

Part 11: Justice and Only Justice

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I was talking with one of the girls at our campus ministry this week and she was reflecting on the nature of discipline and punishment that we have seen in Deuteronomy in the past weeks. Interestingly enough, it's a theme that comes up again today.

Twice we will see calls for capital punishment for offenders as Moses calls God's people to "purge the evil men" from their midst.

She was thinking of her non-Christians friends who think that such acts of punishment make it impossible for this God to also be a good God. Can God punish people and still be good?

I asked her if her friends think that punishment is always a negative thing? She said, "I think so." But then I asked what her friends would think if they had one of their children stolen, molested and murdered? Would they find punishment to be wrong in instances like that?

The answer was an implied, "No." Why is that? Because we at some level we have in our hearts a clear and demanding line of justice.

This week we are reminded of the sanctity of life, and the rights of all people in all places, both out of the womb and in it. Tomorrow we celebrate the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. and his demands for justice towards those who due to their skin color have been denied rights which others are afforded.

Consider even MLK's forerunner, the former slave, poet and pastor Fredrick Douglass who described the injustice even in the church in this sort of scathing way: **"I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of the land... I am filled with unutterable loathing when I contemplate the religious pomp and show, together with the horrible inconsistencies, which everywhere surround me. We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members. The man who wields the blood-clotted cowskin during the week fills the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus...The slave auctioneer's bell and the church-going bell chime in with each other, and the bitter cries of the heart-broken slave are drowned in the religious shouts of his pious master...The slave prison and the church stand near each other...The dealers in the bodies of men erect their stand in the presence of the pulpit, and they mutually help each other. The dealer gives his blood-stained gold to support the pulpit, and the pulpit, in return, covers his infernal business with the garb of Christianity. Here we have religion and robbery the allies of each other—devils dressed in angels' robes, and hell presenting the semblance of paradise."**

Central to Douglass' point is not just that slavery is wrong, but that of all people, God's people should be ministers of justice, not injustice. This plea has been taken up broadly by our culture.

Our culture is zealous for justice, and yet we have yet to see a culture so outraged or a campaign so confident to establish the justice we all desire. Which is why we are reminded today of the central

importance of God's word. Because doesn't our world long for the heartbeat of Moses' message today?
Deuteronomy 16:18-20.

Our world cares and cries for justice. But what Moses is going to show us today in Deuteronomy 16-18, is that God cares more about justice than we do. To be one who cares about justice is to ultimately concern yourself with the God of the Bible. Whether you feel awkward or defensive in a culture which is always watchdogging for injustice, or whether you feel passionate about the pleas for justice, God wants you to consider it as he considers it.

So what we are going to see today in Deuteronomy are three aspects of justice: **The Definition of Justice, The Design of Justice and the Demand of Justice.**

My hope is that you have a Bible today because once more, we are dealing with a larger passage of scripture, so we are going to be bouncing around a little bit. But what I want you to read with me once more is the passage we just read plus what Moses is going to say in chapter 17: **Deuteronomy 16:18-20, 17:8-13.**

So here we see this seamless transition. God's people are to follow justice and only justice, and in order to do that they need judges who judge with righteous judgment. So what does God do? He sets up the priests as judges.

When people are debating about who is guilty in a murder, who robbed who, who has a legal right to this or that, and they cannot resolve the matter on their own, they are to go to the central place of worship and present it to the judges and they will declare to you what is right.

Now if someone doesn't like the verdict of the judge, and they rebel against it, then that person is to be put to death. That's to say that if someone is declared innocent of a crime, and the alleged victim rises up and kills the innocent person. That person is to be put to death. If someone is declared to be guilty, but that person runs away or is aided by counterparts, that person is to be put to death.

This is pretty strong language here, but it is strong because it gets to the center of our first point today: **The Definition of Justice.**

The other day we had some friends over and we heard screams coming out of the room where my two year old daughter was playing with her friend. Her friend had come out screaming and holding her face and so we went to Ellie and Sarah asked her: Ellie did you hit her? And Ellie said yes. Sarah then wanted some more info so she said, "Did you scratch her?" Ellie said, "Yes." "Did you push her?" Ellie said, "Yes." And at this point Sarah was pretty sure Ellie would have confessed to anything so she said, "Did you lick her?" And Ellie said "Yes."

Now the reason why Sarah and I didn't enforce justice to the standards Moses called us to is because in our limitations, we couldn't possibly know what happened. But for God's people, when they traveled to God's chosen place, God's real presence was there. And as the priests ministered in God's holy presence, God was able to help them discern what really happened.

Why can Moses allow the decisions made by the priestly judges in God's holy place be so strictly enforced? Because God gets to define justice. The only reason what Moses just described is not totalitarian foolishness is that God actually knows justice and is able to act on it.

This presupposition that God made the world, and has spoken and acted in our world, and is able to define and decide what is right and wrong is a bedrock truth. Because something needs to define morality and justice.

We see the need for this because every cry for justice or morality has as its foundation something which defines it.

For instance ISIS released a document of Questions and Answers defining how they are allowed to treat female captives under the guidance of Allah. This definition of justice said that it is allowable for Muslim males to have intercourse with any female captives and be free from blame. This goes on to define all females as even those who are under the age of puberty. This according to their god, is just.

But contrary to some claims, this is not only a religious problem. Honest secular world views understand this dilemma as well.

Or take the more consistent atheists who see us as no more than an accidental assortment of materials with no meaning or purpose beyond that. Consider the Duke Professor, Alex Rosenberg who in 2012 gave an address on atheism called, "The Atheists Guide to Reality," where he too offered a Q&A.

Question: What is the difference between right and wrong, good and bad? Answer: There is no moral difference between them. Question: Why should I be moral? Answer: Because it makes you feel better than being immoral. Question: Is abortion, euthanasia, suicide, paying taxes, foreign aid, or anything else you don't like forbidden permissible? Answer: Anything goes.

Can justice be defined? And who defines it? Our individual sense of justice is irreversibly shaped by the subconscious answers we have to those two questions. But here Moses makes explicit what we need to understand: God defines justice. Why? Two reasons.

Later on in Deuteronomy, Moses is going to speak of God like this: **Deuteronomy 32:4**. God is in himself, in his nature a just and upright God. In contrast to us, God has no variance inside of himself. Look at how God revealed himself to Moses: **Exodus 34:6-7**.

God gets to define justice because justice isn't some impersonal force. Justice is part of God's very nature and is represented in his people who are made in his image. We long for justice because we are made in the image of a God who is just, it is part of us.

But there is a second reason that God gets to define justice. In 17:8-13 we see how God's justice is needed because injustice hurts people. We need justice because justice is a social issue. But what immediately follows God's call for justice and only justice is not what we think it would be.

We think God's call for justice would be followed up with what we just read. But look at what actually follows: **Deuteronomy 16:20-17:1**.

What immediately follows God's call for justice is a section on worship. Why? Because justice is a worship issue. Justice is spiritual before it's social. In fact the Hebrew word for justice is often translated as "righteousness." Even linguistically it cannot be separated from spiritual realities.

And the chief injustice that our world can know, is the injustice of worship. Taking what is due to God and giving it to things which are not God.

There is a terrible trend going on in places around the world which are in draught. Historically most of these places have relatively shallow wells dug by whatever resources the locals had. But what's happening is that wealthier individuals, or companies, are coming in with expensive, high-end well digging equipment and buying land in these areas. And as they drill their wells deeper than everyone else's they find water that other people can't.

Which in and of itself isn't that sinister, but groundwater doesn't know any borders. Which means that as these rich people suck up the groundwater, they are able to not only access the water which is underneath the land they own, but just like a giant straw in a large pool, they suck up all the water which belonged to everyone else, and sell it to the highest bidder.

This is what our false worship is. False worship steals from God. Now, God is not a vulnerable villager, but he is a righteous judge. Which is why verses 2-7 prescribe once more the death penalty on individuals who come into God's people and lead them away from the worship of God and to the worship of false gods.

Brothers and sisters, as we've mentioned before, we don't worship Asherah poles or pillars of Ba'al, but to neglect God and to try and live life as if he isn't the rightful Lord and creator is to commit cosmic injustice.

The reason why we wrestle with injustice towards others is that we live our lives practicing injustice towards God. Hearts separated from God by their sin will always wrestle not only with personal injustice, but also in fighting injustice because it cannot be defined or defended with any consistency.

The key then is to be reconciled back to God, to have our hearts return the stolen water and drink from the well of grace. And this is where Moses goes next. Because our hearts are restless, we need some sort of ecosystem in place that helps us live rightly with God and with others. And this is where we see our second point today: **The Design of Justice.**

I watched two unrelated films, one on ISIS and one on the Mexican cartels, and in each film key local individuals made the same point. If real change is to happen, it can't be a rogue rocket strike or a military take-over. Those things have happened before and it never brought real change. In order for justice to get a foothold a strong government which seeks the welfare and voice of the people must be established. This is what Moses is doing in the back half of chapter 17 and chapter 18.

Moses has told Israel that if they want to live long in the land they must pursue justice and only justice. But in order to do that they must remain unblinded, they must not be subverted from the cause of the righteous. So God puts in place three governmental offices which are to create an ecosystem where justice thrives towards both God and others.

If God's people were to love God and love others they would need the kings whom God would choose, priests which God whom God would choose and prophets whom God would choose.

God's king would rule God's people by righteous law, just protection and a pure, undivided heart. Look at how Moses describes this king: **Deuteronomy 17:14-17.**

Power, sex and wealth are the by-lines of any story of an elected official gone wrong. But God says that his king will be free from these influences because he will instead be devoted to something else:

Deuteronomy 17:18-20

God's king would be ruled by God's law. He would have his own copy, he would read it and let that guide his heart. The result is that instead of lording his power over his brothers, he would identify with them in their submission to God.

Then we see God's priests. And Moses shows the role of God's priests in **Deuteronomy 18:5**. The priests are to stand and minister in the name of the Lord. This idea of standing isn't a passive word, but an active one. They stand as soldiers in a gap between a broken people and a holy God.

They help God's people approach God safely. They guide them in the ways and worship of God so that they might have peace with God. But what's interesting is that Moses doesn't speak of the injustice the potential priests would have, instead he spends most of his time talking about how the people are to treat the priests justly.

God has instructed the people to provide for the priests of their own money and food, and to rob the priests of this would do two things. First it would rob God of worship. But second, it would perhaps prohibit the priests from ministering in ways which are pure.

A temptation then would be for the priests to either stop the work of worship all together, or to allow forms of worship which stimulate greater gifts from the people. They would follow the money and allow worship forms which the people were happy to give to.

To stop this Moses reminds the people of their responsibility and the priests of their divinely appointed role to minister true worship before God.

And then we get to the prophets and Moses starts by highlighting the corrupt, unjust and abominable practices of the nations: **Deuteronomy 18:9-12**.

So here is a laundry list of things which are corrupt and show utter disregard for human life. But look at why these people do this: **Deuteronomy 18:13-14**.

The people are sacrificing their kids and participating in these spiritual Ponzi-Pyramid schemes because they are listening to the wrong voices. They are listening to the talkers of the time.

But look at the restorative and protective role of God's prophet: **Deuteronomy 18:15-19**.

If God's people are to remain pure, uncorrupted and clear headed for justice, they must learn to hear God's voice clearly. Here in the same sermon where Moses is preparing the people for his own death, he also promises that God will send another prophet like him. A prophet who will speak words of truth and justice to God's people. In a world of chaos, we need a voice like this.

This is the economy which protects people from injustice by prioritizing a right relationship to God and a right response to each other. This was the key: A King to wield his power for the benefit of the masses, a

priest who mediated the presence of God to his people, and a prophet who clearly spoke to them the words of God.

The problem was, the system was never pure enough. As the story of Israel goes on we see kings, priests and prophets, but the story is anything but justice and only justice. Look at **Micah 3:9-11**.

The story of Israel is not a story of justice. But neither is our cultural story. It's a far too common occurrence for our world to find crusaders unveiled as creeps, activists unveiled as embarrassments, and powerful voices unveiled as paid participants.

Even those who survived the internal temptations to immorality, enduring vision and lasting change has showed hard to come by. Yet our desire for justice remains unchanged. Israel was looking and today our culture is looking. But now it is time to look where God has called us to look.

The Dutch Theologian, Herman Bavinck recognized this wonderful tension on which our world turns: **"[The world seeks God] and at the same time they flee him. They have no interest in a knowledge of his ways, and yet they cannot do without him. They feel themselves attracted to God and at the same time repelled by him."**

Everything Israel looked for and everything our hearts look for in justice must learn to be found in Jesus Christ. In order for us to see justice and only justice we must see Jesus.

Jesus came as the true King. When Jesus was in the wilderness he was tempted by the Devil with all the wealth and power of the world. But what did he cling to? God's law. Jesus did more than obey God's law. He did more than apply it to his own heart. He fulfilled God's law. He met the perfect standard we couldn't so that he could give his brothers his righteousness.

Jesus came as the true priest, who offered a sacrifice pleasing to God when no one else was able. He stood as God's minister to bring a broken people to a holy God in a final and pleasing way.

And Jesus was the true prophet who spoke of repentance and grace. Who expounded upon the Law of Moses and called people to "Love the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind and strength and love others as themselves."

Jesus was the ecosystem which would finally bring justice to the world. He was the King who would protect it, the priest who would offer it, and the prophet who would remind us of it.

Now let's be realistic. We look around our world and we see injustice rage as it always has. What kind of justice did Jesus bring? That's where we forget that justice is first and foremost and issue of the heart. Jesus didn't come to bring justice to a culture, he came to bring justice first and foremost to sinners. To people. To your current state as one condemned under just punishment.

Look at how the gospel of Matthew describes Jesus' ministry: **Matthew 12:18-21**.

Jesus brings justice. How does he bring justice? Where do we see it?

This is where we look at our last point today: **The Demand of Justice**.

Look with me at **Isaiah 1:27-28**.

Because God defines justice, and because those who reject God are guilty of breaking righteous justice, God decides what happens to those sinners. And in Isaiah we see two options, they will either be redeemed by justice and righteousness through repentance, or they will be broken together in judgment.

Justice demands first and foremost that you come and be reconciled in Jesus Christ. Our fury at the injustice of this world is meant to provoke in us a greater understanding of the injustice we have committed towards the God who created us.

To reject this is to be justly punished. As I mentioned earlier, there is no one who is opposed to punishment when we understand the severity of the crime. The question is do you listen to God's prophets and understand that there is nothing more serious than robbing God of worship.

And if you see that, then see the grace of God to make a way for justice by righteousness. It would be entirely unjust for God to ignore your sin and act like it didn't happen. That cheats justice. Sin must be punished. But if you repent, Jesus' righteousness, Jesus' life of perfect justice is counted to you, and your life of unrighteousness and injustice is counted to Jesus. He pays the price of your punishment.

That's something only God can do. I can die for my sins, you can die for your sins but the perfect sinless son of God can die for the sins of all who repent in his name.

Because look here at this wonderful truth: **Romans 3:22-26**. Justice and only justice through Jesus Christ.

Do you hear God's word here? To be truly concerned about justice means you must first stop your injustice. Non-Christians, atheists, and Mormons might do wonderful things to stop injustice in our world but they can't stop their own injustice in their heart.

Only Jesus does that, and here he has spoken so that we might see it and live differently.

So in closing I want to offer three quick summary statements of how the gospel demands we understand justice.

First, justice is not just a social issue, it's a spiritual one. Even if everyone in the world was committed to justice and only justice, we would still run into the problem of definition. Only the God of the Bible defines justice, because it's only the God of the Bible who is wholly just.

No other worldview has proven the benefit of this justice like a Christian worldview. This God is so loving that in justice he pays the punishment of the sinful. But in justice he punishes those who refuse to repent. All justice starts with this spiritual reality.

Second, justice is not just a political point, it's a biblical one. I say this to two crowds of people. To the people who often prioritize social justice over the Bible, I want to remind you that God was after justice far before Twitter was. The solution isn't to distance ourselves from the Bible, even the Old Testament, because the whole of God's word lays the foundation for radical benevolent justice.

To the second group of people who get anxious or uncomfortable any time social justice is talked about, the Bible cares about how God's people treat issues of injustice. There are countless commands in the New Testament which call us to be concerned with ways in which power or sin preys on the weak and vulnerable. The gospel makes justice comfortable for us because we were saved by radical justice.

And lastly, justice is not the work of the church, it is the witness of the church. What do I mean when I say this? Well let me show you just briefly by referencing two verses from **Deuteronomy 15:4,11**.

Which is it Moses? Will there be poor or will there not be poor? Moses is saying yes, in God's place there will be no poor. But here in this place, in this land there will be poor. Jesus says the same thing, "the poor you will always have."

What are the implications of this? The work of the church is not to transform culture through social justice or benevolence. The work of the church is to make disciples and teach them to obey all that Jesus commanded us.

This means that the priority of the church isn't cultural change, it is spiritual change. But the assumption is that when people are changed the ability to influence culture also changes. People create culture.

So this means that when we do the work of justice in our city and in our world, we are doing not because it is the mission of the church to do so. But we are doing it because every act of justice and mercy bear witness to the ultimate act of justice and mercy. And in that way it complements our efforts in discipleship and evangelism by saying: "One day, in God's place, this will be what life is like."

We understand here that it is broken and imperfect, but Jesus has brought perfect and whole justice to us by restoring us to God now, and promising to bring us to God one day.

So dear church, when we understand the gospel we can say wholeheartedly that our cry is justice and only justice.