

Deuteronomy 23:25

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

When thou comest into the standing corn of thy neighbour, then thou mayest pluck the ears with thine hand; but thou shalt not move a sickle unto thy neighbour's standing corn.

Analysis

When thou comest into the standing corn of thy neighbour, then thou mayest pluck the ears with thine hand; but thou shalt not move a sickle unto thy neighbour's standing corn.

This verse parallels the preceding regulation about vineyards (v. 24), applying the same principle to grain fields. The permission to 'pluck ears with thine hand' (qatafta melilot beyadekha) allowed hand-picking individual heads of grain to satisfy immediate hunger. However, using a chermesh (חֶרְמֶשׁ, 'sickle'), the harvesting tool, was prohibited. Hand-plucking gathered small amounts for immediate consumption; sickle use indicated harvesting for storage or sale—theft rather than hospitality.

This distinction protected both travelers and landowners. Hungry travelers could satisfy immediate needs without begging or stealing, maintaining dignity while receiving sustenance. Landowners practiced generosity without losing their harvest to systematic exploitation. The limitation to hand-gathering ensured minimal impact on crops while meeting genuine needs. This created sustainable charity: generous enough to feed travelers, restricted enough to preserve owners' livelihood and prevent abuse.

The disciples' action in Matthew 12:1 and Luke 6:1 invoked this very law. Pharisaic

criticism focused not on taking grain (legally permitted) but on Sabbath work. Jesus's defense demonstrated that:

1. human need takes precedence over ceremonial restriction
2. disciples weren't breaking God's law, only Pharisaic tradition
3. mercy and compassion characterize kingdom ethics more than strict rule-following.

This incident illustrates how God's generous provisions for human welfare can be obscured by legalistic tradition that multiplies restrictions. True biblical ethics balance law's letter with its merciful intent, prioritizing human welfare while maintaining proper respect for God's commands and neighbors' rights.

Historical Context

Grain cultivation dominated ancient Near Eastern agriculture, making this law highly relevant to daily life. Wheat, barley, and other grains provided staple foods, and harvest time was crucial for annual survival. Fields typically weren't fenced, allowing travelers to walk through standing crops. This accessibility made the law necessary: without regulation, fields could be stripped by passing travelers, devastating farmers who depended on harvest for livelihood and seed for next year's planting.

Archaeological evidence from ancient Israel shows agricultural implements including sickles made of flint, bronze, or iron attached to wooden handles. These tools enabled efficient harvesting that could quickly denude fields. The law's prohibition on sickle use prevented travelers from engaging in actual harvesting, limiting them to inefficient hand-plucking that gathered only small amounts. This practical distinction enabled enforcement: someone using a sickle in another's field was clearly stealing, not merely satisfying hunger.

The practice continued into Second Temple Judaism, with rabbinic discussions elaborating on details: how much could be taken, whether groups could gather together, whether one could inform others about particularly generous fields. While some elaborations became overly detailed, they demonstrated ongoing commitment to the underlying principle: community obligation to feed hungry

travelers balanced with protecting farmers' livelihoods. Jesus's citation of this law showed it remained operative and culturally understood in first-century Palestine, serving as common ground for discussing Sabbath observance and demonstrating that God's law makes provision for human needs within appropriate boundaries that respect both individual welfare and community sustainability.

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Study Questions

1. How does this law's balance between generosity and property rights inform Christian economic ethics?
2. What does the limitation to hand-gathering teach about meeting needs sustainably without enabling exploitation?
3. How should churches navigate the tension between generous assistance to the needy and preventing systemic abuse of charity?

Interlinear Text

כִּי	תָבֹא	קָמַת	רֵעֲךָ:
H3588	When thou comest	into the standing corn	of thy neighbour
	H935	H7054	H7453
וְקָטַפְתָּ	מִלֵּיל תֶּ	בְּיַדְךָ	לֹא וְחֶרֶשׁ
then thou mayest pluck	the ears	with thine hand	a sickle
H6998	H4425	H3027	H2770
תִּנּוּ יָדְךָ	עַל	קָמַת	רֵעֲךָ:
but thou shalt not move		into the standing corn	of thy neighbour
H5130	H5921	H7054	H7453

Additional Cross-References

Mark 2:23 (Parallel theme): And it came to pass, that he went through the corn fields on the sabbath day; and his disciples began, as they went, to pluck the ears of corn.

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