

Justice, Judgment and Vengeance in the Plan of God

by Tim Semple

*“JUSTICE means more than punishment,
it means protecting the rights of the powerless.”* Tim Keller

In the Hebrew Bible, justice is government, whether by man or by God. The Hebrew word מִשְׁפָּט (mish-pat), means “judgment”, or “to rule, to govern.” To judge applies to all judicial functions of government. Governments make laws, applies those laws through courts, then enforces the penalties determined by courts. This the judicial side of government, what we call “crime and punishment.”

What is the New Testament view of justice? The Greek word for justice, or judgment, is κρίσις (krisis). It applies when a law is broken and punishment is carried out, the same concept we find in the Old Testament. It is interesting that Jesus says in Luke 11:42 “But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect **justice and the love of God**...” equating justice with love for His Father.

Another word for justice is ἐκδικέω (ekdikeo), and means punishment, vengeance, retribution or reward. From the root of this word we get δικαιοσύνη (dikai-osuna), “righteousness.” Righteousness is the standard for judgment and justice, used for acts of kindness or mercy as well as punishment. This is the very heart of God’s character. He demands perfect righteousness from anyone who would enter into His presence. That is why we can say, “God is a God of justice,” and “all his ways are just,” as well as speak of His mercy and love.

The entire Bible teaches that justice means care for the poor and afflicted, the fatherless, the widow, the sojourner – people not able to fend for themselves, who may need help and support from families, friends, or government—sometimes all three (Deut 10:18; 24:17; James 1:27). God commanded the nation of Israel to care for them. Their failure to do so played a role in God bringing judgment as punishment, and expelling His people from His land.

In the Gospels, Jesus clearly taught, as did Paul and the other writers of the Epistles, that “justice” means that we as Christians have a moral obligation to care for those less fortunate in our society, no matter who they may be. That is why Jesus told the legalistic Jewish scribe that his “neighbor” was a Samaritan! The Samaritans were the enemies of the Jews. God knew that. Jesus knew that. But Jesus also knows that due to the fall, and the curse of sin, there will always be widows, fatherless and immigrants—our neighbors—in all societies. God made provision for this in Israel, and He makes provision for this in the Church Age. The People of God are to care for the outcasts of society, and to defend their rights before governments—even if that means risking our own freedoms.

When it comes to the idea of “social justice” in modern times, the Church is to care for the poor as individuals rather than trying to provide for society as a whole, though caring for individuals can have a great impact on society, as seen in men like Wilberforce in England, or Martin Luther King Jr. in America. The Christian is called by Christ to do whatever he can to help the “least of these.” (Matt 25:40,45). We see the basis for this in the second of the greatest commandments —“Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mat 22:39). However, in many nations, governments have replaced the Church and they provide for the poor with taxation and wealth redistribution. God wants His People to give out of love, not compulsion. Compulsion can cause resentment when people see their hard-earned wealth being taken away, even for a good cause. Jesus was very familiar with this because the tax-gatherers collected taxes for the Romans and were hated by everyone. The problem in most countries, however, is that Christian giving is so meager, that without government help many poor people suffer and starve, even in the midst of massive wealth. Will God hold the Church to the same standard by which He measured Israel in the Old Testament? Is He any less righteous today than He was then?

So, what is vengeance, and how does it fit “God’s Justice?” In Hebrew vengeance is נָקָם (*n^eqām*). This word is often misunderstood. Vengeance, and the idea of revenge, is found both in God and in man. The concept of divine vengeance is about the holiness and justice of God and its effect on man as a sinner. Divine vengeance is always balanced by mercy, which is critical for a proper understanding of the history of God’s redemption of man. Revenge in man is most often evil.

In the Bible there are very few cases where man is the proper source of vengeance. In those few cases, man is a secondary cause and God is the source (Ezek 25:14), as when the Israelites avenge themselves on their enemies (Josh 10:13), when God tells Saul to “devote to destruction” everything that belongs to Amalek—to wipe out any remembrance of them (1 Sam 15). Saul fails to carry out God’s justice, and God’s desire for righteousness and justice is so firm that he removes the Kingship from Saul as punishment (a judgment).

The most familiar passage concerning vengeance is “*Vengeance is mine... I will recompense them who hate me.*” (Deut 32:35, 41). God cannot be true to his character of holiness, righteousness and justice if he allows sin and rebellion to go unpunished. Consider if He simply “overlooked” sin and wickedness. What about the people who suffer and are exploited by the wicked? Should not God be just toward them? Also consider this: If God could and would “overlook” sin and wickedness, then why would He offer His Only Son on a Cross and abandon Him as a sinner? The Cross is the pinnacle of justice. It is the only place in our fallen world where we find the perfect balance of love and mercy alongside justice and vengeance.

The prophets longed for “the day of the Lord’s vengeance” when the Lord would set the record straight (Isa 38:8; 61:2; 63:4). Jeremiah saw it in the fall of Jerusalem. The Lord was taking vengeance on His own people for their disregard of not only the Law, but of the poor, the widows, the orphans and the immigrants. Isaiah had a much longer view. For him, “the day of the Lord’s vengeance” was in the distant future and looked for the renewal of the whole earth—a complete re-creation and magnificent blessing (Isa 63:1–6). The New Testament looks to the same future day that Isaiah saw. Before the re-creation, it says the Lord “treads out the winepress alone and tramples his enemies in His wrath.” (Rev 19:15). We get a preview of God’s wrath at the Cross where Jesus redeems us from sin, but we cannot view that apart from His mercy—His mercy toward us. Because of the Cross Jesus can and will return as Judge and as King, to bring the re-creation that Isaiah foretold. And Jesus is the One who will “tread the winepress and trample His enemies in His wrath.” (Rev 19:15)

Finally, the Old Testament spoke of God’s hatred for His enemies, those who wanted to destroy God’s people (Ps 54). So the Rabbis said, “We do God’s will by hating our enemies,” but Jesus said, “I tell you to love your enemies.” (Mat 5:44) This is the same thing Paul tells the Romans “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, *‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’* But if thine enemy hungers, feed him.” (Rom 12:19-20, Prov 25:21–22, Dt. 32:35). Vengeance and revenge are not for man.

Jesus never calls the Church to judge and condemn the world. We are called to pray for, be kind to, and to love our enemies. In other words, we are called to show mercy. How much of that do we see in the Church today? Even toward each other?

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