

The Justice We Long For

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Date: 19 July 2017

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[0 : 00] We've been looking together through the book of Deuteronomy in our Sunday morning congregation, and I thought for these two Wednesdays, this week and next week, we would have a look again at a little section here about rule and authority, really, in God's kingdom in his land of Israel.

So we're going to read from chapter 16 at verse 18 down to verse 13 of chapter 17, and you'll see it's all about leadership in terms of judges and leaders in the society of Israel.

So verse 18, you shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. You shall not pervert justice.

You shall not show partiality. You shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. Justice and only justice you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land the Lord your God is giving you.

You shall not plant any trees and asherah beside the altar of the Lord your God that you shall make. You shall not set up a pillar, that is, to Baal, which the Lord your God hates.

[1 : 18] You shall not sacrifice to the Lord your God an ox or a sheep in which is a blemish, any defect, whatever, for that is an abomination to the Lord your God. If there's find among you within your towns that the Lord your God is giving you a man or a woman who does what is evil in the sight of the Lord your God in transgressing his covenant, and has gone and served other gods and worshipped them, or the sun or the moon or any of the hosts of heaven which are forbidden, and it's told you and you hear of it, then you shall inquire diligently.

And if it is true and certain that such an abomination has been done in Israel, then you shall bring out to your gates that man or woman who has done this evil thing, and you shall stone the man or woman to death with stones.

On the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses, the one who is to die shall be put to death. A person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness. The hand of the witness shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people.

So you shall purge the evil from your midst. If any case arises requiring decision between one kind of homicide and another, one kind of legal right and another, one kind of assault and another, any case within your towns that is too difficult for you, then you shall arise and go up to the place that the Lord your God will choose, and you shall come to the Levitical priests and to the judge who is in office in those days, and you shall consult them, and they will declare to you the decision.

Then you shall do according to what they declare to you from that place the Lord your God will choose, and you shall be careful to do according to all that they direct you. According to the instruction that they give you, and according to the decision which they pronounce to you, you shall do.

[3 : 01] You shall not turn aside from the verdict that they declare to you, either to the right hand or to the left. The man who acts presumptuously by not obeying the priest who stands to minister there before the Lord your God, or the judge, that man shall die.

So you shall purge the evil from Israel, and all the people shall hear and fear and not act presumptuously again. Well, keep the Bibles open, and let's pray together as we come to God's Word.

Lord our God, we thank you for this, your Word, your Word of truth and light, that you have given to guide our path, to direct our steps in the ways of righteousness, in the ways of justice.

So we pray that you would open our eyes and open our hearts now to your Word, that we might hear it and understand it, and in doing so receive it and do it, that we might walk in your ways, under your rule, and therefore know what it means to live and to live well.

So we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, how can we have the justice that we long for, so that things are right and not wrong in the world, in our families, in the church, in society at large?

[4 : 27] The Apostle Paul writes to the Christian church in Ephesus in the New Testament, and he tells them that it is, in fact, the church of Jesus Christ that is to show the world the way of light, the way of right, the way of justice, by walking in the light.

And part of that is showing the way of right leadership, right authority to the world. Paul quotes the fifth commandment to the Ephesian church.

Remember, honor your parents. And he tells them it's the commandment, the first commandment, with a promise that you may live long and live well. And it's clear, of course, that what that means is having good leadership, not just in the home, but also in the church, in the community, and in society at large.

Of course, we recognize that, don't we? We speak not only of fathers in the home, but we speak of church fathers, community fathers, national fathers, and so on. We recognize that.

And so what God is saying is that if we want to have justice in society, if we want things to be right, then we must honor God's appointed structures of leadership and of authority in every sphere of life, in families, in the church, in the community, and in the world.

[5 : 35] And that's what this passage here in Deuteronomy chapter 17 is concerned with. And it has a very great deal to teach us still today about the justice, the rightness that we all long for.

And also about the Supreme Lord under whose rule alone, under whose law alone, we can truly find that rightness. People are crying out, aren't they, for justice all the time in our world today.

It's a constant cry. Give us justice. Think of the Grenfell fire disaster and so on. People want justice. And actually, when you think about that, in our Western secular world, that desire for justice doesn't sit very well with the prevailing worldview of atheism, of secularism.

People like Richard Dawkins, remember, he says, everything is just by chance. Everything is just down to our DNA. So he wrote this. There's no design, no purpose in the universe, no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.

DNA neither knows nor cares. It just is. And we dance to its music. There's not much hope there, is there, for the grieving person. It's all just down to chance.

[6 : 51] But it's worth asking somebody who has a committed atheist view, a secularist view like that, it's worth asking them, why is it that their view of the world is actually in such conflict with the deepest instincts of their heart as a human being?

Not least this cry for justice, for things to be right, for the world to be other than it so often is. Especially in our world of humanity. Why is it that deep down, if you believe there is no God, there is no reason for anything, why is it that deep down you know that there is injustice?

And you want justice. You know that there is evil. And you want punishment for that. And you want good. You want what is right. There is a world, isn't it, that we all long for.

And what's described here, if you look at verses 18 to 20 of chapter 16, is what we long for. It's what we know we need. We want, verse 20, justice and only justice.

So that we will live long and live well in the earth. And if we're to have all this that speaks about human health and human flourishing and so on, then the truth is that we need what verses 18 and 19 here describe.

[8 : 01] We need proper and good authorities who will judge with righteousness, with justice, who promote what is right, who will prevent and who will punish what is wrong, who will not pervert justice, who won't show partiality, who won't give bribes.

How powerful the lure of bribes are. Look at verse 19. It blinds people who are otherwise wise. It subverts the cause of righteousness. Well, we know that, don't we? The Bible tells us the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil in the world.

And we see it. That is the world that we want and that we need, isn't it? Justice and only justice. Real rightness with right order, right authority in our world.

Well, how then do we get that? Well, that is what verses 21 and 22 and the first verse of chapter 17 tell us. The Bible doesn't help here by having that paragraph division because this section is all of a piece.

These verses are linked vitally with what goes before because the point is, you will have justice and justice alone only if you truly honor the Lord and the Lord alone.

[9 : 12] It's crackling here. Can you stop? Can you hear me? I'm on? Okay. Justice and justice alone comes only if we worship the Lord and the Lord alone.

And that's the reality that these verses tell us. You see, verses 21 and 22 and verse 1 of chapter 17, they tell us that there is to be no space beside God's altar for any other at all.

I think we're crackling again. I'm plugging in, plugging back in. Perhaps you'll bring me the other one.

Do you want to? We'll give it one more try, shall we? We'll carry on. Okay. Look at verses 21 and 22. What are they saying? They're saying there is to be no corruption of the worship of the one true God.

There's to be no rival to the true God, either by Asherah, the goddess, or Baal and his pillars. In other words, in our language, there's to be no pluralism. There's to be no relativizing of the worship of the one true God.

[10 : 23] And verse 1 of chapter 17 tells us there's likewise to be no contempt of the will of the one true God. There's to be no presumption in worship. We can't ignore God's commands about how he tells us he is to be worshipped.

We're to worship his way. Not anything goes. Not any old offering that we want to make. No, only what God prescribes. If people are to have the thing that they long for, the thing that they truly need, we cannot ignore the prerequisite for that, which is that there can be no perversion of true worship, no rival to the Lord, and no presumption on his will.

There must be real reverence for the word of God. And that's why God is telling his people Israel that these things, therefore, are evil, which must be purged from among them.

Look at verse 7. Purge the evil from your midst. Again in verse 13. So you shall purge the evil from Israel. And verses 2 to 7 describe that purging of evil and idolatry, purging of corrupt worship.

And verses 8 to 13 talk about the purging of that contempt, that presumption upon God's word. Now you might think it harsh, these death sentences upon these things.

[11 : 42] But you see, these crimes are the very things which will absolutely destroy the whole fabric of justice and rightness in the whole land. These are the very things which will plunge Israel into a place of injustice, of bribery and corruption, of exploitation.

And that's why it's so deadly serious. You see, none of us would say, would we, that if armed police see a terrorist on the rampage, shooting people, bombing people, killing people, that he should not immediately take aim and fire and kill that terrorist.

Of course, because the evil has to be stopped. And God is saying that is exactly the same here. Because if, if evil like this was to flourish in Israel, if it was tolerated, if it was promoted, it would be disaster.

And if you doubt that, later on, read back at the end of chapter 12 of Deuteronomy, it tells us what that pagan culture in Canaan had sunk to, including things like dreadful child sacrifice, murder of children, offering them to gods in fire.

See, the scholar Derek Kidner says this, there is no limit to the deliberate cultivation of evil. Once the light of God has been extinguished, men then grow to love and even revere everything that the Lord hates.

[13 : 04] Now, there's a word here, therefore, isn't there for our society, for our world today? Because if we want the kind of society that verses 18 to 20 here describe, righteous, just, then the more that we incline to revere the Lord alone and his ways alone, the more just and right our society will be.

That's the key reason that Western society flourished in the last 500 years since the Protestant Reformation, especially in Northern Europe, in the United Kingdom, in North America.

That's something that's acknowledged in a book by the atheist, indeed, historian, Neil Ferguson, his book on Western civilization. He charts the rise of the West, and he says that the most important factor of all was the rise of Protestant Christianity.

That underpins the rise of Western culture in the last 500 years. But chillingly, he charts in that book as well how in the last 50 years we've seen the influence of Christianity crack.

And therefore, at the same time, the wealth, power, and influence, and wealth ebbing away. And we shouldn't be surprised by that, should we, as Christians?

[14 : 18] Because as we become more and more post-Christian in the West, rejecting our Judeo-Christian findings, the things that have underpinned and built up our society as we've known it, well, the more that we reject that, the less justice, the less rightness in society we're going to see.

And the more and more we're going to see of things that are wrong and unhealthy and unjust. That's the truth. That's what God's Word is warning us and telling us is going to happen.

We have to be realistic about that. Now, of course, ancient Israel was a theocracy. That means that the church and the state were one. Nowadays, of course, it's very different. Nevertheless, God's direction to Israel about what is right and just and good gives light to the whole world, and it still gives light to the world.

It tells us what is the righteousness that will exalt a nation, and it tells us what is the sin that will be a reproach to any people. And so if rulers, even today, are wise, they will take heed to the light of God.

And if Christians are wise, we will pray and we will work so that rulers do give heed to the light of God. Now, we've got to distinguish as Christians, of course, between the right arena for church fathers, for church leaders, and for city fathers, for civic leaders and governments.

[15 : 37] God has not given the church in this new covenant age the power of the sword, the rule in the civic realm. The only weapon that he's given us in the church, of course, is the word of God in the gospel.

Nevertheless, he has given that power to civil authorities. Paul is very clear in Romans 13. Peter is as clear in 1 Peter 2. Paul says that civil authorities are God's servants for our good.

He says they're ministers of God indeed in the world. And therefore, of course, they will be answerable to God for their actions, for what they do. And their chief calling by God in those areas of life are to promote what is good and to punish what is evil.

And of course, since God alone is the one who can tell us what is good and what is evil, then he will hold every ruler in this world responsible for what they have done to promote good or what they have done to promote evil.

And so as Christians today, that's why the New Testament tells us we are to pray and we were to work so that our leaders and our rulers will know the difference between good and evil and will promote good and punish evil.

[16 : 50] And in a democracy, of course, which is actually the rule of the people of all of us, we have a great responsibility. We have a duty to do everything we can so that our rulers will know the difference between right and wrong and good and evil.

Because here's the truth. You and I, we are part of the government in a democracy. We may not feel that we are, but we are. And that means that we will answer to God for our part in the government of this country and for our part in ensuring that our leaders know the difference between good and evil.

The Bible doesn't allow us as Christians, does it, to bury our heads in the sand, to hide away, to escape from the world. It commands us to engage in this world for good and for righteousness.

That's part of loving our neighbor. And loving our neighbor is, of course, part of what it means to truly love God. So there's something here to make us think about the world, about our society, about our place, about our duty as Christians within it.

But of course, God's chief concern in his word is not just for the world around, but it is for his own people. It's for his church, the church of Jesus Christ. After all, that's where the world is going to see or ought to see flourishing human life.

[18 : 01] That's where it ought to see society living in the light of God's revelation and in the liberation of God's rule, not the world's rule. That's why Paul says that we in the church are to be a pillar, a buttress of truth in the world.

We're to be a light to the nations. And these things are written to give us hope so that we can bring hope and show hope to the world. So what can we learn in the church for ourselves and for the world about leadership?

And what can we show the world about rightness, about justice in all of these things? Well, I think a very great deal from these verses, not least from what we see in verses two to seven about the rigorous process of justice.

Just look at these verses. Look at verse four. Look at the concern for truth over against mere hearsay. You're to inquire diligently. You're to investigate properly.

You only act if something is true and certain. And notice verse six, not just on the word of one, there must be more than one witness. There's great realism there, isn't there?

[19 : 02] Because people tell lies. People have wrong motives. They bear grudges. And you must get to the truth. Look at verses two and five.

There's a concern there for impartiality, isn't there? There's no bias in favor of men, for example, as there is in Sharia law, as there was in most other ancient laws. No, men and women, everybody equal under the law.

That's important. There's a concern for punishment that is just as retribution for a crime. Look at verse five. It's very important. Punishment must fit the crime.

Notice, you don't just punish somebody in order that crimes are deterred. That's what dictators do. When Saddam Hussein used to get annoyed at people, he sent his henchmen out and they would just round up a bunch of people, randomly string them up on the lampposts in Baghdad and hang them.

That was certainly a very effective deterrent. It struck the fear of God into people. But there was no justice in that. They weren't punished for crimes that they committed. No, God says punishment deserves crime.

[20 : 07] Crime deserves punishment. Punishment is retribution for wrongdoing. Notice again in verse five, the concern for public justice over against private vengeance.

It's to be done in the city gate. That is the public courts. That's very important. You don't just take it into your own hands. There's great concern also in verse seven. Do you see for, for responsible litigation, the witness must cast the first stone.

That ought to give pause, oughtn't it? Because you can't just make an accusation against somebody and then hide away from the consequences. You've got to be involved. And again, verse seven, notice the concern for the real consequences of sin and evil.

Evil must be purged because it's a thing to be feared. It affects everybody. We've got to take sin and wickedness seriously. Again, there is a word there for society in general, for the world.

These things are all very familiar to us as we read them. Why is that? Well, it's because our legal system was based squarely upon exactly these biblical principles for which we should thank God. It's why we have still a trustworthy legal system, at least much more so than many places.

[21 : 18] But how relevant these things would be if we applied them rigorously to our churches? The Lord Jesus echoes these things, doesn't he himself, in Matthew 18, where he talks about disputes among believers, as does Paul, where he talks in the same way about needing two or three witnesses and so on.

The Lord isn't naive about Christians likewise, telling lies, making up untrue allegations. Just think how different our churches would be if in all of these things we followed exactly this kind of pattern.

If we had an absolute concern for truth over against hearsay, that would absolutely cut down gossip in the Christian church almost immediately, wouldn't it? Or if we had an issue with a brother and a sister, if we sought to deal with it properly, using these procedures publicly, rightly, without having private vendettas in the background.

Or if we were willing always to put our name, or even better, our face to an accusation that we wanted to make against somebody else, instead of doing it behind their back or anonymously. But that often happens in churches.

I never had an anonymous letter in my life until I became a pastor of a church. Isn't that a shocking thing? Does the church of Jesus Christ really show the world justice and only justice?

[22 : 47] Does it show the world right living, right treating of one another, truth, honesty, transparency, and everything? Because if we don't do that, how are we ever going to lead the world to worship the Lord and only the Lord?

We need to think about that, don't we? Dealing justly with one another is part of loving one another. We're to purge the evil of unlove from our midst.

And likewise, you see, we can learn also, I think, from verses 8 to 13, which deals with these very difficult cases. Verse 8 reminds us that doing the right thing sometimes can be very complex.

When it's not absolutely clear what the right decision is. And when that is the case, the point here is, the decision is made not merely by man's idea, but by God's pronouncement.

You take it to the Supreme Court. And what God declares, verse 9, that is what you must do, verse 10. It's repeated again, twice.

[23 : 49] You must do, not what you think best, but what God declares. You are not to presume. And this is about the great distinction between the idea that all human law is subject to a higher law, the law of God, or whether you even just call it natural law.

The distinction between that idea and the idea that ultimately law is just made by man. It's positive law. It's just posited by governments and so on.

Western civilization has always understood that there is a higher law beyond the realm of man, under which all human law must be decided. That was why they could have the Nuremberg trials.

That's why nobody who was a prison officer in a Nazi prison camp killing Jews could have the defense and say, I was just obeying the law of the land. As my government told me. No, that was no defense because there is a higher law that trumps all human law.

And Western civilization has always known that, but more and more, we're leaving that behind. And right and wrong is something which is not decided above humanity, but is merely decided by humanity, by our government, by our votes today.

[24 : 58] That's why, for example, we can take something of the order of creation, like marriage between a man and woman, and now say, no, no, no, we're changing all that. Marriage can be between anybody, two men, two women, and soon between humans and animals, no doubt.

But you see, as soon as the principles of justice are removed from an absolute higher authority of morality, then ultimately, friends, the truth is there is no hope for justice in this world.

The road of positive law, man's law alone, is the road to tyranny, to totalitarianism, to terror. That's what you saw under the Nazis.

That's what you saw under the communists. That's what you see today in North Korea and other places like it. That is what Revelation chapter 13 pictures for us in that vision that John has of the mark of the beast on humanity, the mark of man, the unfettered authority of evil humanity, telling us what is good and what is evil and calling good evil and evil good.

And again, as Christians today, we have to be realistic about that. We have to see where our society is heading and we have to be prepared for that. And even more vital, once again, you see, as the church today, we will be under increasing pressure to come into line with what the world tells us is right and what the world tells us is wrong over against what God says is right and wrong.

[26 : 26] But no, always, and especially in issues of great difficulty, we are faced with in our world today. We have to make judgments about it. Things like life and death matters, as here. In these things, our guidance must come supremely from the Supreme Court.

It must come from God's Word not from only our wisdom. And we face all kinds of difficult questions in the world today. Difficult ethical questions as a result of modern medicine, modern technology, and so on.

We have to understand things about sexual issues, gender issues, embryo issues, the beginning of life, the end of life, all of these things.

And we must not be presumptuous in any of these things as though we know best. we must not be pragmatic just going with the flow, what the world says.

No, we go to the Supreme Court and the Supreme Court is the Word that God Himself has given us. And we are to go do what He says and what He commands.

[27 : 28] It's the Scriptures and it's the Scriptures alone that will lead us into the life that we long for. So friends, that's God's message to our world and to the church.

It's as clear as day. If we want things to be just and right in our churches, in our society, in the world, if we want justice and justice alone, then we must have the Lord and the Lord alone.

It's only under His rule that we will find all that we long for. It's only under His rule that this world can have what every human deep down longs for.

Only where there's no corruption in His worship, no rival gods. And only where there's no contempt for His Word and for His will. There's no presumption.

There is real reverence for God's Word. And if we want that in our society, then our churches must show the way because who else can and who else will?

[28 : 28] And if we want that for this whole world, then as Christians, through our work and our witness in the world today, we must speed the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ who alone at last will bring this world justice and only justice under His perfect rule and in His kingdom of peace.

Bring, Lord, your better world to birth. Your kingdom loves domain. And so to that end, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Amen.