

Deut 24:6–25:4 Respect for Human Dignity

I'm sure that we are all well aware of how coarse and inhumane our culture is. People in many cases treat each other very badly. People are violent. They curse at each other, threaten each other, make false claims about others, harass each other. Some of them rejoice when those who have a different opinion are murdered.

I suppose it's sinful human nature that leads so many people to live in conflict. People who are not reconciled with God find it hard to live at peace with others.

When people live together, conflict is bound to result. But God's intent for Israel was that his people would live together in peace and harmony. If everyone in the nation adopted a humane set of values, people would get along a lot better. If everyone loved his neighbor, people would not be in conflict all the time.

The passage we are looking at today contains a set of rules or regulations that helped Israel live at peace among themselves. Israel was just about ready to conquer the PL, and Moses wanted to remind the people about the proper way to live in society.

The rules and regulations we see here help people maintain good relations with one another by treating others well. One of the marks of a healthy society is that the citizens treat each other with respect and dignity. Each person recognizes that each other person is made in the image of God and deserves fair treatment.

In this section, Moses highlights a set of commands whose intent seems to be to protect human dignity. Moses demands that the Israelites treat each other with mercy and justice. They must treat each other humanely, with love, concern, and good will.

These rules do not pertain to us directly, but they show God's concern that his people treat each other humanely, mercifully, and justly. This is how we love our neighbor—this is how we ought to treat one another. This is how we fulfill the command to love one other.

Moses mentions several potential situations in which Israel should demonstrate respect for the dignity of others. Some of these situations apply more directly to us than others, but we can learn from each of them.

I. Respect human dignity through humane financial dealings. .6, 10-13

- A. In the ancient world, people would secure a loan by pledging something of value against the money borrowed. I.e., they would secure the loan through pledging collateral. If the borrower does not pay back the loan, then the creditor gets to keep the collateral.
- B. .6 In this case, Moses prohibits taking a millstone as security/collateral for a loan.

1. Millstones were used for grinding grain to make flour. The milling process required two stones—an upper millstone and a lower millstone. The lower millstone was stationary while the upper millstone turned on top of it. The grain was crushed between the two stones, and flour was the result. Typically, the upper millstone was smaller and was portable.
2. The miller could not mill anything with just one stone; you needed an upper and lower millstone to grind grain.
3. So if a creditor took a millstone for collateral for a loan, the miller could not make a living. Taking a millstone would amount to taking away one's capacity to earn a living.

The Heb. says “for life it *is* he is taking in pledge.” Taking away the millstone would deprive the borrower of his way of making a living, and thus, it would amount to taking away his life.

4. When providing a loan for someone, the lender/creditor should not be so disrespectful that he threatens the livelihood of the borrower.
5. The principle here is that the wellbeing of the borrower and his family was more important than the money the creditor was lending out. People are more important than money.
6. So in taking security for a loan, they could not threaten a man's livelihood. They could not use financial practices that would put the man out of business. Value the man more than the money.

App: That is an idea sadly lacking in our world today. Many people value money more than people. They are willing to violate basic standards of decency and morality just to make money.

Humans are made in the image of God, and are thus worth far more than any amount of money. We should value people much higher than money or material possessions.

C. Vss. 10-13 set some further rules for collecting collateral for a loan.

1. .10 Do not enter a man's house to get his pledge/collateral.

2. .11 Stand outside and let the man bring it out to you.

This is another way of preserving a borrower's dignity; you don't barge into his house to get the collateral for the loan. You give the man some privacy in his own home. You respect others, even those who owe you money.

3. .12 You cannot keep the collateral from a poor man overnight (cf. Ex. 22:26–27; Job 22:6).

.13 The pledge/collateral in this case is an outer garment, a coat/cloak. The man is so poor that the only valuable object he owned was his coat/outer garment. And the only way he has of keeping warm overnight is the coat on his back. His cloak was his blanket; that's all he had to keep warm through the night. So this was obviously a very poor person.

The health and welfare of a person is more important than money. Value people more than money.

4. **.17end** They could not take a widow's cloak/garment as a pledge/collateral for a loan. This was apparently the only thing of value that she owned. The well-being of the woman was more important than the money loaned out. Value people more than money or material objects.

5. .13end If you follow these rules, the borrower will bless you, and God will be pleased. This is a righteous act—this was good in God's sight.

App: We find a couple of principles to keep in mind:

First, when you borrow money, your life becomes more complicated. Lending and borrowing are sometimes necessary, but it would be wise to avoid taking out loans as much as possible. "The borrower is the servant of the lender" (Pr 22:7). Stay out of debt.

Second, people are more important than money. A creditor wants to secure his money with collateral, but he should not do it at the cost of human dignity. In financial transactions, we must treat people humanely. Respect people's dignity and privacy; show some respect.

Trans: The general principle is that we treat people with basic human dignity. We treat people like we would want to be treated. We love our neighbor as ourselves.

II. Respect human dignity by punishing crime. 24:7; 25:1-3

Punishing crime is *not* contradictory to human dignity. If a person commits a crime worthy of punishment, then the criminal deserves to be punished. However, the punishment should fit the crime and should not violate the dignity of the person.

A. .7 The first case he mentions is kidnapping.

1. The Heb. says lit. “stealing the life of any of his brethren.”

2. Kidnapping is capturing a person to make him a slave or to sell him into slavery. This practice was fairly common in the ANE; the crime of kidnapping is mentioned in the law codes of other ANE people.¹

Kidnapping was not like what happens sometimes in our world, where people are trying to get someone to pay a ransom. In the ancient world, the kidnapper made money by selling the victim into slavery.

3. .7 Kidnapping was a capital crime; it was punishable by death. The kidnapper is stealing the life of the victim, so it is appropriate that the kidnapper forfeit his life for such a crime.

Exodus 21:16 *He who kidnaps a man and sells him, or if he is found in his hand, shall surely be put to death.*

4. .7end Putting the kidnapper to death was a way of putting away the evil from among them. We respect human value so much that we put the kidnapper to death for what he has done.

Kidnapping was a capital offense, but other crimes called for other penalties. So let’s skip ahead to ...

B. **25:1-3** Moses does not mention the crime involved, only that a criminal has been caught and he deserves some kind of corporal punishment.

¹ Jack S. Deere, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 305–306.

1. 25:1 Israel had a court system in place to deal with crime and criminals. They had judges who would decide on these issues.

That shows that Israel was to be a nation ruled by law, not by powerful people. Israel had laws in place that protected both victims of crime and criminals.

2. .1 The judges were responsible to “justify the righteous and condemn the wicked.” The judges try the case and determine who is accountable, who should be punished, etc.
3. .2 If a person were found guilty of a certain crime, and if he deserves to be beaten/flogged, the judges could impose an appropriate penalty. The penalty had to fit the crime.

- a) Apparently, different crimes called for different levels of punishment. A beating/lashing/flogging was an appropriate penalty for some crimes.

- b) .3 Forty lashes/blows was to be the absolute maximum penalty. More than forty lashes/blows would be humiliating; it would rob the criminal of his basic human dignity.

Even a convicted criminal deserves a measure of dignity.

The justice of law was tempered by mercy.²

- c) Even someone deserving corporal punishment should not be degraded by beating him too severely.

4. .3 And just from how this is described here, it does not seem as if this punishment were life-threatening. The concern is that the criminal might feel humiliated, not that he’d lose his life.

App: Under the OT law, criminals were subject to various forms of punishment, from paying a fee, to suffering a beating, to death.

² Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 325.

The concern in view is the humiliation of a fellow Israelite. Punishments handed out should not be degrading, especially for a relatively low-level crime. The punishment should fit the crime, and those responsible for applying the punishments must not humiliate a fellow Israelite. This criminal would be released back into society after his punishment. If he paid for his crime, he should retain some level of dignity in the society.

Trans: Israel had to punish criminals, but they had to be careful not to degrade them. Respect for human dignity extends even to those on the margins of society, people like criminals and outcasts. We must treat all people with a basic level of decency and respect.

We respect human dignity by taking the life of the criminal in some cases. Because human life has value, anyone who violates certain basic standards of decency forfeits his own life. It's right and proper to take the life of the guilty criminal in some cases.

III. Respect human dignity by obeying legitimate authorities. .8-9

- A. .8 The Bible uses the word *leprosy* to describe a number of infectious skin diseases. Moses had already taught extensively on this topic—he takes two chapters in Leviticus (chapters 13-14) to discuss what is to be done in an outbreak of leprosy. So he does not repeat all of that here. He just reminds the people to be careful to do what the priests and Levites tell them to do.

I.e., he uses the case of leprosy to remind the people to obey their authorities.

- B. .9 And he reminds the people what happened to Miriam—Num 12 relates the account of how God struck her with leprosy because of her lack of respect for Moses. Miriam was guilty of speaking ill of the leader of God's people, and God struck her with leprosy/skin disease as a punishment for her lack of respect for Moses.

This rule served as a warning about what happens when someone disregards proper authority, as Miriam did when she threatened Moses.

Quote: To speak evil against [legitimate] leadership was to challenge the sovereignty of God himself and thus to invite his swift and sure retribution.³

App: I doubt that God will strike you with leprosy if you disrespect your authorities, but he can certainly discipline you in various ways if you are guilty of the same kind of conduct. We must yield to valid authority and treat our authorities with respect.

We respect human dignity by obeying those who have authority over us.

IV. Respect human dignity by paying workers adequately and promptly. .14-15

- A. It's a sad fact of human history that wealthy and powerful employers tend to take advantage of poor, powerless workers. Oppression of the poor by the powerful has been a constant throughout human history. But it must not be true of Israel when they occupy the PL.
- B. Those working as manual laborers generally expected to be paid at the end of each workday rather than weekly or monthly. Manual laborers lived a day-to-day existence—from hand to mouth; his daily wage covered his daily expenses. A manual laborer needed the day's pay to put food on the table for himself and his family. Missing his wages for just a few days could result in starvation for his family.

Leviticus 19:13 *You shall not cheat your neighbor, nor rob him. The wages of him who is hired shall not remain with you all night until morning.*

.14 This pertains to a fellow Israelite ("your brethren") as well as to "one of the aliens," i.e., a Gentile of lower status working in Israel.

- C. You can imagine how devastating it would be for a man like that to work all day and receive no wages at quitting time. Unscrupulous employers might withhold pay from their workers, and the worker had virtually no hope of getting his money.
- D. Israelites must show compassion and good will toward one another, especially toward those they hire to do a job.

³ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 321.

- E. .15end Also, the poor, oppressed man might cry out to God for vengeance, and the unjust employer might find himself under the judgment of God. God might cause disaster to fall upon the rich employer if he fails to pay his workers.

App: People of all economic statuses deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. We must show respect to even the poorest people. The most vulnerable among us should receive greater care and concern.

Paying an employee a suitable wage regularly is a biblical principle. Employers must not oppress their workers.

Trans: The focus again is on human dignity. We respect human dignity by paying people fairly for the work they do.

V. Respect human dignity by holding people accountable for themselves. .16

- A. Moses forbids punishing a criminal's family. The law cannot hold a man's family responsible for the crimes of the criminal. Instead, each person would be held accountable for his own sin.

- B. We do find several biblical examples of entire families suffering for the sins of the father. E.g., Aachen, Korah, Saul, David—their families suffered because of the sins of the fathers. God sometimes dealt with the group or the community as a whole for the sins of individuals within the group.

Deuteronomy 5:9 ... I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me.

- C. God might visit the iniquity of the fathers upon their children, but the law cannot. The judges and elders of the city must not punish children for the crimes of their parents.

App: The main principle here is personal accountability. Each individual has value before God and is thus personally accountable to God. The Bible teaches individual, personal accountability; each person is responsible for his own actions. We respect human dignity by holding people accountable for themselves.

Sadly, in our culture today, people often refuse personal accountability. They excuse themselves and blame others for the sins and crimes. But we cannot do that; we must take accountability for our own actions.

VI. Respect the human dignity of the vulnerable/underprivileged. .17–22

Deuteronomy 10:18–19 *[God] administers justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing. 19 Therefore love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*

- A. Moses mentions several categories of people here who would typically live in poverty and would be vulnerable to abuse: strangers/resident aliens (i.e., non-Jews living in the PL), the fatherless/orphans, and widows. These are often the most helpless and needy groups in society. Such people might easily get into debt and then not be able to pay off their loans.
- B. Even the weakest and most vulnerable people are worthy of love and justice. We ought to respect the human dignity of everyone.
- C. .18 Israel should be sensitive to human suffering because they suffered as slaves in Egypt. Israel must not oppress or abuse anyone, especially the underprivileged or less fortunate. They must insure that vulnerable people get justice.

App: We should have compassion for struggling and marginal people. That does not mean that we excuse their bad behavior. Some people use their poverty as an excuse for all manner of sin and crime. Poverty is no excuse for sin or for breaking the law.

- D. .19 Farmers should not pick their fields clean of the entire harvest. Instead, they must leave something in their fields for the poor to collect for themselves. The poor have the right to glean the fields after the harvesters have gone through. I.e., they could glean/pick the leftovers after the harvest.

Leviticus 23:22 *When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field when you reap, nor shall you gather any gleaning from your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger: I am the LORD your God.*

.19end God would bless those who provide for the unfortunate in this way.

And this was a way of the farmers showing their gratitude to God for an abundant harvest. God provided for the farmer, and now the farmer can provide for poor and needy members of his community.

Cf. the story of Ruth and Boaz

.22 Moses again reminds Israel that they were slaves in Egypt. They know what abuse and oppression is like. They must not sink to that level by abusing the poor. Israel must protect the weakest among them, not oppress them.

App: We should treat the poor and unfortunate with decency and respect. We should be careful to treat such people fairly and compassionately.

Deuteronomy 15:11 *For the poor will never cease from the land; therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and your needy, in your land.'*

App: Part of the welfare system for Israel was gleaning. The poor and needy could go out and collect the food they needed for free. But they had to do a little work for it.

Work is honorable. Sitting around and doing nothing when you could be working, and expecting others to provide what you need, is dishonorable.

Humans are more likely to flourish and take responsibility for themselves when they have to work to make a living.

We have government programs today that are designed to take care of underprivileged/disadvantaged people; that's good. However, those programs are often don't work very well because they do not require any work from those who receive the benefits. Work preserves human dignity, and benefits for most people ought to be tied to work.

The last verse here pertains to animals rather than humans.

VII. **25:4** Respect domesticated animals by treating them fairly.

- A. Poor and needy *humans* had the right to eat some of the harvest, and even lowly farm *animals* have the right to enjoy the bounty and blessings of the harvest.
- B. Oxen and donkeys would be used to thresh grain. I.e., walking on the grain would separate the kernels of grain from the stalks.

The farmer would lay out the stalks of grain on a threshing floor, and an animal would be hitched to a central pivot point. Then the animal would walk around in circles, crushing the grain and separating it from the stalk or separating the grain kernel from the husk. Sometimes they would pull a threshing sledge or a cart that helped in this process.

- C. The farmer must allow the ox to eat while it is performing this work. It's a matter of fairness. The ox is doing the work, so he ought to be paid for it. The ox is providing a living for the farmer, so the ox should be able to grab a bite of grain if he wants some. Hard working animals have a right to a portion of the harvest that God provides.
- D. Paul applies this verse twice in the NT (1 Cor 9:9; 1 Tim 5:18) to show that a minister is worthy of his salary. If God cares about the welfare of a working ox, how much more does he care for the human laborer, especially those working in the ministry? If an ox or donkey deserves respect, how much more should people made in the image of God be treated with a measure of dignity and honor?

These are all examples of how we can recognize the human dignity of various people in various situations. All people bear the image of God and are worthy of respect. We should recognize the dignity in all people, especially in those who are vulnerable—the poor, widows, orphans, and strangers.

Israel as a nation was obligated to follow these guidelines. People of all nations would flourish if they treated one another with a measure of dignity and respect. Every citizen should enjoy basic standards of human dignity. Even criminals should enjoy some level of protection. A good society will protect its most vulnerable citizens from humiliation and abuse.

The unsaved world is often harsh and heatless. Unbelievers often do not treat others with basic human dignity and respect. But Christians should be different. We should distinguish ourselves from the unsaved world by respecting basic human dignity. We must not sink to the level of the ungodly world around us by being disrespectful and dishonorable in how we treat others. If we have no respect for human dignity, we are inviting God's judgment. If we expect God to bless the work of our hands, then we must respect the human dignity of all people, especially of the most vulnerable among us.