

Reflecting God the Abundant Giver: 2. True Ambassadors of his Justice

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Date: 01 October 2017

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[0 : 00] Thank you, Andy. Well, let's turn to our Bible, shall we, and to our reading for today, which is in Deuteronomy chapter 24 and 25, beginning at chapter 24 and verse 8.

And that's page 166, if you have one of the blue church visitors Bibles. We've been working our way through these central chapters of Deuteronomy, where Moses is expanding and applying the implications of the Ten Commandments, the Decalogue, to the people of God.

And here we're dealing with issues to do with the matters of the Ninth Commandment, the command for truthfulness and against falsehood. So we begin at Deuteronomy 24, verse 8.

Take care, in the case of a leprous disease, to be very careful to do according to all that the Levitical priests shall direct you, as I commanded them. So you shall be careful to do.

Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam on the way as you came out of Egypt. When you make your neighbor a loan of any sort, you shall not go into his house to collect his pledge.

[1 : 15] You shall stand outside, and the man to whom you make the loan shall bring the pledge out to you. And if he's a poor man, you shall not sleep in his pledge.

You shall restore to him the pledge as the sun sets, that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you. And it shall be righteousness for you before the Lord our God. You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he's one of your brothers or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns.

You shall give him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets, for he's poor and counts on it, lest he cry against you to the Lord and you be guilty of sin. Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers.

Each one shall be put to death for his own sin. You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge.

But you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you out of there. Therefore I command you to do this. When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to it.

[2 : 30] It shall be for, it shall belong to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. That the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again.

It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterwards. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.

You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt. Therefore I command you to do this. If there's a dispute between men, and they come into court, and the judges decide between them, acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty, then if the guilty man deserves to be beaten, the judge shall cause him to lie down and be beaten in his presence with a number of stripes in proportion to his offense.

Up to 40 stripes may be given him, but not more. Lest if one should go on to beat him with more stripes than these, your brother be degraded in your sight.

And you shall not muzzle an ox when it's treading out the grain. Amen. May God bless to us. His word that speaks of so much fairness, justice, and truth.

[3 : 52] And what a contrast to the world that we live in. Let's turn to our Bibles to Deuteronomy chapter 24. Page.

What page is it? 166, if you have a church Bible. Now, when truth dies, justice dies, and life itself dies.

And alas, that is the story of our world, in which human beings have turned their back on the God of truth. They exchange the truth of God, says Paul, for a lie, worshipping no longer the creator, but created things.

And above all, of course, worshipping ourselves as godlike, which is the greatest delusion, the greatest lie of all. And the result of that has not been heaven on earth, but something much more akin to hell on earth.

God gave human beings up, says Paul, to what they chose to be. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, inventors of evil.

[4 : 58] Foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Well, pick up your Sunday paper and have a look. It's not new, of course.

Eight centuries before the coming of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah described the world as he saw it, suffering from the death of truth. Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you, he says.

And the result? A world full of falsehood and lies and anti-truth. Your lips have spoken lies, your tongues utter wickedness.

No one goes to law honestly. All speak lies. Their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity. Desolation and destruction are in their highways. The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their path.

Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands afar off, for truth has stumbled in the public squares. And he goes on in a similar vein with God's damning verdict on human society.

[6 : 08] You can read it all in Isaiah 59. And the Lord saw it, he says, and it displeased him that there was no justice. And so when it was abundantly clear that there was no one with the capacity or even the desire in all humanity to intercede, to put things right, then God determined to put on his own armor of righteousness.

And for his own arm to bring the truth and righteousness again to this world. A redeemer will come, he promised, to make all things right, to turn the enslaving lies of man back into the liberating truth of God, and to turn the shame and dishonor of man into the joy and the rejoicing of everlasting God.

For I, the Lord, love justice, he says. I hate robbery and wrong. So the Lord will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before the nations.

And Isaiah paints that wonderful picture, as you know, of a gloriously renewed new heavens and earth, where there is no hurt, no destruction, no injustice ever again.

All the former things are forgotten. Because instead of lies and falsehood, he says, all will bless themselves by the God of truth.

- [7 : 31] And he who takes an oath shall swear by the God of truth. Read it in Isaiah 65. A world rescued from the lies, from the falsehood of man, back to the truth of God.
- And that is what the gospel of Jesus Christ is about, friends. Nothing less than that glorious reality. For this purpose, I came into the world, says Jesus, to bear witness to the truth.
- If you abide in my word, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. I am the way and the truth and the life that you've been lacking.
- And the life he came to rescue us for is a life of true abundance, of real flourishing righteousness, and it begins now. But of course, that life is still to be revealed in all its full wonder when the Lord Jesus himself returns.
- According to his promise, Peter says, we are waiting for a new heaven and a new earth, which is the home of that righteousness. But of course, Peter acknowledges that for the most part, the world today doesn't acknowledge that.
- [8 : 45] Rejects the truth of God. But we don't. We know the truth of God in Jesus. And so he says, we must live our lives now in the light of that glorious reality.
- We must live in holiness and in godliness, he says, without spot or blemish. And all Christ's apostles say the same, don't they? Paul says, we're to live without blemish in the midst of a crooked generation, shining as lights in the world.
- God's house, as he says, the church of the living God is to be a pillar and buttress of truth in this world. In stark contrast to all the falsehood, all the lies.
- And we know that we are people of the truth, that we belong in the home of God's truth and righteousness, if that is real among us. That's the Apostle John's point. When we live not and love not just in word and in talk, but in deed, he says, and in truth.
- For if we say with our lips that we have fellowship with him while we walk in the darkness, well, we lie. And we do not do the truth, he says.
- [9 : 54] You see, when you belong to the God of truth, then truth is something you do throughout all of your life. And that's what our section here this morning in Deuteronomy 24 and 25 is really all about.
- It's about doing the truth as true and faithful ambassadors of God's truth and justice in the world. And way, way back then, Moses was teaching God's people the real meaning of the ninth commandment, which demands truth and never falsehood.
- And he's showing them here that that means far, far more than just never telling lies. No, it's about living without any falsehood, without any injustice in your life. Rather, the opposite, doing the truth, showing fairness, showing compassion, showing truth in every conceivable area of your life.
- Because they were God's redeemed people. Three times in the passage there's references to Egypt, aren't there? Reminding them that God has brought them out of Egypt, out of the place of slavery and injustice to be people of God's great liberation, God's great light.
- Verse 18, You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and that the Lord your God rescued from there. Therefore, I command you to do this. Same again in verse 22. Well, friends, how much more so for us?
- [11 : 18] How much more should we as Christian people today be people who live the truth as true ambassadors of God's justice and righteousness? The righteousness of the God who has redeemed us, not just out of Egypt, but out of the bondage and the darkness of sin by the precious blood of his own son.

So let's look carefully at these verses in front of us and take the Apostle Paul seriously. Remember, he says, these things are written for us, to teach us, to correct us, to rebuke us, to train us in righteousness so that we might be equipped for every good work that God has called us in advance to do.

And the first word here, actually, in verses 8 and 9, is a warning. Lest any of us should think that we are above the need for this kind of instruction. Don't think that. Don't think that you or anybody else can sit lightly to God's commands.

Be very careful, says verse 8, to do everything that God commands or else bear the consequences. Verse 9, remember Miriam. What's that about?

Why is there this odd mention here out of the blue of leprosy? Well, it's referring back to the story of Miriam. Read it in Numbers chapter 12. When Miriam, Moses' own sister, spoke falsely against Moses.

[12 : 38] And what happened? God struck her with leprosy. And even when Moses interceded, Lord, don't do that to her. She's my sister. The Lord said, well, I'm sorry.

Being your sister doesn't mean you can get away with disobeying me. No special treatment. So remember, Miriam, don't think that you can get away with disobedience to God with speaking or acting falsely just because, well, you feel you have some sort of special relationship or special status.

If you think that, you're on the way back to Egypt, not on the way forward to the everlasting kingdom of God. And it's a salutary warning for every one of us right at the start this morning, lest we should think, because of some association I have or some relationship I have, that somehow the Lord will sort of turn a blind eye to my disobedience and ignoring of Him, to living falsely, to not doing the truth.

But I'm Miriam. You can't treat me like that. And God said, well, yes, you are Miriam. And shouldn't you, of all people, know a lot, lot better, Miriam, sister of Moses?

That's what God says. And that's what God says to us, too, if we're tempted to say something like that. But I'm a real evangelical Christian. You can't discipline me. Oh, I'm a Reformed Christian.

[13 : 59] I'm a Presbyterian Christian or whatever it is you think is a special kind of Christian. I go to the Tron Church. I'm the pastor of the Tron Church. And God says, well, you should jolly well know a lot better, shouldn't you?

Living truly, not falsely, must be personal to every single one of God's people. There's no exceptions through connection or through privilege.

And what this passage teaches us by the various examples that it gives us is that living the truth must be absolutely pervasive throughout the entirety of the life of God's people as a whole. We're to be a pillar and buttress of truth in this world.

And it's to be pervasive truth and fairness and justice in everything we do. It's to be a way of life. And that means there must be deep thinking, searching thinking about everything that's done in the name of the Lord.

Not only that, but how it's done and when it's done and in what spirit it's done, what considerations that we give. And these verses, you see, like all of the Mosaic law, they are far, far from being just primitive commands, simplistic things.

[15 : 14] No, no, no. They're full of subtleties, full of nuance. They show great discrimination, great discretion all through. Although they're far from exhaustive, they just give us a few examples.

But when we ponder these examples carefully, we'll see just how far-reaching the commands of God are upon our lives. Well, we've only got time really this morning to scratch the surface.

But nonetheless, let's try and glean something of what it means for God's people to reflect the God of truth and to be true and truthful ambassadors of his truth and justice in this world.

Four things. First of all, verses 10 to 13 surely teach us that we must be people who strive to preserve dignity. We're to extend compassion with dignity to the poor.

Now, notice again the realism of God's word. We learn back in chapter 15 that God is clear. There will always be poor among you. So there must be realism, but there must also be righteousness.

[16 : 21] And that means not just not oppressing the poor, but it also means not dehumanizing them in the way you actually try to help them. In seeking to give something to your poor neighbor, he's saying, don't rob him further of the only thing he's actually got left, his dignity as a human being.

So you don't barge into his house to collect the pledge for the loan you're giving. And you certainly don't barge in just to find out what you probably suspect, that in fact the only thing he has worthy of a pledge is his cloak.

The most basic requirement for human warmth to keep him warm at night. Well, you might suspect, find well, that that is the case. But you respect the man's dignity.

You stand outside his door. You let him bring it out and offer it as a pledge to you just as any other person would do. You treat him like any other person with dignity and with respect. See how careful this is.

You don't refuse his pledge. You don't say, oh, I can't take that from you. No, no, no, because I can see how poor you are. So I'll make a special charity case for you. I'll give you alone without a pledge. No, no, no. You take the pledge.

[17 : 30] You take the man seriously as an equal. You don't rob him of his dignity, but you do it sensitively so as not to rob him of his need for warmth.

You give him back his pledge every night so he can have a sleep in it. So you see, you're helping your poor neighbor practically, but not in such a way as to press home to him his utter dependence on you.

Rather, you're doing it to preserve his dignity. It's far more than just the deed that counts. It's the attitude that matters, both to the recipient of the help and also to God.

Verse 13's clear, isn't it? God will see how you go about doing this. And when he sees this, he sees a true-hearted, obedient faith in action, a heart of righteousness just as the Apostle James says.

He's showing his faith by his works because any other kind of faith is just dead. Well, it's a challenge, isn't it, to think how to be compassionate, how to be generous, but in such a way as it doesn't demean people, but it dignifies them.

[18 : 40] That was the great churchman Thomas Chalmers' vision in the 19th century. Once upon a time he was a minister of the Tron Church here in Glasgow. And he longed for that kind of help to the poor that wouldn't pauperize them.

He had a vision for what he called a godly commonwealth in Scotland where this sort of thing was put into action. Of course, it never was realized because it was never really realistic because the nation lacked the necessary godliness.

But certainly, surely, within the professing church there must be that right attitude of preserving dignity even as we help those in need.

where givers and receivers are both dignified by that true hearted attitude of humble sharing in the goodness that we all know comes from God alone.

If you read Paul in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, you'll find that it's exactly that spirit that he's enjoining. And he says, those who are able to give materially are to see that as they give to those in need in that right way that they themselves are being enriched by God because he says this ministry is not only providing the supply for the need of the saints but actually it's overflowing, he says, as thanksgiving to God.

[19 : 56] God sees it. And as Jesus himself tells us repeatedly, our heavenly father sees and rewards what's done in the right spirit.

So let's be thoughtful givers whether materially or in any other way. Not demeaning, not diminishing people but dignifying them even in our help.

So if you're giving help for example in knowledge and teaching to a Christian brother or sister who's spiritually lacking, who's had very little, who's been taught little, who's undernourished spiritually in that way, who's underprivileged, be careful how you do that.

Don't let your knowledge just press upon them their feeling of inferiority to make it so obvious to them that they're undernourished. No, no, no. That's not helping them.

That's not nourishing their spiritual poverty, is it? That's just nurturing your spiritual pride. The true ambassadors of our heavenly father's justice, his righteousness, makes them compassion with dignity to the poor of all kinds.

[21 : 06] Well, there's surely a thousand other things that we could ponder. We think of all sorts of situations that this applies when we see the principle that's thrown up for us here, when it sinks in. But verses 14 and 15 are equally clear and practical, aren't they?

The ambassadors of the Lord's truth and justice must be people who pay diligently. We are to ensure payment with alacrity when we have gained something from somebody else.

You shall not oppress a hired servant who's poor and needy. Give him his wages on the same day for he's poor and he counts on it. The hired servant had no residential employment.

They depended on this kind of daily labor and daily pay. Perhaps they were more likely to be sojourners. You'll see that they're explicitly included in this. And somebody like that doesn't have a monthly budget.

They don't have a deep freeze full of food, do they? They need to go out and buy their food for the night before darkness that very day. If they don't get their pay, they come and buy their food. Their family will not eat that day.

[22 : 08] So you are not to eke out a little bit of extra interest on your bank account by delaying his pay because he depends upon it for life whereas for you it's just a little bit of extra gain.

Well, it's a straightforward principle, isn't it? Pay diligently what you owe without any delay. Now, it's easy for us when you think about that. It's easy for us to start pointing the finger at other people, big businesses, supermarkets and so on who often delay paying their accounts with much smaller businesses and suppliers and so on and often put real pressure on them even threatening their solvency at times.

Well, when that happens and it happens a lot, God sees and their guilt is before God and God will bring justice in the end. But you see, it's not any good just to point the finger at other people.

This is a challenge to all of us. Look at verse 16. It's very clear, isn't it? Every one of us will be answerable for our own sin. And you see, what the principle here is all about is seeking to live on borrowed time and borrowed money.

Money that isn't your own. That's what putting off payment like that is for something you've already possessed. Things you possess now but haven't yet paid for.

[23 : 27] Whether it's borrowed corn that the laborer has brought in from your field or a big vat of grapes from his day's labor. Or indeed, whether it's a whole lot of new clothes or new TVs or smart cars or all kinds of things that you take possession of today but you haven't yet paid for because it's all on credit.

There's much more for us to think about here, isn't there? It's certainly not just the chance for us to sort of self-righteously criticize others out there for this kind of thing because you see, we live in a society today where enriching ourselves today, we're consuming today what we don't have to pay for until another time is become endemic all around us how we all live.

And the fact is, you see, that actually does depend on exploiting often the most poor and the most vulnerable people of all. on the immediate personal level, if you live like that with a deferred payment mentality, if you run up debt, then in the end it will bring extraordinary misery both to you and your own life and your family's life and many others too.

That's a killer for so many people today. And the guilt for that lies in a number of places. Yes, with those who take on the debt wrongly and irresponsibly, but all the more so with those who encourage people in that way of life.

It seems to be most governments and most central banks in the Western world today. And of course, they're encouraged by whom? By the voters who are voting for those governments and we're all sitting here in the room today.

[25 : 04] And you see, on the macro level, the same is absolutely true, isn't it? We may think that if we borrow too much and we have to default on our loan in the end, well, it's not really going to hurt anybody because these big banks, well, they can absorb my little losses.

But you see, when everybody does that, the bank can't and the bank goes bust. And who is going to suffer the most then? Well, let me tell you, it's not going to be the fat cats. It's going to be the most vulnerable, isn't it?

Whose savings, meager as they are, are absolutely vital to them and their lives depend upon it. And even without a big bust, what happens, you see, when whole societies become addicted to debt as ours are today?

When they're addicted to not paying today for what we consume today and have today? Then the governments and the central banks have to bail everybody out by printing more money, by having interest rates so artificially low that people can stay alive.

And what happens then? Who suffers most from that? Well, it's not the wealthy asset owners because their assets are real and they just go up in value as the value of paper money goes down and down.

[26 : 11] Now, who suffers the most are those whose only asset is their own labor to sell as their real wages are depressed and they become poorer.

It's prudent savers who don't have huge assets, just have their money in the bank account and now don't get any interest at all and the interest they get is way below inflation so they're becoming poorer all the time. Or it's pensioners who discover when they retire that their pension pot will only buy them an annuity that's a third of what it would have done 20 years ago.

And so their retirement is going to be blighted. So friends, we're all in this, aren't we? Aren't we? We need to think how we live. Are we guilty of wanting far more today than we actually want to pay for today?

And in doing so, are we adding our own oppression to poor and needy in our own societies and in many other places in the world? But certainly, as Christian people, in all our personal transactions, surely we must be people who strive to pay diligently for all work done, for all goods received, for all agreements that we enter into.

Because if we don't lead our obligations, look at verse 15. God will see and it's sin and each one of us will be held accountable for our own sin.

- [27 : 35] There's a lot to chew on, isn't there? As there is in verses 17 to 22, which urge us that it's not good enough just to be reactively righteous, but rather we're to be people who plan deliberately.

God's people are to practice generosity with determination for the vulnerable. You may remember that we saw at the end of chapter 16 the clear principle of justice stated.

There's to be no perverting justice, no partiality, justice and only justice among God's people. And here's a particular instance of this in verses 17 and 18.

And then a worked example of what that looks like just in this one area of life, of material needs for the vulnerable sojourner or the fatherless or the widow. And the point is clear.

They have God-given rights. And those rights depend upon our God-given responsibilities. So we have to plan deliberately ways to help them.

- [28 : 36] And again, notice, not just charitable handouts, rather, it's giving them a way to work themselves so that they can share in the blessings of God to the whole land of Israel. Certain things, we're told, shall be for, that is, they'll belong to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, says verse 19.

And notice God says, your blessing depends on your participation in that. Chris Wright tells us, what this is saying is not to ban combine harvesters, but to find means of ensuring that the weakest and the poorest in the community are enabled to have access to the opportunity they need in order to be able to provide for themselves.

And I guess in our world today that means all kinds of things like decent education and job training and disability access and all that sort of thing. Of course though, what is spoken about here depends on everybody being aware of the grace of God, doesn't it?

Verse 18. Remember you were slaves and God redeemed you and blessed you. Again in verse 22, that's why I'm commanding you to do this because of what I've done for you. That's what underpins it and motivates it and makes it possible.

But of course, we live in a society today, don't we, that has forgotten God. So it's not surprising, as Chris Wright says, that in a culture that has been systematically squeezing the biblical God out of its definition of reality and truth, there's a corresponding resurgence of callousness towards the vulnerable.

- [30 : 14] But surely it must be different within the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Because we have a remembrance not of less, but of far, far more than any of these people here.

The abundance of God's grace towards us in his gospel, in the great redemption we have. So must not we who are called to be a pillar and a buttress of truth in our world, must not we of all people be people who plan deliberately ways of helping the deprived and the vulnerable among us to share in the blessings that God has given to us.

And in such a way is they know that that right belongs to them by right of God. It's not just a charity work on our part. I'm not so much speaking in the church of material welfare and provision because we are so fortunate, aren't we, to live in a complex welfare state.

And if we're inclined to complain about it as we do all of the time, friends, we need to go and spend a few months in some other countries in the world, don't we? And realize how fortunate we are. So I'm not speaking so much of that, although we have had our own experience here in plenty of sojourners, of asylum seekers among us, and sometimes things are very difficult materially for them.

It does apply. But we do want to be helpful, don't we? Deliberately helping people to help themselves in a way that doesn't demean them, doesn't make them just dependents.

[31 : 41] But over and above that, there are also many fatherless, many widows among us in the church today, single mothers, fatherless children who are without so many of the blessings, the benefits that a strong and stable marriage and family brings.

A single mother doing her very best to bring up children can feel like it is taking up every single ounce of life and breath just to cope. It's ripping her garment off her.

That's what verse 18 means, depriving her of the only thing she has, of everything. That she and her children should be starved of the same help and attention and joy that she sees her fellow believers having is a terrible thing.

And I think the Lord is saying to us, surely, as his church today, by these verses that we are not to be merely reactive in our health, not just responding in times of crisis, but being proactive, to have an attitude of compassion and of understanding and of love to everyone in our midst and especially the most vulnerable and to be planning deliberately how without patronizing, without stigmatizing them in any way, planning how we can ensure that they are enabled to participate fully in the richness of the shared life that is the joy of life in the church of Jesus Christ, the household of God.

So are we doing that as we should be? I think we have to ask ourselves that corporately together, but also individually. Are we opening our own homes regularly to share the family life and the joy that some in our midst lack and sharing it with them?

[33 : 32] Have you ever thought of babysitting for somebody in that position who's got nobody else at home to look after their children so that they can come at least from time to time and be part of some of the evening activities that so bless the rest of us in the life of our church?

Have you ever thought of that? Have you ever taken somebody on holiday perhaps to share in the joy that you have in such a time? Or is the very thought of that something awful to you?

How could our special family time be invaded like that by others? that they should share perhaps just one or two of the grapes of the enormous bunch of grapes that God has given you?

There's a lot for us to ponder. You see, if verse 18 and verse 22 really mean something to us, then surely the verses in between must be the most natural thing of all to any true Israelite.

How much more to the Israel of God today who are redeemed by the precious blood of Christ? Won't we of all people be those who want to plan to show that kind of generosity with real determination for the vulnerable, for the weak, for those who are lacking?

[34 : 55] And also, when there is sin and guilt in our midst, we want to take the first three verses of chapter 25 very seriously too, won't we?

Which instruct us here how to punish decently, implementing justice with humanity even for the guilty. God's concern for truth and fairness and compassion extends even, even, note verse 2, to the guilty man, even to the man who deserves a good beating.

corporal punishment was part of Israel's law code then. It was part of our own law code until just recently, even in schools. Those of my generation and older will perhaps remember the sting of that.

And nowadays, maybe we think it's great that we've left those bad old days behind. But let me just say this, these verses at least give us pause for thought, don't they? God himself declares here in verse 2 that a man may deserve a beating from his fellow men.

doesn't that undermine human dignity? Doesn't that seem to contradict everything that we've been saying? Well, improperly administered in the hands of malicious and unjust people, then it may indeed be so, which is precisely why these verses are here.

[36 : 15] Because God's very realistic about the human heart, about the injustice, the inhumanity, the cruelty that can be there. But it need not be so and indeed proper punishment is something that actually stresses the dignity and the honor of the human person even when they are guilty of a crime.

And of course, any penal code at all can be abused, can't it? It can become totally inhumane. I think there is deep inhumanity in our own penal code today and in our own chief form of punishment in our country, which is imprisonment.

I think so often that is deeply damaging to prisoners, deeply damaging to their families. It does very little to meet the crime with a just punishment.

It certainly fails whole scale in terms of rehabilitation, which it's supposed to do. It's often the very opposite. It's very significant, I think, that nowhere in the whole Bible's law is prison or imprisonment ever prescribed as a punishment for crime.

Punishment is corporal, yes. It's also all about restitution of the wrong. It's about compensation for the person who's been wronged. Far more just and effective towards the victims of crime.

[37 : 31] And indeed, that would certainly be so in our own society today. We took more notice of that. A lot cheaper for the taxpayer than the prisons. But corporal punishment can certainly be abused and it often is abused.

Often is an occasion for great brutality and cruelty. We see that in certain countries today. But not so here. Notice verse 1. There's to be proper procedure for the trial and in verse 2 for the supervising of the punishment.

And notice there's clear proportionality. A few blows for a minor offense, more for a major. But even for a major offense, there's also verse 3 clear strict prevention.

Never more than 40 lashes lest a human being be degraded. degraded. The human dignity, even of the guilty man, is being protected here by God.

Just as back in chapter 21, remember, even the dead body of a capital crime, a criminal who'd been executed had to be treated with respect. But the prisoner here, the guilty man, is to be punished if he deserves to be punished.

[38 : 44] And indeed, it is that actually itself which does most to preserve his dignity and his humanity.

It's desert that is the only thing that links punishment with truth and justice. It's only that that makes punishment right and proper. It's certainly not the power of a punishment to deter crime that makes it right and proper.

A dictator, if he wants to deter crime when a criminal offense has taken place, he just rounds up a whole bunch of people and executes them. Saddam Hussein used to do that and hang them along the streets of Baghdad. A very effective deterrent.

But devoid of any sense of justice, utterly inhumane, totally degrading of human dignity. But as C.S. Lewis says so clearly and so rightly, to be punished however severely because we have deserved it because we ought to have known better is to be treated as a human person made in God's image.

You see, proper, proportional punishment dignifies the offender. It says they have responsibility, not diminished responsibility because they're incompetent or they're insane.

[40 : 05] It says they have responsibility and they have moral capacity to respond to that discipline for their own good as well as for the good of society.

But that will be so, of course, only if there is punishment with decency and not with degradation. So we've got to think about that and lament, I think, in our own very confused society the times when so many people seem to think what is humanitarian is in fact actually undermining of people's true human nature and dignity and morality and responsibility to God.

Just take one very current example that's about to hit us, our SNP government's latest effort to try and invade the sphere of families and family life and so on. They failed in the named person scheme which the Supreme Court threw out described it as totalitarian.

But the latest is to try and criminalize parents who ever smacked their children. As though there was no difference between cruelty and sadistic violent abuse on the one hand and caring and loving discipline.

As though there's no difference between something that is degrading and torture and something that is dignifying because it is proper discipline of a child. What a contrast to the clarity, the simplicity of God's word here.

[41 : 34] And how foolish, how naive to the reality of human nature, even children's nature which is filled not with sugar and spice and all things nice but with sinfulness just like the rest of us.

Proverbs 22 verse 15 speaks God's realism. Folly is bound up in the heart of a child. The rod of discipline drives it from him. And that's why likewise Proverbs 13 verse 24 is the real truth about how to love our children.

Whoever spares the rod hates his son. Hates his son. But he who loves him is diligent to discipline him.

Friends, ignore that word at your peril. Love disciplines. Of course, never in a rage, never without restraint, never to degrade your child.

If a publicly convicted criminal of a major crime was to be punished with such care, with such protection, with such dignity to his humanity, how much more for your naughty child?

[42 : 42] Of course. But love and a care for human dignity demands that we punish deservedly but with decency.

And of course, the same goes for the church of Jesus Christ when discipline is necessary. And again, how often we get that totally wrong. Discipline in the church is not to degrade your brother.

It's to deliver him from his sin. And so often in the church today we get that wrong. We either don't discipline at all or we go far too far. That's what Paul is writing about to the Corinthian church.

Remember in 1 Corinthians 5, he's urging them, you have to discipline this brother for his sin which is so shocking. Even the pagans are shocked by it and you've done nothing about it. Well, obviously eventually they do but then they go far too far because in his next letter in chapter 2 he's pleading with them to bring him back in lest your brother be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow or degrading him.

Well, what a lot of wisdom we need, don't we? Just to keep something as simple as the ninth commandment. To know how to live with truth and fairness and justice and compassion in every area of life.

[43 : 59] But you see, cherishing the truth, literally doing the truth in love, says Paul to the Ephesian church, is how you grow up into Jesus Christ. It's how the whole church is built up.

So if we're really to be a pillar and buttress of truth in the world today, then our commitment to cherish his ways of truth must be utterly pervasive in every aspect of our life.

It must therefore be absolutely personal, affecting every single one of us who claims Christ's name. Pervasive truth and fairness and justice and compassion.

That's surely what verses 1 to 3 are telling us, aren't they? Even the guilty offender deserves it. And verse 4, too, even the ox deserves it.

The ox who's treading out that grain for you. Even he deserves his mouthful for his labor. And Paul quotes that verse, doesn't he, twice in the New Testament to the Corinthians and to Timothy. And he says, if the Lord's concern for the ox is that he should get a fair deal, well, how much more should it be your concern for those who work for the church and work for the gospel to have a fair deal?

[45 : 09] God's justice, God's compassion is even for criminals, it's even for animals, it's the Sabbath day applied to the ox and the donkey, do you remember? So as ambassadors of his justice, how much more should evidence of our justice and our fairness and our compassion and our truth be seen in everything that we do and among everyone that we live?

Above all, of course, within the household of God. It must be pervasive. And therefore, it must be personal. We can't escape verse 16 here.

Look at it again. Yes, there is a deep corporate responsibility upon the whole of God's people for this, but none of us can hide from our own personal responsibility.

We're each responsible for our own contribution to untruth, to injustice, to unfairness, to partiality. And just as no one is to be punished for other sin, God is equally clear.

We will be held guilty for our own sin. And in the end of each of us we'll stand before the Lord Jesus Christ, says Paul, and we will give an account for the deeds done or indeed the deeds undone while in this body.

[46 : 31] And Jesus warns us, doesn't he? And he encourages us when he says, your heavenly Father sees in secret. What does he see in your life and mine? We don't want it to be the end of verse 15 for us, do we?

The Lord sees and sees guilt. Don't let that be you. Don't let that be me. Rather, let it be what he sees at the end of verse 13.

Righteousness. That is, he sees you and me and he says, yes, there's one of my true children. There's someone who loves my truth. There's someone who's living my truth, who's cherishing the truth in love and who's growing up in my son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who's living for him because he's loving like him.

That's what God's looking for. That's what he's longing for as he looks at your life and mine, as he looks at our life together here as a church day by day and week after week.

Let it be that that he's seeing. Not the other. Always. True ambassadors of his heavenly justice.

[47 : 47] Let's pray. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who's in heaven.

Lord, may that be so for us. And to that end, may these words that we've read and studied this morning go deep into our hearts.

We should not only read them, but mark them well, learn them, and inwardly digest them. that through the inside of your Holy Spirit we might see in our own lives all the ways that we need to repent, all the ways that we need to begin walking in faith, doing the truth, each one of us, that together we might truly be a pillar and buttress of your truth, your justice, your fairness, your love in this dark world today.

And so point the world to Jesus Christ, our Lord. And we ask it in his name. Amen.