

Covenant Justice in Deuteronomy

Tony Cosentino, 2007

Jesus taught and preached in the tradition of the prophets. The prophets constantly called God's holy people back to their Covenant roots (and protection) and their message was often centered around the theme of Justice –to the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger: God's *little ones*, that is the *anawim YHWH*, who had no one but their God to defend and provide for them. The quotes below are taken from the Book of Deuteronomy. In many ways, we see them reflected in the teaching of the prophets, in the preaching of Jesus and in the Church's teaching on social justice.

Year of Forgiveness:

"Every seven years you shall pardon debts. You shall do this in the following manner: the creditor shall pardon any debt of his neighbour or brother [relative], and shall stop exacting it of him because Yahweh's pardon has been proclaimed. You may demand that a foreigner pay back his debts but you shall pardon the debt of your brother. However you should have no poor in your midst for Yahweh will give you prosperity in the land that you have conquered..." Deut 15, 1-4

"If your fellow Hebrew, a man or a woman, sells himself to you as a slave, he shall serve you for six years, and in the seventh, you shall set him free. When you set him free, do not let him go empty-handed, but give him something from your flock, from your store of wheat and wine, something from the good things that Yahweh has blessed you with.

Remember that you too were a slave in the land of Egypt, and Yahweh, your God, has given you freedom. Because of this, I give you this commandment." Dt 15, 12-15.

"Do not think it hard on you to give him freedom, because for six years you have gained from him twice as much as from a hired servant." Dt 15, 18.

Jubilee Year (Leviticus):

"For six years you shall sow your field, prune your vineyard and harvest the produce, but in the seventh year the land shall have a rest, or sabbath, a Sabbath for Yahweh... This shall be a year of rest for the land, but whatever it produces of itself will provide food for you, for your male and female slaves, for your hired servant and for the stranger who lives with you. ...for your livestock and for the wild animals on your land. When seven Sabbaths of years have passed, that is, seven times seven years, ...on the tenth day of the seventh month, sound the trumpet loudly. ...Keep holy the fiftieth year and proclaim freedom for all the inhabitants of the land. It shall be a jubilation year for you when each one shall recover his property and go back to his family....

In this year of Jubilee each of you shall recover his own property. When you sell something to your neighbour or buy something from him, do not wrong one another....

The land shall not be sold forever for the land is mine, where you are but strangers and guests of mine. In all the territory you occupy, the land is to be redeemed.

When your brother becomes poor and sells his property, his nearest relative is to come and buy back what his relative has sold. If the man has no relatives to buy back his property, but later has sufficient means to redeem it, he will calculate the value based on the number of years since he sold it and refund the balance to the man to whom he sold it and in that way he shall recover his property. But if he does not find the means to repay him, what has been sold shall remain with the buyer until the Jubilee year when it must be given back to its original owner. Lv 25, 1-30.

If your brother becomes poor and is unable to support himself, help him. Help this stranger or this guest that he may live with you. Do not take interest from him, but fear your God, so that your brother may live among you. ...I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of Egypt to give you the land of the Canaanites and to be your God.

If your brother becomes poor and sells himself to you, do not make him work as a slave, but let him remain with you as a hired servant and an alien until the year of the Jubilee. He shall then leave you, he and his sons with him, and return to his own family and to the property of his fathers. For they are my servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt and they are not to be sold as slaves. Do not rule over them harshly, but fear your God. Lv 25, 35-43.

Care for the Poor:

“If there is anybody poor among your brothers, who lives in your cities in the land that Yahweh gives you, do not harden your heart or close your hand, but be open-handed and lend him all that he needs.

Be careful that you do not harbour in your heart these perverse thoughts: ‘the seventh year, the year of pardon, is near,’ so you look coldly at your poor brother and lend him nothing. He may cry to Yahweh against you, and you will be guilty. When you give anything, give it willingly, and Yahweh, your God, will bless you for this in all your work and in all that you undertake.

The poor will not disappear from this land. Therefore I give you this commandment: you must be open-handed to your brother, to the needy and to the poor in your land.”

“When you harvest the wheat in your fields, if you drop a sheaf, do not return to pick it up, but let it be there for the foreigner, the orphan and the widow. Yahweh will bless you for this in all your work.

When you harvest your olives, do not go back to beat the trees another time, what is left shall be for the foreigner, the orphan and the widow.

When you gather the grapes in your vineyard, do not return to look for what has been left. This will be the share of the foreigner, the orphan and the widow. *Remember* that you were a slave in Egypt. This is why, I command you to do this.”

Dt 25, 19-22

Fair Trade:

“You shall not keep in your bag two weights, one heavier and the other lighter, nor shall you have in your house a large measure and a small one. You shall have a full and exact weight, and an equally just and exact measure, that you may lengthen your days in the land which Yahweh, your God gives you. Because Yahweh hates him who does such things and any kind of injustice. *Remember* what Amalek did to you when you were on the road, coming out of Egypt. He went out to meet you on the way and when you were weak and tired attacked all who were left behind. He had no fear of God. Therefore, when Yahweh, your God, after subduing all your enemies around you, has given you rest in the land which he gives you, you shall wipe out the remembrance of Amalek under the heavens. **Do not forget.**”

Dt 25, 13-19

Just Distribution:

“Every three years, separate the tithes of all the year’s harvest but store them in the city. Then the Levite among you who has no inheritance of his own, and the foreigner, the orphan and the widow who live in your cities may come and eat, and be satisfied. So Yahweh will bless all the works of your hands, all that you undertake.”

Dt 14, 28-29.

Impartiality in Matters of Justice:

“Appoint judges and secretaries for your tribes in every city which Yahweh gives you, that they may judge the people according to justice.

You shall not bend the law or show partiality. Do not accept gifts because gifts blind the eyes of the wise and subvert the cause of the righteous. Justice! Seek justice if you want to live and inherit the land which Yahweh, your God gives you.” Dt 16, 19-20

Returning Lost Goods to Rightful Owner:

“If you find the lost ox or sheep of your brother, do not pretend that you did not see it, but bring it back to its owner. If your brother does not live near you, or you do not know to whom the animal belongs, you shall keep it in your house until its owner comes looking for it. Then you shall return it.

Do the same with his ass, his clothes, or with anything lost by your brother that you happen to find. Do not pretend not to notice it, but help your brother lift the animal up. Dt 22, 1-4.

Against Conscriptio of Newly Married Men:

“The newly married man shall not go to war or be given other public duties. He shall be exempt from everything throughout the year, that he may stay in his house and make his wife happy.” Dt. 24, 5

Against Taking Life Necessities Pledge:

“Mill and grindstone shall not be taken as a pledge. Can life be taken as a pledge?” Dt. 24, 6

“When you lend anything to your neighbour, you shall not go into his house and take anything as pledge. Wait outside, and he shall come out of the house to give you the pledge. If you have taken as pledge the cloak of a poor man, you shall not keep it overnight; you shall return it to him when the sun goes down that he may sleep in his cloak. The poor shall bless you and you shall be righteous in the eyes of Yahweh, your God.” Dt 24, 10-13

Just Wage and Prompt Payment of Workers:

“Do not exploit the lowly and the poor daily wage-earner, whether he be one of your brothers or a foreigner whom you find in your land in any of your cities. Pay him daily before the sun goes down, because he is poor and he depends on his earnings. Then he will not cry to Yahweh against you, and you will have no sin. Dt 24, 14-15

Just Treatment of Labourers

“You shall not muzzle the ox when it threshes the grain.” Dt 25, 4.

Against Exploitation of Widows, Orphans and Foreigners:

“When you harvest the wheat in your fields, if you drop a sheaf, do not return to pick it up, but let it be there for the foreigner, the orphan and the widow. Yahweh will bless you for this in all your work.

When you harvest your olives, do not go back to beat the trees another time, what is left shall be for the foreigner, the orphan and the widow. When you gather the grapes in your vineyard, do not return to look for what has been left. This will be the share of the foreigner, the orphan and the widow. *Remember* that you were a slave in Egypt. This is why, I command you to do this. Dt 24, 19-22.

Assuming Responsibility for Widowed Sister-in-Law:

“If two brothers live together and one of them dies without any child, the wife of the dead man shall not marry anyone other than the brother of her husband. He shall take her as his wife and shall give offspring to his brother. The first son she bears will perpetuate the name and the family of the dead. In this way his name shall not be wiped out of Israel.” Dt 24, 5-6.