowledge Him as the ultimate Provider of all that is best in life. Also it was a failure to acknowledge the vast gulf that exists between the perfectly holy God and sinful people. The priests were normally responsible to maintain pure worship at the sanctuary (i.e., no fertility symbols or defective sacrifices), but the ultimate responsibility rested with the judges. If the priests failed, it was necessary for the judges to intervene.

17:2-7. The judges were also to see that false worshipers were executed. One who **worshiped other gods** deserved capital punishment because his act threatened the nation’s very existence. Astral worship was also forbidden (cf. 4:19) for it honored inanimate creation rather than the living Creator. The execution could take place only after it had been proved by a thorough investigation. To insure against a capricious execution **two or three** independent **witnesses** were required. **One witness** was inadequate (cf. 19:15) because if he lied no one would be able to prove or disprove it. **The witnesses** were to **be the first** in the execution. So if their **testimony** was later proved false, they in effect would have committed murder and would be liable to execution. The whole community (**all the people**) would then join in the execution, thereby demonstrating their rejection of other gods (17:3) and their commitment to the Lord. Such idolatry was an **evil** to be purged **from** the people (cf. v. 12; see 13:5). New Testament churches have a similar responsibility to keep themselves pure. A Christian offender should be “cut off” from his local church’s fellowship if a thorough investigation proves his sin and he is unwilling to repent of it. If he is a genuine believer he will not lose eternal life. But he will suffer loss on earth and receive less reward in heaven (Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 3:10-15; 5; 1 Tim. 5:19).

17:8-13. Moses made a provision for future judges in the Promised Land similar to that provided for judges in the time of the wilderness wanderings (1:17). If a judge felt a case was **too difficult for** him to decide, he could take it to a central tribunal (consisting of **priests** and the officiating chief **judge**) to be established at the future site of the central sanctuary (**the place the LORD would choose**). **The decisions** of the tribunal would be final. Any rebellion against the tribunal was considered “contempt of court” and was a capital offense. This made the rule of justice paramount in the land and helped prevent anarchy. After Moses and Joshua died, the people were to be governed by judges and priests. However, this system did not provide Israel with any semblance of a strong central government. It could only work if the leaders (the judges and the priests) *and* the people were committed to following the Lord. The Book of Judges records the sad failure of the people and the leaders in this system. Moses anticipated that failure by including this law in reference to the future king. One may ask why God allowed the priests and judges to fail. Or why did not God institute the monarchy immediately? The answer, at least partly, is that He was preparing the nation to appreciate the gift of the monarchy.

17:14-15. After Israel could no longer tolerate her unique position of being without a king, she would ask for and receive a **king**. Verses 14-15 speak of the king’s qualifications, verses 16-17 of his behavior, and verses 18-20 of his education. The king was to have two qualifications. First, he had to be chosen by **the LORD**. Later history made it clear that prophets, speaking on God’s behalf, would declare His choice (e.g., Samuel’s support for Saul, 1 Sam. 9-12, and then for David, 1 Sam. 16; Nathan’s support of Solomon, 1 Kings 1). The people could **be sure** that God would place no one on the throne whom He had not gifted to be **king**. Therefore if a king failed, the reason for his failure would not lie in his lack of ability but in his

moral life. Second, the king **must be an Israelite**. An Israelite raised from childhood in the traditions and Scripture of Israel would be a far better choice than **a foreigner** to protect the purity of Israel's religion.

17:16-17. Three things about the behavior of **the king** were singled out. The prohibition against acquiring **great numbers of horses** meant that on human terms the king's army, composed mainly of infantry, would be significantly weaker than an enemy's army with many chariots and cavalry. Yet this was precisely the point. An obedient Israelite king was to depend not on military strength but on **the LORD** alone. God had already demonstrated His ability to crush a large superior chariot army (Ex. 14-15). Acquiring horses would mean the people would be going **to Egypt**, where many were available. Returning to the nation's former land of slavery was unthinkable. The prohibition against taking **many wives** was given because many kings married foreign women to form political alliances. If the king followed the Lord he would not need political alliances. Also foreign wives would cause **his heart to be led astray** to worship their idols. The prohibition against **large amounts of silver and gold** was intended to keep the king from developing a sense of independence and a lust for material wealth (cf. Prov. 30:8-9). All three prohibitions, then, were designed to reduce the king to the status of a servant totally dependent on his Master, the Lord. The tragedy of ignoring these commands is seen in Solomon who broke all three prohibitions (1 Kings 10:14-15, 23, 26-28; 11:1-6).

17:18-20. The *education* of a king consisted of his copying, reading, and following **carefully the Law and these decrees**, that is, the entire Book of Deuteronomy (not just this small section of vv. 14-20). This would insure a right spirit within the king (i.e., humility and obedience) and a **long** dynastic succession.

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Requirements and Appointment of Judges (Deut 16:18-20)

18 "You shall appoint judges and officers in all your gates, which the Lord your God gives you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with just judgment.

19 You shall not pervert justice; you shall not show partiality, nor take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous.

20 You shall follow what is altogether just, that you may live and inherit the land which the Lord your God is giving you.

Requirement of being just (18)

The Just are honest and cannot be shaken (Ps 15:2-5)

2 He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from his heart 3 and has no slander on his tongue, who does his neighbor no wrong and casts no slur on his fellowman, 4 who despises a vile man but honors those who fear the Lord, who keeps his oath even when it hurts, 5 who lends his money without usury and does not accept a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things will never be shaken.

The Just are judged by God and is pleased if they have integrity (1 Chron 29:17)

17 I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity. All these things have I given willingly and with honest intent. And now I have seen with joy how willingly your people who are here have given to you.

The Just are guided by Integrity (Prov 11:3)

3 The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity.

The Just must be trustworthy (Luke 16:11-12)

11 So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? 12 And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?

The Just do not judge by appearances, but by righteousness (John 7:24)

24 Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment."

Requirement of having integrity (19)

Integrity sets a good example for others (Titus 2:7)

7 In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness

Integrity protects and provides hope (Ps 25:21)

21 May integrity and uprightness protect me, because my hope is in you.

Integrity helps our lifestyle to be secure (Prov 10:9)

9 The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out.

Integrity is guarded by righteousness (Prov 13:6)

6 Righteousness guards the man of integrity, but wickedness overthrows the sinner.

Integrity keeps one from being punished (Prov 17:26)

26 It is not good to punish an innocent man, or to flog officials for their integrity.

Requirement of obedience (20)

Obedience is better because it delights God (1 Sam 15:22)

22 But Samuel replied: "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.

Obedience leads to righteousness (Rom 6:16)

16 Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey — whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?

Obedience leads to the praise of God by others (2 Cor 9:13)

13 Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.

Obedience keeps us remaining in God's love (John 15:10)

10 If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.

Obedience leads to the reward of blessings (Deut 28:1-6)

1 If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. 2 All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God: 3 You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. 4 The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock — the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. 5 Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed. 6 You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.

Obedience brings the reward of freedom (James 1:25)

25 But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it — he will be blessed in what he does.

Settlement of Judgments (Deut 17:8-13)

8 "If a matter arises which is too hard for you to judge, between degrees of guilt for bloodshed, between one judgment or another, or between one punishment or another, matters of controversy within your gates, then you shall arise and go up to the place which the Lord your God chooses.

9 And you shall come to the priests, the Levites, and to the judge there in those days, and inquire of them; they shall pronounce upon you the sentence of judgment.

10 You shall do according to the sentence which they pronounce upon you in that place which the Lord chooses. And you shall be careful to do according to all that they order you.

11 According to the sentence of the law in which they instruct you, according to the judgment which they tell you, you shall do; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left from the sentence which they pronounce upon you.

12 Now the man who acts presumptuously and will not heed the priest who stands to minister there before the Lord your God, or the judge, that man shall die. So you shall put away the evil from Israel.

13 And all the people shall hear and fear, and no longer act presumptuously.

Settlement between people (8)

Settlement between people should be separated by simple and difficult (Exodus 18:26)

26 They served as judges for the people at all times. The difficult cases they brought to Moses, but the simple ones they decided themselves.

Settlement between people be divided between judges to solve workloads (Deut 1:13-17)

13 Choose some wise, understanding and respected men from each of your tribes, and I will set them over you." 14 You answered me, "What you propose to do is good." 15 So I took the leading men of your tribes, wise and respected men, and appointed them to have authority over you — as commanders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens and as tribal officials. 16 And I charged your judges at that time: Hear the disputes between your brothers and judge fairly, whether the case is between brother Israelites or between one of them and an alien. 17 Do not show partiality in judging; hear both small and great alike. Do not be afraid of any man, for judgment belongs to God. Bring me any case too hard for you, and I will hear it.

Settlement between people should start with a warning then comes punishment (2 Chron 19:10)

10 In every case that comes before you from your fellow countrymen who live in the cities — whether bloodshed or other concerns of the law, commands, decrees or ordinances — you are to warn them not to sin against the Lord; otherwise his wrath will come on you and your brothers. Do this, and you will not sin.

Settlement between people should have multiple steps to resolve (Matt 18:15-18)

15 "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 16 But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

Settlement by priest (9)

Settlement by priest because God commanded it (Hag 2:11)

11 "This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Ask the priests what the law says:

Settlement by priest because they are messengers of God (Mal 2:7)

7 "For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction — because he is the messenger of the Lord Almighty.

Settlement by priest because God is also present (Deut 19:17)

17 the two men involved in the dispute must stand in the presence of the Lord before the priests and the judges who are in office at the time.

Settlement by priest because they are charged to keep the law (Ezek 44:24)

24 "In any dispute, the priests are to serve as judges and decide it according to my ordinances. They are to keep my laws and my decrees for all my appointed feasts, and they are to keep my Sabbaths holy.

Settlement acceptance (10-11)

Acceptance of settlement because God established authorities as His servants (Rom 13:1-6)

1 Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. 2 Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. 4 For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. 5 Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. 6 This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing.

Acceptance to be obedient to God (Titus 3:1)

3 Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good,

Acceptance because God uses authorities to punish the wicked and commend the righteous (1 Peter 2:13-15)

13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, 14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. 15 For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.

Acceptance because God knows how to rescue the godly and punish the unrighteous (2 Peter 2:9-10)

9 if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment. 10 This is especially true of those who follow the corrupt desire of the sinful nature and despise authority. Bold and arrogant, these men are not afraid to slander celestial beings;

Acceptance because defying authorities is slandering God's power (Jude 1:9-11)

9 But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not dare to bring a slanderous accusation against him, but said, "The Lord rebuke you!" 10 Yet these men speak abusively against whatever they do not understand; and what things they do understand by instinct, like unreasoning animals — these are the very things that destroy them. 11 Woe to them! They have taken the way of Cain; they have rushed for profit into Balaam's error; they have been destroyed in Korah's rebellion.

Settlement when there is disobedience (12-13)

Disobedience caused by bad choices (Prov 1:29-31)

29 Since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the Lord, 30 since they would not accept my advice and spurned my rebuke, 31 they will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes.

Disobedience causes one to not be in the will of God (Jer 18:9-10)

9 And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, 10 and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.

Disobedience causes one to not know God (Titus 1:16)

16 They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.

Disobedience causes one to be stubborn and to forsake God's word (Jer 9:13-14)

13 The Lord said, "It is because they have forsaken my law, which I set before them; they have not obeyed me or followed my law. 14 Instead, they have followed the stubbornness of their hearts; they have followed the Baals, as their fathers taught them."

Disobedience causes one to violate God's covenant (Deut 17:2-5)

2 If a man or woman living among you in one of the towns the Lord gives you is found doing evil in the eyes of the Lord your God in violation of his covenant, 3 and contrary to my command has worshiped other gods, bowing down to them or to the sun or the moon or the stars of the sky, 4 and this has been brought to your attention, then you must investigate it thoroughly. If it is true and it has been proved that this detestable thing has been done in Israel, 5 take the man or woman who has done this evil deed to your city gate and stone that person to death.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from John Gill

INTRODUCTION TO DEUTERONOMY 16

This chapter treats of the three grand yearly festivals, of the feast of passover, when, where, and what was to be sacrificed, how to be dressed, and in what manner to be eaten, Deuteronomy 16:1, of the feast of pentecost, when to begin it, where and how it was to be observed, Deuteronomy 16:9, and of the feast of tabernacles, when, where, and how long it was to be kept, Deuteronomy 16:13, which three times in the year all the males were to appear before the Lord, and not empty, Deuteronomy 16:16, an order is given for the appointment of judges in the land, to execute judgment, Deuteronomy 16:18, and the chapter is closed with a caution against planting groves, and setting up images, Deuteronomy 16:21.

Verse 16

Three times a year shall all thy males appear before the Lord thy God,.... This has been observed before, Exodus 23:17, and is repeated here for the sake of mentioning the place where they were to appear, which before now was not observed, and indeed it is chiefly for that the other festivals are here recited:

in the place which he shall choose; which though not expressed is now easily understood; and the three times at which they were to appear there were, in the feast of unleavened bread, and in the feast of weeks, and in the feast of tabernacles; or passover, Pentecost, and tabernacles; and of numbers of people going up from the country to each of these feasts, we have instances in the New Testament; to the passover, Luke 2:42, to Pentecost, Acts 2:5, to tabernacles, John 7:2,

and they shall not appear before the Lord empty; Aben Ezra observes, the meaning is, not empty of the tribute of the freewill offering of their hand, and which Jarchi more fully explains of the burnt offerings of appearance, and of the peace offerings of the Chagigah, or money answerable to them; which, according to the Misnah q was a meah of silver for a burnt offering, and two pieces of silver for the Chagigah, which weighed thirty two barley corns r

Verse 17

Every man shall give as he is able,.... The quantity to be given is not fixed in the law, but the wise men appointed it, as observed on Deuteronomy 16:16 but it is left by the Lord to the generosity of the people, only giving this general rule, that they should do according to their ability, and as the Lord had prospered them; see 1 Corinthians 16:2 so Jarchi, "every man that hath many eatables and much goods shall bring many burnt offerings and many peace offerings."

Verse 18

Judges and officers shall thou make thee,.... Judges were fixed in the sanhedrim, or court of judicature, and those that have lawsuits come before them; officers are masters of the staff and whip, and they stand before the judges, and go into markets, streets, and shops, to order the weights and measures, and to smite all that do wrong; and all they do is by order of the judges; so Maimonides s: the qualifications of judges to be chosen and constituted by the people are thus described by him. In the sanhedrim, greater or lesser, they place only men wise and understanding, expert in the wisdom of the law, and masters of great knowledge, and that know some

of the other sciences, as medicine, arithmetic, astronomy, and astrology, the ways of soothsayers, diviners, and wizards, and the vanities of idolatry, that they may know how to judge them; and they set in the sanhedrim only priests, Levites, and Israelites, who are genealogized; nor do they set an old man there, nor an eunuch, nor a king, but an high priest, if he is qualified with wisdom; and they must be free from blemishes, and of a good stature and appearance, and understand many languages, and not hear by an interpreter; and though all this was not precisely required of the sanhedrim of three judges, yet these same things ought to be in everyone of them, wisdom, and meekness, and fear, and hatred of money, and love of truth, and love of men, and to be of a good report t and these were to be placed in

all thy gates which the Lord thy God giveth thee throughout thy tribes; that is, in every city, as Onkelos, and so Jarchi; and usually the courts of judicature were held in the gates of cities, and it was only in the land of Israel, not without it, that they were obliged to set up courts of judicature, as Maimonides u observes; who also asks, how many courts were fixed in Israel, and what the number they consisted of? to which he answers, they fixed at first the great court in the sanctuary, and it was called the great sanhedrim, and its number were seventy one; and again, they set up two courts of twenty three, one at the door of the court, and the other at the door of the mountain of the house (and so in the Misnah) w; and they set up in every city in Israel, in which were one hundred and twenty (men or families) or more, a lesser sanhedrim, which sat in the gate, and their number were twenty three judges; in a city in which there were not one hundred and twenty, they placed three judges, for there is no court less than three x:

and they shall judge the people with just judgment; give a right and just sentence in all cases that come before them, according to the laws of God, and the rules of justice and equity.

Verse 19

Thou shalt not wrest judgment,.... Or pervert it, pass a wrong sentence, or act contrary to justice; this is said to the judges as a direction to them, and so what follows:

thou shalt not respect persons; so as to give the cause on account of outward circumstances and relations; as in favour of a rich man against a poor man merely for that reason, or of a near relation or intimate friend and acquaintance against a stranger, but justice should be administered without favour or affection to any; as Jarchi puts it, he was to make no difference in his address and behaviour to contending parties before him; he was not to be tender and soft to one and hard to the other, or let one stand and another sit:

neither take a gift: as a bribe to give the cause wrong: at Thebes, in Egypt, as Diodorus Siculus y relates, in a court on a wall, were images of judges to the number of thirty; in the midst of them was the chief judge; having Truth hanging down from his neck (which seems to be in imitation of the Urim of the high priest of the Jews), his eyes shut, and many books by him; by which image was shown, that judges should receive nothing, and that the chief judge should look to truth only:

for a gift doth blind the eyes of the wise, and pervert the words of the righteous; see Exodus 23:8 the Jews have a saying, that a judge that takes a bribe, and perverts judgment, does not die of old age, or till his eyes become dim z.

Verse 20

That which is altogether just shalt thou follow,.... Or "justice", "justice" a, strict justice, and nothing else:

that thou mayest live and inherit the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee; that is, continue in the possession of it.

Verse 21

Thou shalt not plant thee a grove of any trees,.... Of any sort of trees, as oaks or any other; not but that it was lawful to plant trees and groves of them, but not for a religious or idolatrous use: particularly

near unto the altar of the Lord thy God, which thou shalt make thee; as the Heathens did near their altars, lest it should be thought to be done for a like superstitious and idolatrous use; which evil the Jews sometimes fell into in the times of wicked reigns, and which their good and pious kings removed and destroyed; see 2 Kings 18:4 and Hecataeus b, an Heathen historian, relates of the city of Jerusalem, that there were there no image, nor plantation, nor grove, nor any such thing.

Verse 22

Neither shalt thou set up any image,.... Graven or molten, of man, beast, fish, or fowl; the word signifies a "statue or pillar" c which was set up for idolatry; for, as Aben Ezra observes, what was not set up for idolatry was not forbidden, as when erected in memory of any action or remarkable event; see Joshua 22:10, c.

which the Lord thy God hateth as he does every species, of idolatry, or that has any tendency to it; it being so opposite to his being, perfections, and glory; and therefore nothing should be done like it, because it is so hateful to him.

(Adapted from URL:https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/eng/geb/deuteronomy-16.html)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

The 14-year period 1980–1994 was bittersweet for the American judicial system as Operation Greylord began and ended. Greylord was the name of an undercover FBI investigation into alleged corruption in the judicial system in Cook County, Illinois. The “bitter” part was that the allegations proved to be true. In the end, 15 judges were convicted on various counts of bribery, mail fraud, racketeering, income-tax violations, etc. The depth of the systemic corruption was underlined as dozens of others—including lawyers, deputy sheriffs, policemen, and court officials—were also convicted. The “sweet” part was that an accountability system existed to expose and correct such corruption. Despite that, we will never know how far and to whom the ripple effects of the corruption extended. Work toward a just system begins by acknowledging the need for four distinct kinds of justice: (1) distributive justice to ensure economic fairness (see Deuteronomy 24:14–15; 2 Thessalonians 3:10; James 5:4), (2) restorative justice to require restitution by an offender (see Exodus 22:1–15; Luke 12:58–59; 18:3–5; 19:8), (3) retributive justice to punish offenders because they deserve it (Deuteronomy 25:2; Romans 13:4–5), and (4) procedural justice for ensuring fairness in application of rules by due process (see Exodus 23:3; James 2:1–9). The fourth of these is the starting point, the one the other three depend on as a prerequisite. Humans have a duty to work for all four, but our work begins with the fourth. This obligation has been unchanged since today’s lesson text was penned. Our efforts here form part of the salt and light that Jesus commanded us to be (see Matthew 5:13–16). We do so as citizens of the kingdom that is “not of this world” (John 18:36), as we honor the ruler of that heavenly kingdom. Whereas previous lessons on justice have examined justice alongside various qualities such as kindness and righteousness, today’s lesson considers justice alongside some of those officials who were supposed to administer it in Old Testament Israel, namely, judges and priests.

Concluding Thoughts from the Echoes Commentary

Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, visited as the Israelites traveled to the Promised Land. He observed how Moses listened to the people's disputes day and night. Jethro warned Moses he was going to wear himself out if he didn't get help. Jethro said to divide the work, to appoint judges to help. Moses followed Jethro's advice and appoint several judges over the people.

Honesty and Fairness - Other officers held the responsibility to keep the official records and genealogies. They advised the judges, making sure the decisions were carried out. Those who called themselves judges and officers stood out as honest men. God expected them not to twist the law or commit any injustices. They needed to hold those under their authority with respect. They must not hold out for friends, relatives, or the wealthy, then hold back fair sentences for the poor, oppressed, and the foreigners. On some decisions, the judges ruled. But in weightier matters—murder, claims of property, injury and assault cases—priests and Levites made the decisions. This court had no appeals. Before the fall of Israel and Judah, corruption took place in the courts. Those with special places of authority favored the rich and robbed the poor. The wealthy owned much of the land, and the impoverished souls suffered. The leaders didn't recognize God and His laws (Isa. 1:21-26; Amos 5:9-15).

Acknowledge the Bible - Today, while the Bible is not the book many people look to for guidance, we who follow the Lord stand on its truths. Acting in accordance with the Scriptures might not be popular in secular culture but doing so will stand the test of time when all people answer to the Lord.