

Deuteronomy 16:19

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Thou shalt not wrest judgment; thou shalt not respect persons, neither take a gift: for a gift doth blind the eyes of the wise, and pervert the words of the righteous.

Analysis

Thou shalt not wrest judgment; thou shalt not respect persons, neither take a gift: for a gift doth blind the eyes of the wise, and pervert the words of the righteous.

This foundational principle of biblical justice contains three distinct prohibitions that protect the integrity of judgment. The Hebrew verb natah ("wrest") means to bend, turn aside, or distort, suggesting that judgment must remain straight and unbending. The phrase "respect persons" translates the Hebrew nakar panim, literally "to recognize faces," warning against showing favoritism based on status, wealth, or personal relationships.

The final prohibition addresses bribery with stark honesty: gifts (shochad) don't merely influence judgment—they actively **blind** ('ivver) even the wise and **pervert** (saleph, meaning to twist or distort) the words of the righteous. This acknowledges that corruption can affect even those with wisdom and righteousness, making impartiality systemically important. God's justice system requires structural protections, not just good intentions. This verse establishes that true justice must be blind to external influences and deaf to the seductions of gain.

Historical Context

This command was given as Israel prepared to enter Canaan and establish a judicial system. Ancient Near Eastern courts were notoriously corrupt, with justice often sold to the highest bidder. Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Canaanite societies all struggled with judicial bribery, as documented in texts like the Code of Hammurabi and Egyptian wisdom literature. By contrast, Israel's law code placed justice under divine authority, making corruption not just a civil crime but a sin against God himself. The placement of this command within Deuteronomy's festival calendar (chapter 16) suggests that justice was considered as sacred as worship. The appointment of judges in every city (Deuteronomy 16:18) created a decentralized system designed to prevent the concentration of corrupt power that plagued monarchies.

Related Passages

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Study Questions

1. How does the prohibition against 'respecting persons' challenge modern systems of justice where wealth often determines legal outcomes?
2. Why does the text say gifts blind 'the wise' and pervert 'the righteous'—shouldn't such people be immune to corruption?
3. What structural safeguards can communities implement to prevent the subtle influence of gifts and favoritism in decision-making?
4. How does this verse inform Christian ethics regarding conflicts of interest in business, ministry, or public service?
5. In what ways might we 'wrest judgment' in everyday situations without realizing we're showing favoritism?

Interlinear Text

לֹא	תַּפְצַח	מִשְׁפָּט	לֹא	תַּפְצַח	תַּפְצַח	לֹא	פָּנִים
H3808	Thou shalt not wrest	judgment	H3808	thou shalt not respect	persons	H3808	
	H5186	H4941		H5234		H6440	
נְתַקֵּח	נְתַקֵּח	נְתַקֵּח	עֵינֵי	עֵינֵי	עֵינֵי	חֲכָםִים	חֲכָםִים
neither take	a gift	a gift	doth blind	the eyes	of the wise		
H3947	H7810	H7810	H5786	H5869		H2450	
וְיַזְבַּל	דְּבָרִים	צָדִיקִים					
and pervert	the words	of the righteous					
H5557	H1697	H6662					

Additional Cross-References

Exodus 23:2 (Judgment): Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil; neither shalt thou speak in a cause to decline after many to wrest judgment:

Leviticus 19:15 (Righteousness): Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honour the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour.

Proverbs 17:23 (Judgment): A wicked man taketh a gift out of the bosom to pervert the ways of judgment.

Deuteronomy 10:17 (Parallel theme): For the LORD your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty, and a terrible, which regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward:

Deuteronomy 24:17 (Judgment): Thou shalt not pervert the judgment of the stranger, nor of the fatherless; nor take a widow's raiment to pledge:

Habakkuk 1:4 (Righteousness): Therefore the law is slackened, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth.

Proverbs 24:23 (Judgment): These things also belong to the wise. It is not good to have respect of persons in judgment.

Ecclesiastes 7:7 (Parallel theme): Surely oppression maketh a wise man mad; and a gift destroyeth the heart.

Deuteronomy 27:19 (Judgment): Cursed be he that perverteth the judgment of the stranger, fatherless, and widow. And all the people shall say, Amen.

Isaiah 1:17 (Judgment): Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.

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