

"Justice, Justice, You Shall Pursue!"

Justice. It's something we all want when we're wronged. And yet so often justice is what we're looking to get out of when we ourselves are guilty of something. We want justice when we're in the right. We want leniency or clemency when we're not. Of course there's nothing wrong with admitting your guilty and throwing yourself on the mercy of the court. But it's quite a different thing to deny you are guilty, if you are, and look to pervert the justice system to get away with your crime.

Well, here we've come to a short few verses that talk about the justice system for the Israelites in the Promised Land. Here we're reminded that our God is a just God, and is zealous for justice. You might recall back to chapter 1. There Moses reminded the people how he established a judicial system of judges and officers over the tribes and families. This was something he established during their wilderness wandering. These judges handled most of the cases, and Moses was given the harder ones. Now, Moses explains how this is to work when they get out of the wilderness and settle in the Promised Land. And so basically this passage applies the same principles on a city level. Verse 18 says that they are to appoint judges and officers in all your "gates;" the word "gates" is a way to describe a community or town. Chapter 17 will go on to say that if a case is too difficult in the Promised Land for any of these local city judges, then they are to bring the case to the Levites at the central place of worship. In other words, these verses, and the additional details in the next chapter take the judicial system that Moses established in the wilderness, and explains how it will function in the Promised Land. Essentially it's fundamentally the same system, just applied to the larger geography in the Land.

And so this passage is very much rooted in what we studied back in chapter 1. One of the conclusions I came to in that sermon was that this system of judges was all part of how Israel was ruled largely through elders. I made the case that how the New Testament church is ruled by elders is rooted in part in this Old Testament practice where elders of the people were appointed to judge and rule the people. That application applies today. The principles here apply especially to our elders who are to administer justice in the church. 1 Corinthians 6 says that believers shouldn't be bringing civil disputes to pagans, but instead to resolve them in the church. Often this can happen just through brother to brother interaction, where reconciliation happens by both dealing graciously with each other. But when the matter doesn't get resolved that way, these believers are to take the matter before the courts of the church. The elders in the church are to administer justice in these cases. The OPC has a Book of Church Order that details the processes for such cases, and they are based on the principles found in Scripture. And so this is a responsibility of our elders to handle these sorts of judicial cases in the church. That means the justice described in this passage is what our church elders must have as they judge and rule. This sense of justice is something we must look for in our elders and support them in this effort.

Of course keep in mind that in the old covenant there was a close union of church and state. These judges in the old covenant handled all the cases.

In the New Testament church, we don't have the same sort of jurisdiction that the old covenant had. Yes, we handle conflicts between believers in the church courts. We handle cases of a spiritual matter regarding believers as well. But there are things our church courts don't handle; things that are outside our jurisdiction and scope as a church. For example, a conflict a believer might have with an unbeliever is really something to be handled in the civil courts. Criminal cases like murder and manslaughter are things that fall under the scope of the state to deal with, though certainly the church courts would issue church discipline to members involved in such crimes as well. And so the fact that in the new covenant the church is no longer united to a particular nation or civil government, means that the scope of our judicial system in the church is limited to specific things. For example, the church elders discipline with the sword of the Spirit, not with a physical sword like the state does. This means that civil governments will be responsible for enforcing much of the justice described in this passage as well. In other words, today's Scripture has application to the state as well. The purity of justice described here is something our government leaders should espouse as well. It's what we should pray for them to have. We should even vote accordingly as we have the opportunity to give an input in this area of our government. Certainly some of us might even be in roles such as judges and lawyers were we can put these principles directly into practice.

And so what I'd like us to spend some time today focusing on, is the call to justice described in this passage. This has application then to both the church and the state. As we do this, we can't help but be reminded of the problem of injustice in our world. And we'll think about what the Bible's ultimate solution is toward this problem.

This call to justice is positively stated first in verse 18. It says that the judges, "Shall judge the people with just judgment." This word for "just" is the same one that appears twice in the Hebrew in verse 20. Verse 20 says, "You shall follow what is altogether just." This is an English translation that's trying to get at the emphatic nature of the Hebrew here. The title of today's sermon is actually my more literal word-for-word translation of the Hebrew. "Justice, justice, you shall pursue!" "Justice, justice, you shall pursue!" That's how the Hebrew actually has it. It has the same word "justice," twice in a row. This is the same word used in verse 18 to describe the just judgment. In Hebrew you normally place the object of a verb after the verb at the end of the clause. If you place it first, that's emphatic. But here, it's not only placed first, the word justice is actually placed twice in a row, in front of the verb. Reading Hebrew you don't usually see this. It's a really strong way of placing the focus on justice.

What's the point? This passage is passionately calling for justice. Justice is important to God. And what's the word justice even mean? Well, in the Hebrew you could also translate it as "righteousness," or even just "rightness." It's getting at what's right. Of course, the standard for what's right is the law of God. God tells us what is right and wrong. Whoever judges between what is right and wrong is therefore a servant of God. That's why Romans 13 can even say that civil governments as they judge with the sword are serving God. God is a God of all justice; he ultimately says what's right and wrong, and it's the job of judges to enforce that. That's why Proverbs 29:26 can say, "Many seek the ruler's favor, but justice for man comes from the LORD." God is the ultimate source of all justice.

And so this passage calls positively for justice. But it also places that call in the negative as well. What I mean is that there are several commands in this passage that tell us what justice should not be. Verse 19, "You shall not pervert justice." Literally, you shall not "stretch" or "bend" justice. We can often try to make the law say whatever we want it to say. Activist judges in our civil courts can be guilty of this, effectively legislating from the courts. This means we need to be concerned with both the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. This verse goes on to imply that you need wisdom to be able to do this properly. We must not bend and stretch the law to fit our wants; we must wisely apply its boundaries in each unique situation. Ecclesiastes 3:16 describes how normal it is that in the place of justice there is so often wickedness. Perversion of justice is something all too common.

Verse 19 goes on. It says "You shall not show partiality." Again, this is describing what justice is not. Justice shows no partiality. Literally, it says you shall not recognize faces, or persons. The idea is that you are not to show preferential treatment to some people, to give them a pass on the law's requirements just because of who they are. We all know that people with power and influence can try to demand special treatment and exceptions. It infuriates us when we see famous people on TV commit some crime and find some way to get out of it. But we take pride in our system when even those with power are met with justice for their crimes. Partiality is repeatedly forbidden in Scripture in terms of justice. Actually, in Scripture if justice is to show any partiality, it's to the people you might not expect to have otherwise even been given a fair hearing in the first place. Exodus 23:6, "You shall not pervert the judgment of your poor in his dispute." Deuteronomy 27:19, "Cursed is the one who perverts the justice due the stranger, the fatherless, and widow." It's these groups that would typically suffer when judges showed partiality. Instead, Scripture repeatedly calls judges to not show partiality, but instead to especially look out for these groups that typically are the brunt of injustice and partiality.

Verse 19 finishes with a final statement of what justice must not be. It says that you should not, "Take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous." Here you have a prohibition against bribery, placed in proverbial language. In fact, there are a number of Proverbs that talk against bribery as well. For example, Proverbs 17:23, "A wicked man accepts a bribe behind the back to pervert the ways of justice." It's such a sinful wicked thing for a judge to let money dictate his judgments. If justice can be bought, then that's not justice at all.

These three commands described in verse 19, really are all interrelated. You can think about them separately, but in Israel's history, they all typically would come together. Samuel's sons, for example, were judges, and 1 Samuel 8:3 says that they, "Took bribes and perverted justice." Verse 19 sees justice being perverted by judges showing partiality to those who bring in bribes. Instead of the righteous cause being vindicated, the person with the most money gets their way. That is not justice. It's injustice.

I hope the application so far on these principles of justice is fairly clear. To leaders, those responsible for administering justice, you have some clear, specific, commands here. You are called to give justice, and only justice. Not to twist it to meet your desires. Not to put it aside because people of influence are pressuring you. Certainly not to take a bribe. Especially look to uphold the cause of the needy: the poor, the widow, the foreigner, the orphan.

But this has application to those *under* judicial systems, which is of course all of us. Don't tempt your leaders and judges. Don't demand preferential treatment. I think it's unlikely that any of us would explicitly try to financially bribe an elder in the church or a civil judge or policeman. These things in America are much less common than they are in other places or at other times in history. But yet some of the same dangers can still be there. In the church setting, we can assume pridefully that we deserve special treatment. We can put undue pressure upon our elders to respond unbiblically by giving them some sort of ultimatum that might not be keeping with justice. We can be so convinced we are in the right that sometimes we don't stop to hear out what the elders' judgment actually is; to see that it actually does come from Scripture. We should be very careful in how we deal with our elders that in no way to we tempt them to partiality or to respond because of any pressure that could at all be considered a form of bribery or blackmail. I know these terms sound harsh. But it's often the actions done in apparent innocence that will put this pressure on our elders. We can be so convinced we are right that we don't let God's system of justice do what it's supposed to do. Instead we try to place undue pressure on our leaders to get the result we want.

Now this doesn't mean that you shouldn't plead your case. You should. And you should make your case as clearly and accurately within your legal grounds. But you should plead it biblically and in keeping with justice. You should work within the system of justice, not try to go around it, or abuse it. The same applies to cases before the courts of the civil government. We all know, for example, that there are certain lawyers that will pervert justice and truth in order to win a case. We also know that there are some very honest and reputable lawyers. Who you pick to be your counsel will be important for how you support the cause of justice.

And of course, sometimes the best way for us to support the cause of justice, is to just admit when we are guilty. If you're really guilty, don't try to fight it. That wouldn't be keeping with justice. In fact, if you're guilty, Jesus says you should even try to settle your case with your accuser before you even come before the judge, Luke 12:58. God is a God of justice. We all as Christians should grow to love justice as God loves it. That's part of our Christian sanctification.

As we've thought about justice so far today, we probably can all sit back and think of some injustice that you've seen. This of course is nothing new. This passage here in Deuteronomy is part of the law given to Israel in the old covenant. Notice how verse 20 attaches this law to the conditional blessings of the Mosaic covenant. The last part of verse 20 tells them that if they are faithful to keep true justice and not pervert it, that it will go well with them. They will live and inherit the Land God was giving them. This is yet another of the many conditional blessings held out to the people in Deuteronomy based on their ability to keep God's law.

Well, we know Israel failed in this effort. They, like every society and nation had fundamental failures in their justice system. As God sent the prophets to warn Israel about all the ways they were breaking the covenant, this was one of the more common areas that he addressed. Listen to some of the words of the Isaiah in this area. Isaiah 1:23 says to Israel, "Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow's case does not come before them." Isaiah 5:23 says woe to those who, "Justify the

wicked for a bribe, and take away justice from the righteous man!" Many of the other prophets rail on the same thing. Justice had become grossly perverted among Israel. This was in violation of the law of God. It earned God's curses instead of his blessings.

The problem is not any better today. So many things seem wrong with our judicial system today. You've got crooked cops and scandalous lawyers. You've got activist judges who make laws from the bench instead of enforce the ones we already have. Justice seems like it's gone horribly astray when people want to do away with the death penalty for serial killers, while protecting the supposed rights of a woman to kill an unborn child. Many today talk about social justice as the cause we need to take up. Though many of us might not agree with all the politics of those coming in the name of social justice, it still shows this inner urge in people for justice. That's there's an inner recognition, on all sides of the political aisle, that things are not right in our world in terms of justice. Things are not right in this world, and it's the job of judges to enforce what is right. This world is indeed full of injustice. Almost everyone would say that they want it, but it is us humans that contribute to the injustice.

Injustice is a real problem. But the Bible does have a real solution. The Bible does hold out the hope for real justice. God is the God of Justice. This passage demonstrates it. The whole Bible demonstrates it. An interesting picture of this hope is given in the book of Habakkuk. There you have Habakkuk dealing with the question of justice. He prays to God asking for justice. He points how all the wicked Israelites seem to be prospering; that injustice seems to prevail. God answers him and says that he was going to bring judgment on the Israelites for this, by having the Babylonians destroy them. But that seemed to confuse Habakkuk even more. Why would God let those who are even more treacherous, the Babylonians, destroy a people that are, relatively speaking, more righteous than they? Where's the justice in that, Habakkuk asks? The Lord's reply is two-fold. One he says that the Babylonians themselves will ultimately one day face judgment as well. That actually wasn't that far off either. But the second thing God told him is that the "just shall live by faith." Can you trust in God, that when everything seems wrong around you, that he will ultimately make it right? Jeremiah prophesied the solution. Jeremiah 23:5 promised that the Messiah would come and execute judgment and justice on the earth. That's the promise to all of us, that God will ultimately bring justice to this world.

And yet the New Testament picks up on this hope given to Habakkuk. Paul uses this quote, that the just shall live by faith as pointing us to the gospel. Paul uses this to show us that none of us are actually just. None of us are actually righteous. If the Messiah is going to come and bring judgment on the earth, we'll be judged, unless Paul says we live by faith. Faith in the Messiah. Faith that he will save us from this just judgment, by bringing us forgiveness for our sins; by transforming us from the wicked to the righteous.

Jesus lived a life of righteousness on earth. And he paid the price of unrighteousness on the cross. He bore God's infinite wrath against all injustice. That was Judgment Day number 1. That was the start of God bringing justice to this earth. He did it on the cross. Jesus, who knew no sin, became sin for us, so that in him we could become the righteousness of God. The gospel tells us that though we are guilty before God for numerous sins, if we confess our sins, and look to Christ as our Savior and Lord, we will be forgiven. This is important for many reasons, but for one reason

especially. Because God says there is another final judgment day coming. This is the day prophesied by Jeremiah when the Christ will judge the world. If you have become a Christian, then on that day you will be acquitted. You'll be declared as those who have already been justified, declared righteous, through faith in Christ. Paul says that's what it really means for the just to live by faith. That we are made just and righteous through faith in God's salvation. That salvation has come in Jesus. But on that great day of judgment, if you are not a Christian, you will be found guilty. You'll be found guilty of lifelong rebellion against God. The punishment on that day will be an eternal hell. My friends, no one has to have uncertainty about that great day of justice. Believe in Jesus today. Trust in him and find forgiveness. Have the hope of living for eternity with Christ in a new world that has been rid of all injustice.

And what a way Christ has secured this salvation. He did it by taking on this plight of injustice. It was the height of injustice against him that brought him to the cross. He was the innocent man falsely condemned. Bribery was involved as well. Remember that the rulers and judges essentially bribed Judas to betray Jesus. Remember that the rulers and judges bribed the Roman guards to cover up the resurrection and lie about it, saying that his disciples came and stole his body. Something has gone terribly wrong with the system when the judges not only are willing to take bribes, but when they themselves are offering the bribes to commit an injustice. That's what happens to Jesus. That's what leads to the cross. And so Jesus bears the burden of injustice. He puts himself in the shoes of all those who have suffered injustices, to overcome injustice once and for all. He understands our sufferings, when we suffer injustice. And he has atoned for injustice, even the injustices we have committed. This is the work of our Savior! Jesus came to bear the brunt of all the injustices so that we could be forgiven of our own sins of injustice.

Brothers and sisters, the world claims it wants justice. So many movements today are looking for some sort of justice in the world. Some look for this through the government, by being heavily involved in politics. Some work for justice through various non-profit organizations or political action groups. Some believe this is the job of the church, to work to see justice in all areas of civilization. Some believe that the church's primary job is to the means of social and political change in the area of justice. Some have elevated this to the church's highest goal.

Well, certainly as a church, we should be concerned about justice. We've made that clear today. Certainly individuals should be involved in different ways to support the cause of justice. That can be through politics or various organizations. Just how we each live our life should contribute toward justice, not work against it. But I want to make very clear today that the church's primary mission is not to directly work for justice throughout the world. Certainly much of the work of the church might indirectly bring that about. Certainly if we have some specific opportunity in the course of our ministry to aid in the cause of justice, we should act for justice. But the church's primary mission is to preach the gospel. This gospel gives the ultimate solution to injustice as we've described. The Bible also sets a realistic appraisal for us. Until the final judgment day, there won't be complete worldwide justice on earth.

Yes, we each should never work against justice. We should each make a difference as we can. But we need to have a realistic perspective as well. And that realistic perspective is that the only hope for real justice on

earth will come through the gospel. And the full expression of that justice will only come on Judgment Day when Christ returns. In the mean time, we are to live godly; we'll seek to contribute to justice; but chiefly the church must bring to the world the ultimate solution. Jesus Christ. No one else will. And there is no other real solution. Saints of God, be concerned about justice. Live justly. Encourage justice. But most of all, share the gospel that gives the real hope of justice to the world.

And that's a justice that in God's wisdom has resulted in grace for us. As we've thrown ourselves on the mercy of the court of Christ, we have found not only clemency; and not only complete pardon; but we've been highly exalted before God. The wisdom of God in Christ that has brought together both his mercy and justice. This is grace upon grace for us. Let us tell the world of this great grace. Amen.

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