



## **Practice Justice (Deuteronomy 6:18-7:20)**

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**September 3, 2023**

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Justice is not an invention of man. It is not in the eye of the beholder. It is not a power grab in the guise of a moral absolute. It is not grounded in what feels right or fair. It is culturally conditioned and expressed, but it is not derived from the fleeting whims of human thought or imagination. God and God alone is the source, root, definition, and guarantee of justice.

“The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.” (Deut 32:4) “[The LORD] has established his throne for justice, and he judges the world with righteousness...” (Ps 9:7-8) “The LORD of hosts is exalted in justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness.” (Isa 5:16) “The LORD works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed.” (Ps 103:6) “For the LORD loves justice; he will not forsake his saints.” (Ps 37:28)

“He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth...” (Isa 42:3-4) “And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:7-8) “For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him.” (Isa 30:18)

If you hear the word “justice” and the first thing that comes to your mind is what “those people” are doing or not doing, or what you’re doing or not doing not doing. If it’s not who God is, what God has done, what God will do, and what makes God glorious, then you do not understand justice at all.

How we love to throw around the word! Environmental justice. Racial justice. Social justice. Do we any idea what we’re actually talking about? Absent a God of justice, we have nothing but my take versus your take, what seems just to you verses what seems just to me, nothing outside our subjective selves or ever-changing majority opinions. We bandy about moral categories like justice. But we’ve jettisoned the only moral foundation – the just God with whom we have to do and before whom is all our ways.

In Deut 12-26, Moses lays out the kind of life God requires for his people. It means worshiping God in the way he requires and makes possible. It means carefully obeying



his Word. It means holiness, sacrifice, generosity, joy. It also means practicing justice. Why? Because our God is a God of justice. We worship a just God by practicing justice. And in Deut 16-17, the Lord teaches us what that looks like.

## 1) REFUSE TO SHOW PARTIALITY (16:18-20)

Notice the close connection in v. 18 between who was about to give Israel the land and how they were to live in the land. Why must the Israelites judge one another in the land with “righteous judgment”? Because the land is a gift from the LORD their God! They are God’s people, in God’s place, under God’s rule. And because he is a God who practices justice, they must be careful (v. 19) to “not pervert justice.”

What does it mean to not pervert justice? Moses gives two examples. **First, it means not practicing partiality or favoritism, literally, to not “regard faces.”** There’s nothing wrong with observing a difference between you and someone else. The problem is when we assign worth or value based on our differences and respect or reject them accordingly. Yes, the primary context in view in Deut 16 is a court of law. But the priority of practicing justice by treating the people around us with the dignity they deserve as image-bearers of God impacts all our relationships!

So we reject the partiality that only opens our hearts and homes to people in our economic class. We reject the partiality that only spends time with people in our demographic, or who share our life experiences, or are easy to get along with. We also reject the prejudice that assigns someone a different worth or value because of the color of their skin. The history of our own city on this front is especially sordid, so let’s linger here for a minute.

On a racial front, God’s goal for us as his people, what practicing justice instead of partiality requires, is not becoming color-blind or getting to a point on Sunday morning where you come in and don’t see color. Here’s a question. Does the fact that God practices justice and only justice mean he doesn’t see the poor or widows? Does it mean he just sees generic people? No. He counts all our sorrows (Ps 56:8). He knows our frame, including the unique challenges we face in a fallen world because of our ethnic background or the color of our skin.

Practicing justice means we take time to listen to one another’s stories, understand one another’s sorrows, and minister the hope and help of Christ accordingly. When 3 black people are shot at a Dollar General in Jacksonville, you may not feel troubled. Partiality sizes up a situation and says, “I’m not particularly bothered by what happened, you shouldn’t be bothered either, so I’m not going to ask how you’re doing.”

Brothers and sisters, there are men and women in our church who are shaken and grieve when a shooting like that happens. Why? Because they see themselves. They see their children. Justice says, “I refuse to give my life experiences pride of place. I’m going to love and honor you as an image-bearer of God by leaning in, asking questions, and looking for opportunities to comfort and care.” Why? Because the injustice of partiality is more than an error in judgment. It’s a violation of the law of love.

**Moses’ second illustration of perverting justice, taking a bribe, is no different.**

What does a bribe represent? A quid-pro-quo relationship where I treat you not according to what is true and right, but according to what you’ve given me lately. In the legal realm, it’s partiality driven by selfish gain. Lord help us, brothers and sisters. We can do the exact same thing in all kinds of relationships.

How often do you withhold the love an image-bearer of God deserves if they’ve been mean to you? Or extend the love and care an image-bearer of God deserves if they’ve been nice to you? It’s easy to live with quid-pro-quo relationship where the way I treat you is entirely controlled by what you’ve given me lately instead of the God who fashioned you in his image. We do in the relational realm the same thing a bribe does in the legal realm.

Brothers and sisters, justice and only justice we must follow. As v. 20 declares, our life in God’s kingdom depends on it. Why? Because there is a just and righteous God in heaven who rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked, to whom all will give an account. Experiencing his favor and blessing, the joy of relationship with him, requires walking in his ways. We must practice justice by refusing to show partiality.

**2) PROTECT THE HOLINESS OF THE CHURCH (16:21-17:7)**

Having established the principle of justice as a critical expression of worship, teaches Israel what practicing justice looks like in two scenarios. The first is found in v. 2-7. Moses addresses a situation where an Israelite has (v. 3) “gone and served other gods and worshiped them...” It’s a high-handed and scandalous act of public idolatry. It’s not a hidden matter of the heart. It’s a visible sin compromising the spiritual integrity of the people and their witness to the glory and goodness of God. What does practicing justice require then?

**First, notice there’s a nation-wide, every-member responsibility to act.** V. 4, if “it is told you and you hear of it, then you shall inquire diligently...” An apathetic response would be entirely unjust in light of the worth and majesty of God. So you may not say,



“I’ll let someone else deal with that. What do we pay the pastors for anyway?” No. You must take responsibility. You must inquire diligently.

**Second, when you act, practice due process.** Rumors and hearsay are insufficient. True and certain is the standard. The testimony of at least 2 or 3 eyewitnesses is required. Why so many rules and regulations? Because the entire process must reflect the integrity of God’s own justice. His judgments are not capricious or impulsive. They are true and just. And his purpose in rendering judgement through the judgments of his people is crystal clear. V. 7. “So you shall purge the evil from your midst.”

If you’re a member of our church, the people of God under the new covenant, your sin, no less than my own, is inescapably corporate. It may feel hidden. It may feel isolated. But you’re doing it as part of the family of God. Phrases like “within any of your towns” in v. 2 or “in Israel” in v. 4 or “from your midst” in v. 7 point to the communal context of our sin.

If you’re a member of our church, walking the path of unrepentance is serious because your sin doesn’t just affect you. It affects the spiritual health of the people around you and it affects the purity of our witness to the world. That’s why a passive response on our part is not an option. It wasn’t an option back then for Israel. And it’s not an option today for the church.

Those exact words, “purge the evil from your midst,” surface again centuries later in 1 Cor 5 when Paul gives the church in Corinth instructions in how to discipline a man in their midst who has committed a particularly serious, publicly scandalous sin. 1 Cor 5:1-2, 5, 13, “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you...You are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord...Purge the evil person from among you.”

Notice the goal in excommunicating the man. Publicly removing him from membership in the church, releasing him from the kingdom of God and back into the kingdom of this world isn’t about shaming or punishing him. It’s about disciplining him so that he might come to his senses, return to the Lord, and be saved on the final day of judgment.

So why isn’t there any mention of the stepwise process of discipline Jesus institutes for the church in Matt 18? It’s not because there’s one process for less serious sins (Matt

18) and another process for more serious sins (1 Cor 5). In both chapters, the church is responsible for practicing justice by discerning the true, spiritual condition of a member's heart. In every case, the question is the same. Does the evidence for unrepentance outweigh the evidence for repentance in this person's life?

In most cases, a significant amount of time with multiple circles of involvement is necessary to confirm someone has chosen the path of unrepentance. That's what gradual discipline in Matt 18 is all about. But there are some situations where little to no time is required to confirm someone has chosen the path of unrepentance. That's what immediate discipline in 1 Cor 5 is all about.

Jonathan Leeman helps us understand what's going on. "There are, no doubt, some sins that are so deliberate (like a long pattern of abuse or murder) or repugnant (like sexual predatory behavior or extortion) that any quick words of apology would be unbelievable. It's not that such sins cannot be forgiven, or that a person might not be immediately repentant. But some time needs to pass and the fruit of repentance displayed before a church can responsibly pronounce forgiveness...The nature of some sins 'disables' a church's ability to continue affirming the person's overall posture of repentance, and so the church has no choice but to remove its affirmation for the time being."

Today, the people of God are no longer defined as citizens of a theocracy but rather as members of the local church. The principle still applies, but the remedy is different. For God's glory and the sinner's good, we purge the evil from our midst by removing someone from church membership. We don't turn a blind eye. We don't ignore the situation because it's messy. Remember, the public integrity of the Lord we serve is at stake. We practice justice by protecting the holiness of the church.

### **3) SUBMIT TO THE AUTHORITY GOD HAS ESTABLISHED (17:8-13)**

In vv. 8-13, Moses highlights a second scenario where justice must prevail. He tells Israel how to handle legal cases that are too difficult for the local judges and officers. Look at v. 9. What should the Israelites do if a case is too hard for the local judges and officers? "Arise and go up to the place that the LORD your God will choose." Eventually, that meant go to Jerusalem to appear before the highest court in the land.

And when that court issues a legal decision, how must the parties involved respond? V. 10, "Then you shall do according to what they declare to you from that place that the LORD will choose. And you shall be careful to do according to all that they direct you."

Why not decide, “Those guys aren’t saints. I think they’re wrong. So I’m not going to ignore them and do what is right in my own eyes.”

If you reject the priests’ or judge’s authority, Moses says, you are rejecting God’s authority. Repeated references to the decision coming from “the place that the Lord will chose” implicitly affirm what v. 12 makes even more explicit. “The man who acts presumptuously by not obeying the priests who stands to minister there before the LORD your God, or the judge, that man shall die.” Why? Because he is ultimately spurning the authority of God who established the priest or judge in the first place!

The Apostle Paul makes the same connection in Rom 13:1–2, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God (Parents, teachers, bosses, presidents, governors, regardless of whether you voted for them!) Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.”

But how is that possible, you ask? They’re corrupt. They’re wicked. Indeed they are, my friends. When Paul wrote Rom 13, the “governing authority” was the Roman emperor Nero and his corrupt minions. And yet, unless what they’re telling us to do explicitly violates the Word of God, we must obey, even if we disagree, because God has established them. That doesn’t mean God agrees with them or we must agree with them. It means that we submit to God by submitting to them.

Hear that, especially if you’re an American. God is watching when you file your taxes. God is watching when you drive on I-95. God is watching when you’re filling out an employment application, or immigration paperwork, and in a multitude of other situations where it’s oh-so-tempting to justify lying or disobeying human authorities because we think they’re being ridiculous. It takes tremendous humility to submit to imperfect human authorities because we trust the perfect justice of God’s authority.

A friend of mine recently said, “You know, Matthew, a lot of people are encouraging me to lie to the INS and say I was threatened in my home country so I can get asylum. But I wasn’t. For me to say that would be to knowingly “turn aside” from the verdict they have given me.” That kind of attitude pleases the Lord, brothers and sisters!

That’s what it looks like to practice justice by submitting to God’s authority, even when it’s expressed through imperfect men and women. We submit to them because we trust him. And it’s his justice, his overriding power, his unshakeable promise to work all things for the good of those who love him that steels our souls when submitting to them costs us dearly.

#### 4) HOPE IN KING JESUS (17:14-20)

When you need justice, when you long for justice, when you are suffering under the crushing weight of injustice, what should you do? Where should you turn? Moses tells us in v. 8. “Go up to the place that the LORD your God will choose.” In other words, we look to the Lord. The justice for which your heart aches is not something a mere man can give you. It’s ultimately something God and God alone can give.

That doesn’t mean we take a *laissez faire* approach to opportunities the Lord provides in our personal lives to contend for justice. When John Robertson carefully evaluates an insurance claim, it’s a God-given opportunity to practice justice. When Sara Rogers arbitrates an HR claim, it’s a God-given opportunity to practice justice. When moms of young children in our midst spend hours making peace between scrabbling siblings, you are practicing justice.

But here’s what you must remember no matter how much influence the Lord has given us in other people’s lives. **Do not locate your hope for justice in what you can do, or other people can do. Look to the Lord, my friend.** It sounds like this. Ps 10:12-14, “Arise, O LORD; O God, lift up your hand; forget not the afflicted. Why does the wicked renounce God and say in his heart, ‘You will not call to account’? But you do see, for you note mischief and vexation, that you may take it into your hands; to you the helpless commits himself; you have been the helper of the fatherless.”

When we long for justice, we look to the Lord. But not just to the Lord in general. As v. 7 reminds us, we look to a specific place of his choosing. In Israel’s day, she looked to Jerusalem. Today, brothers and sisters, we look to a hill called Calvary. For it is there, outside the gate of Jerusalem, that the Son of God was killed for our injustice, for our rebellion against God’s authority. The witnesses were false. He was completely innocent. And yet his death displayed the height of God’s justice. For he bore the sins of many.

If you want proof, my friend, that God will not ignore injustice, look to the cross. If you want proof that God will ensure justice prevails, no matter the costs, look to the cross. It is the greatest display of God’s justice the world has ever seen. And the victory Christ won that day over sin and death assures us of a coming day when “the man who is of the earth” will “strike terror no more.”

In the Ancient Near East, kings had final responsibility for ensuring justice prevailed in their land, if they were so inclined. Israel, however, didn’t have a king until several

centuries after Moses first preached the words of Deuteronomy. But he anticipates the future king's role in leading the nation in practicing justice. Look at vv. 14-15. When you say, "I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me," you may indeed set a king over you..." Dubious motives aside, Moses grants their request in advance and establishes some requirements.

**First, the King must be the man of God's choosing.** If there is to be a human king, it must be one whom Yahweh, Israel's rightful king, appoints as his representative, his agent, an expression of his ultimate authority. There's no self-nomination here. The only king you should aspire to have, Israel, is the king of God's choosing. Brothers and sisters, that's the kind of king we have in Jesus! Isaiah 42:1, "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations."

**Second, the King must be a fellow Israelite.** He must be a brother, one with God's people. He must share in their identity and nature. He must be like them so he can represent them and care for them. That's exactly the kind of king we have in Jesus! Heb 2:17-18, "Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."

**Third, the King must not acquire many horses, wives, or excessive silver and gold.** What do many horses represent? Military power. The nations around Israel trusted in chariots. They trusted in horses. Egypt was happy to supply them for the right price. Moses says it must not be so. The psalmist agrees. Ps 20:7, "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God."

What does a large harem represent? Besides unrestrained sexual pleasure, it marked political stature in the form of marriage alliances with the daughters of other kings. A large harem meant you were a force to be reckoned with on the international stage. It also spelled spiritual adultery because your wives worshiped all manner of other gods.

What is the problem with amassing "excessive" silver and gold, usually acquired by taxing your subjects? It often revealed the king was chasing selfish gain. He was more interested in being served than serving. Material riches represented self-sufficiency and the power to purchase allies, buy off enemies, and do all sorts of things other than humbly depend on the Lord.



To chase worldly power, pleasure, and wealth as if those things are worthy of trust is the height of injustice because it denies the Lord the trust he alone deserves. And if you read the history of the monarchy in Israel, what do you discover? Those were the very areas her kings repeatedly failed. King Solomon is a case in point. He had 1,400 chariots, 12,000 horsemen. 1 Ki 10 specifically says he imported them from Egypt. The weight of gold that came to him in a single year was nearly 50,000 pounds. The saddest report of all is found in 1 Ki 11:1-3, “Now King Solomon loved many foreign women...He had 700 wives, who were princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart.”

**Brothers and sisters, where the kings of Israel failed, King Jesus did not!** When Satan tested him with power, pleasure, and wealth, he prevailed. He resisted to the point of death. He was a faithful Son! Jn 8:28-29, “So Jesus said to them, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him.”

Jesus did everything Moses required of Israel’s kings in vv. 18-20. He ordered his life according to the law of God. He feared the Lord in every attitude and action. His heart was not lifted up above his brothers. He came to serve, not to be served, to rescue all who trust in him from the clutches of sin and death.

Friend, God created you to find freedom and joy in being ruled by King Jesus. He will never take advantage of you. He came to deliver you from the kingdom of this world and bring you into the kingdom of God. The kingdoms of this world will inevitably crumble and fall. Power will change hands. Pleasure will pass away. Wealth will evaporate. Christ’s kingdom endures. So will all who trust in him.

Dan 7:14, “And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”

## **CONCLUSION**

We worship our just God by practicing justice. Doing justice means we refuse to show partiality. Doing justice means we protect the holiness of the church. Doing justice means we submit to the authorities God has established. And doing justice means we place all our hope in King Jesus. To hope in him is to give him the worship he justly requires and deserves.



Do you long for justice? Hope in him. Do you thirst for justice? Hope in him. Do you weep on account of all that remains unjust in our fallen world? He weeps too. But it's not the tears of the hapless victim. It's the compassion of a conquering King, a King who is coming back soon to judge the living and the dead and make all things new.

What kind of king will you set over you, my friend? Every one of us is mastered by something. May it be King Jesus. Surrender your life to him, submit to him, hold fast to him, so that now and on the day he returns, you might rejoice with the Apostle Paul – "To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen." (1 Tim 1:17)