

I Want Justice

Deuteronomy 16:18 - 17:20

When someone says, “I want justice,” usually they mean, “I want vengeance.” I want that person who hurt me punished. I want to be vindicated. Or expressed even more appropriately, I want the one who is evil to receive his just consequences. He should get what he deserves. That’s justice, and it isn’t necessarily bad or wrong.

Justice is a word meaning righteousness. So to be just is to be righteous, to do what is right. Or equitable. And that, of course, is a good thing. In that context, we should all want justice. Justice can also be understood as a contrast to mercy, since mercy refers to a form of kindness that would relent from exacting punishment. And mercy is a good thing too. Surely, if we all received only justice from the hand of God, without mercy, we would all be lost. Condemned to the eternal punishment of hell. So we cry out, “Lord have mercy.”

As God’s people, we are ultimately to embrace both justice and mercy. They are not mutually exclusive. And so, in the familiar words of,

Micah 6:8 “He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?”

Our text this morning has much to say about doing justly. Let me start by repeating something I emphasized two weeks ago about how Old Testament civil laws apply to our circumstances today. We are no longer a theocracy. God’s people are no longer ruled as one nation on this earth under the authority of a king who also sits on the throne of God. The shadows of the Old Testament fade away, pass away, and we are no longer bound to

these civil laws as they were given to Israel. But the broader principles of the laws are still valid, as broad principles. God doesn’t change. Righteousness doesn’t change. The outward circumstances might change, but not the abiding principles, and that is what I want to focus on again this morning.

Our Confession of Faith gives us this explanation with reference to the various civil and judicial laws which God gave to his people in the Old Testament: “To them also, as a body politic, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the State of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.”

So the civil laws of Israel expired when the nation ceased to exist, but general equity of those laws abides. The general principles embedded in those laws, the general principles embodied by those laws are still valid for us today. So what are they? Again, that is our focus this morning. I will begin this way, by emphasizing,

I. THE RULE OF JUSTICE IN OUR COVENANT COMMUNITY.

Now, by covenant community, I don’t mean specifically the church. But more broadly, our society. The whole of our inter-personal human relationships. The church is part of that, but more so for application of this chapter today, the reference is to the communities in which we live in the civil realm. Communities of mankind, our state, our country. Even our local city or county. And in those communities in which we are bound together as citizens or members, there must be the rule of justice. And that gets very specific for Old Testament Israel.

But we start very broadly, first of all, with,

A. The principle of righteousness.

I've already alluded to it.

v.18

Two Hebrew words are actually used, synonyms. Just justice. Righteous justice. Just judgment. However you want to put it in English, the meaning is that it was right, upright. It was perfect. And any community of people, in order to live and survive together in a fallen world, must have the principle of righteousness at work.

Similarly, v.20

Do you know how that righteousness is emphasize in the original Hebrew? They just repeated the word. We have translated "what is altogether just." Literally, it is what is "righteous, righteous." That is absolutely crucial if we are going to be able to live together.

Clearly, that is true for the administration of government within the church. The exercise of authority must be done with this sense of righteousness. As well as in the civil authorities. Rulers doing what is right, because it is right.

Not because of political partisan alignment. Not because of political expediency or self-serving benefits. But because it is right. Let me challenge you always to keep that sense of what is right in your mind and heart. Committed to doing what is right, what is righteous, because it is right!

But how do we know what is right? What is the definition of righteousness? Our text doesn't have a comprehensive answer to that question, but we do have examples.

B. The examples of righteousness.

v.19

What does it mean to show partiality? Literally, to regard faces. To give preference to someone you know! Rather than doing what is right, you favor the person whom you know. You give preference not because of the principle of justice or righteousness, but because of some personal connection or favorite.

There is a similar perversion in taking a bribe. You give favor and preference to the person who buys it! There is certainly no righteousness in that, "for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous."

There is further explanation of this sort of righteousness in, Ex. 23:1 "You shall not circulate a false report. Do not put your hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness. 2 You shall not follow a crowd to do evil; nor shall you testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after many to pervert justice. 3 You shall not show partiality to a poor man in his dispute. 4 "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall surely bring it back to him again. 5 If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden, and you would refrain from helping it, you shall surely help him with it. 6 "You shall not pervert the judgment of your poor in his dispute. 7 Keep yourself far from a false matter; do not kill the innocent and righteous. For I will not justify the wicked. 8 And you shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the discerning and perverts the words of the righteous. 9 "Also you shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of a stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

There are all sorts of obvious applications of this in terms of our own civil governments today, because it seems like our national government is completely and entirely partisan. Partiality

is built into the whole system, and never has that been more evident than with the recent impeachment and acquittal of our President. Corruption seems to be everywhere in our government, and the whole nation pays the price.

This principle of righteousness must also be operative within the church, as James puts it so clearly,

James 2:1 “My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality. 2 For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, 3 and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, “You sit here in a good place,” and say to the poor man, “You stand there,” or, “Sit here at my footstool,” 4 have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?...8 If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you do well; 9 but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors.”

The rule of justice. Then,

II. THE PRACTICE OF FAITHFULNESS IN OUR COVENANT COMMUNITY.

We come first to a theme we see often,

A. Faithfulness in our worship of God.

v.21-22

We have covered worship matters in recent weeks, so I won't spend too much time there today, but note the emphasis on the motivation of honoring the Lord. In the Old Covenant context, that meant offering the acceptable sacrifices at the acceptable place. No idols. And even with the sacrifices that were

prescribed to be offered, they had to be animals without any defect.

17:1

The Lord gets the best of what we have to offer. That's the abiding principle even as we worship God now in the his new covenant age. We give to God our best, the first day of the week, the first portion of our increase. We give him all of our love, with all of our strength and all of our heart.

To broaden that sense of faithfulness to God, I would then emphasize the call for our,

B. Faithfulness in the preservation of our separation from evil.

Quite a few details are given in this context.

v.2-5

That seems harsh, though you need to keep in mind the underlying principle of holiness, the holiness of God's people. And that means separation from evil. In old covenant Israel, the only way to insure separation was to impose that separation literally, physical. Put to death the offender. The main principle is stated clearly at the end of,

v.7 “So you shall put away the evil from among you.”

Separation from evil. Let me give you the obvious New Testament reference.

1 Cor. 5:9 “I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. 10 Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. 11 But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or

covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person. 12 For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? 13 But those who are outside God judges. Therefore “put away from yourselves the evil person.”

That is an abiding principle, and Paul applies it there in Corinth to the church. We would call it church discipline. Put away the evil person! We call it excommunication. We are to be a holy people, separate from the world.

Moses adds some more details beginning in,
v.8-13

There is restraint, however. A protection against the evil of false accusations.

v.6-7

Giving witness is a serious matter, which is why you read what you do in verse 7. And the second witness is a principle that is also carried into the new testament,

Mat. 16:15 “Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ 17 And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.”

Those verses are the practical means by which someone who has been sinned against in private is able to obtain a second witness. I get really tired today when people overuse and misuse those words to prohibit a victim from seeking justice, when actually, the purpose is just the opposite. If the situation is

entirely private, he-said-she-said, as we put it today, get someone else involved to serve as your second witness. You have that right, and the access to seek justice.

What you cannot do is falsely accuse someone without such evidence, and in the general principles of the Old Testament, a false witness was to receive the same punishment as he was seeking to imposed on the person accused. In other words, we have to protect the sanctity of truth especially when it comes to giving witness. That is the only way that we can live together, and these broad principles certainly have general application to our lives in society and in the church today.

One final subject in terms of the general equity of the Old Testament civil law, and that is,

III. THE PRACTICE OF AUTHORITY IN OUR COVENANT COMMUNITY.

When we live together as human beings, we live under a structure of authority which God has instituted and established. Typically we think in terms of the family, the civil government, and the church. You could also add a work or employment category as well. God has ordered that we would live together with that exercise of authority made clear. Old Testament and New.

With reference to civil authority, the civil magistrate, we read in the new testament,

Rom. 13:1 “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the

same. 4 For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. 5 Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake."

That is certainly straightforward. In the Old Testament, the reference is simply to the king.

v.14-15

It was necessary. Civil government is necessary. The exercise of authority is necessary, because we live in this age, what Paul terms "this evil age." Sin abounds, and until Jesus returns, the wheat and the tares will live together. And God has instituted civil authority for the preservation of mankind. So this reference in Deuteronomy 17 certainly provides grounds for,

A. The legitimacy of a king.

But notice the restraint.

B. The restraint of a king.

When God institutes authority, he puts restraints upon the one in authority, necessary restraints because of the sinfulness of all mankind. So here are the restraints,

v.16-18

That's practical, isn't it? You don't exercise authority in order to get rich. We can only wish that were applied today. You don't exercise authority in order to take advantage of women and others who might be vulnerable. Surely, we have seen horrible abuses of that sort of abuse in our day. And we excuse it all the time, look the other way, and protect the abuser who is in power.

In fact, the fullness of restraint is provided by God is his law,

so we read,

v.18

Finally, with respect to the exercise of authority, with respect to the king, and as that would apply today, with respect to all in authority, notice the importance of,

C. The piety of the king.

I wrestled with which word to use for piety, and I want to stress just how positive this word is. It could be godliness, but it has more to do here with the character of the heart than even a profession of faith, per se. The point is, those who are entrusted with authority are supposed to be worthy of that trust. Character matters. I lament that our culture has all but lost that sense of the importance of character, even at the basic level of honesty and decency.

But here is what Moses wrote,

v.19-20

Humility is needed, "that his heart may not be lifted above his brethren." That is what is needed. The exercise of authority doesn't bestow upon any measure of superiority. Indeed, the greatest ruler there ever was, the one who held the greatest measure of authority as the son of God, said this of himself,

Mat. 20:25 "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. 26 Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. 27 And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave— 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

That is what is so astounding about biblical leadership and the

proper exercise of authority. The ruler is actually the servant. The one who has the responsibility to exercise authority is himself the servant of those under his oversight.

Now, all of this has application to our civil governments today. And if all of these things were faithfully practiced by our civil magistrates, it would bring blessing and honor to our own nation. We can make many applications to the exercise of oversight in the church as well. But ultimately, of course, all of this is a necessary restraint, for no human ruler has ever ruled without sin. So even as Moses gives the people of God this pattern for justice and faithfulness, we are completely and entirely dependent upon Jesus to forgive us for our failure.

And, ultimately, to look to him, the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. The king of all kings, the one seated at the right hand of his father in heaven. The author and perfecter of our faith. So this chapter is not just a civics lesson for us to learn how to be good citizens of the earthly kingdoms to which we belong. It is as well a reminder that our citizenship is in heaven.

Phil. 3:20 “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.”