

Biblical Justice in the Light of the Biblical World-view

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The Biblical World-view

In order to understand the biblical concept of justice we must first understand the biblical world-view and the corresponding shared assumptions held by all of the biblical writers from Genesis to Revelation. In Biblical thinking there are certain fundamental principles that are agreed upon by all the biblical writers and, therefore, do not need to be continually explained - they are simply “givens” that are assumed to be true. All of these principles are established in the Old Testament – beginning with the creation account in Genesis - and then confirmed and expanded upon in the rest of the scriptures. Amongst the most important of these are the following:

- (1). God almighty, the creator of the heavens and the earth, is sovereign over all and is the ultimate judge of all the earth (Gen. 1ff; Ps. 103:19; etc.).
- (2). Mankind, created in the image of God, is responsible to God for his conduct in this life: both in relationship to God as well as in his relationship with his fellowman (Gen. 1:26-27; 9:4-6; etc.).
- (3). God’s purposes will be accomplished and his justice will prevail (Rom. 8:28-30; Eph. 1:3-14; Rev. 11:15-18; etc.)

It is these fundamental principles of biblical theology that must be understood in order to properly understand many biblical sections. Biblical writers spoke from certain assumptions dependant on this worldview that was based on God’s revelation as recorded in the Old Testament scriptures. No biblical writer would have ever questioned God’s sovereignty and his ability to accomplish his purposes; nor at the same time, would they have ever questioned man’s responsibility for his own actions before God. In contrast to Greek philosophy, or later Western ways of thinking, from the biblical perspective these principles – God’s sovereign power and man’s responsibility - simply did not conflict.

In addition to these fundamental principles of a biblical worldview, biblical statements must be understood in accordance with how biblical writers thought and spoke. Statements of truth in the Bible are often phrased – according to Semitic custom - in the language of absolutes or overstatement. This leaves it to the readers or hearers to work out the specific “qualifications” of these statements in their own situations. The New Testament scholar George B. Caird emphasized this in his book *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*:

Hyperbole or overstatement is a figure of speech common to all languages. But among the Semitic peoples its frequent use arises out of a habitual cast of mind, which I have called absoluteness - a tendency to think in extremes without qualification, in black and white without intervening shades of gray ... It is characteristic of Semitic style to express ideas absolutely and to leave the listener to fill in for himself the implicit qualifications. [p. 110, 57]

Readers of the biblical documents must come to grips with this biblical use of language and with the biblical worldview that forms its background. When we read scriptures we must learn to think as the biblical writers thought; otherwise, we will often misinterpret many passages because we are reading from a different world-view or else we do not understand the biblical style of language in which ideas are expressed absolutely without explaining the qualifications. As we shall see, reading from such a biblical perspective is absolutely essential to understand passages dealing with biblical justice such as Matthew 5-7 or Romans 13:1-7

Biblical Justice in the Old Testament

The biblical basis for justice is set forth in the Book of Genesis. God created man in his own image so that man could live in fellowship with God and rule over the earth in a god-like manner on God’s behalf (Gen. 1:26-27). Man is, therefore, first and foremost responsible to God the creator. Secondly, he is responsible to treat his fellowman in a manner worthy of the dignity, honor and respect that being created in God’s image demands. Biblical justice proceeds from this basis (Gen. 9:4-7). The Old Testament Mosaic Law was given in the Book of Exodus to promote and ensure that these two principles were upheld in the life of the nation of Israel (Ex. 18-24; etc.). This is why Jesus could sum

up the Mosaic Law in the two great commandments of loving God and loving one's neighbor as oneself (Matt. 22:34-40). In short, the Mosaic Law, including the Ten Commandments, was an application of these two great truths of loving God and loving one's neighbor – that were implicit in Genesis 1-2 - to the specific situation and historical circumstances of the nation of Israel.

Though many people think that the Old Testament principle of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” is the only Old Testament standard for justice, there is a lot more to this subject than that. The Old Testament standard of an eye for eye and tooth for a tooth was meant to *limit* the excesses of personal retaliation common in ancient cultures and which often lead to blood feuds. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth was a principle of fairness upon which justice could be based. It was normally not carried out in a literal manner; instead as the context in which it was originally set forth shows, monetary compensation or other forms of compensation were often used instead:

If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely [or, “has a miscarriage”], but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman’s husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, bruise for bruise.

If a man hits a manservant or maidservant in the eye and destroys it, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the eye. And if he knocks out the tooth of a manservant or maidservant, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the tooth (cp. Ex. 21:23-27).

As with any code of Law, the Old Testament Mosaic Law set forth principles of justice – based on the two great commandments and embodied in the ten commandments especially – that normally had to be interpreted and applied by the judges of that era in the light of specific situations. Though there were strict standards for fairness, mercy and various means for repentance and forgiveness were also built into the system. As the situations of the Old Testament Israelites changed – i.e., first under judges, then under kings, in exile, and return from

exile – the application of the Mosaic Law had to be modified according to the new and different circumstances. Though the principles of truth continued to be the same, new situations called for new applications of these same truths. However, in all cases, whether under their own judges or kings, or else under foreign rulers, the Israelites were instructed to honor, reverence and obey their rulers. For in Israelitic thought,

... the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes ... (Dan. 4:17).

Only when obedience to these rulers conflicted with obedience to God himself was it their right and duty to disobey.

Biblical Justice in the New Testament

The New Testament's teaching about justice and the role of governing authorities follows directly in line with that of the Old Testament. Though the Sermon on the Mount as recorded in Matthew 5-7 is often thought to be a new Law of Christ which abrogates or replaces the Mosaic Law, this is certainly not correct. In truth, Jesus' statements simply interpret the principles of the Mosaic Law in the light of the first-principles of God's original intent for mankind as recorded in Genesis 1-2. The Mosaic Law contains the original truth of God as set forth in Genesis 1-2 but it was given in a way that applied to Israel's specific situation; therefore, some of its provisions were given due to Israel's specific circumstances or else because of the hardness of their hearts. However, when correctly understood and applied, the Old Testament Law – together with the Prophets - set forth God's original will beautifully (e.g. Hosea 6:6). It was this *true intent* of the Law that Jesus was setting forth in the Sermon on the Mount and which he demonstrated in his own life. This true intent is encapsulated in the two great commandments of loving God and loving one's fellowman – principles that are the underlying basis for godly living throughout the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. In fact, at the end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus summed-up his entire ethical teaching with the simple and well-known phrase:

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 7:12).

It is particularly important that the language of the Sermon on the Mount be understood in its true Semitic light. Its well-known statements are set forth one after another in the language of overstatement and often with hyperbole. In this section Jesus is teaching and illustrating principles of truth that were already embedded in the Old Testament Law and Prophets but which had been misinterpreted or misapplied – often due the oral “tradition of the elders” that had been built up around the OT Law by the Pharisees (e.g. Matt. 15). Jesus’ well-known statements such as “do not resist evil”, “judge not” and “love your enemies” were *not* meant to be understood as absolutes without any qualifications. Otherwise, this would contradict other biblical statements and principles - even in the Sermon on the Mount itself. Instead, such statements were meant to correct abuses of Old Testament principles of justice and restore the original intent of God’s created order to the interpretation and application of the principles of the Mosaic Law. In short, Jesus’ teaching was made in the light of principles that were already deeply embedded in the Old Testament and no one would have thought that they meant that other provisions in the Old Testament for the just administration of law and justice should be abrogated.

It is not surprising then to see the apostle Paul in Romans 12 expound the same types of personal ethics as Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and then to immediately follow it up in Romans 13 with an exposition about the proper role of governing authorities who act as God’s agents in the promotion of justice. Certainly, the situation of the Christian believer after Pentecost is different than that of the believer before Pentecost. With Christ’s life, death and resurrection the new covenant era of salvation has begun; therefore, the old covenant shadow of animal sacrifices, Sabbaths, religious festivals, etc. has passed (Col. 2:16-17). Christians are now a part of God’s new creation in Christ and they should not get caught up in petty arguments, lawsuits, etc. - especially with fellow Christians! – or, in an endless pursuit of justice over worldly matters (I Cor. 6:1-5). Nevertheless, the God-given role for governing authorities to promote justice and punish criminal behavior continues on in continuity with the Old Testament. In fact, immediately after calling on Christians to not carry out personal vengeance (Rom. 12:14-21), Paul specifically taught

that Christian believers were to pay taxes for the godly purpose of enabling governing authorities to act as God’s “agents of wrath” in punishing evildoers as well as to promote the general good of society (Rom. 13:1-7).

Certainly, if a Christian holds such a position as a governing authority in the secular realm then it is his/her responsibility to fulfill those duties as well (cp. Joseph, Daniel, etc.). To say, as some do, that Christians cannot participate in a government role in punishing evil-doers – especially if that means using the sword – while at the same time acknowledging that they are commanded to pay taxes for this specific purpose would be the height of hypocrisy. In Romans 13 the punishment of evil-doers by governing authorities – even with the sword - is depicted as a *godly* activity, not ungodly. Would it really make sense that Paul is telling Christians to pay unbelievers to do their dirty work for them?! We may certainly debate the proper methods and means of governing, punishing, etc. but there can be no debate as to whether punishing evil-doers is intrinsically godly or not (after all, this is what God himself will do at the final judgment); nor can there be any debate as to whether it is the God-given role of governing authorities to carry out these duties.

In short, Paul’s exposition of the role of civil government in Romans 13 is based directly on Old Testament principles and is a prime example of biblical thinking and speaking. Like Jesus, Paul does not pause to give qualifications to many of his statements. Qualifications are a “given”; they are implied by other biblical passages as well as by real-life situations which demand that individual believers think for themselves. When a person lives with the mind of Christ, - i.e., walks by the Spirit - this way of thinking and living is simply a normal way of life (Rom. 12:1-2).

In conclusion, I present the following comments by NT scholar F.F. Bruce on Romans 13:1-7 from his wonderful commentary, *Romans*, in the *Tyndale New Testament Commentary Series* [Eerdmans , pp. 220-226]:

Paul places the whole question [of governing authorities in Rom. 13:1-7] on the highest plane. God is the fount of all authority, and those who exercise authority on earth do so by delegation from him; therefore to disobey them is to disobey God.

Human government is a divine ordinance, and the powers of coercion and commendation which it exercises have been entrusted to it by God, for the repression of crime and the encouragement of righteousness. Christians of all people, then, ought to obey the laws, pay their taxes and respect authorities – not because it will be the worse for them if they do not, but because this is one way of serving God.

But what if the authorities themselves are unrighteous? What if Caesar, not content with receiving what is rightfully his, lays claim to “the things that are God’s”? Paul does not deal with this question here ... But Christians will voice their “No” to Caesar’s unauthorized demands the more effectively if they have shown themselves ready to say “Yes” to his authorized demands.

It is plain from the immediate context, as from the general context of the apostolic writings, that the state can rightly command obedience only within the limits of the purposes for which it has been divinely instituted – in particular, the state not only may but must be resisted when it demands the allegiance due to God alone.

[In Romans 13:4] the state is ... charged with a function which has been explicitly forbidden to the Christian (12:17a, 19). The Christian state of later days lay, of course, outside the range of Paul’s admonition, and no express direction is given by

which the Christian ruler or judge may reconcile his duty as Christian to leave the exacting of vengeance to “the wrath of God” and his official duty to “execute his wrath”. This is not to say that he cannot extract principles to guide him from this and similar passages. But it is plain that two distinct spheres of “service” to God are envisaged.

“The sanction that the Bible, here and elsewhere, gives to the forcible restraint of evil puzzles many modern Christians, because of its apparent contradiction of Christ’s way of love and His precept of non-resistance to evil. But this comes from failing to distinguish the preservation of the world from the salvation of the world. The truth is that the Bible affirms both the Law “which worketh wrath” (Rom. 4:15) and the “faith which worketh by love” (Gal. 5:6): both Christ’s strange work and his proper work.” [A.R. Vidler, *Christ’s Strange work* (1944), p. 28].

... But the following verses [Rom. 13:8-14] show that the duty of obedience to secular authorities is a temporary one, lasting only for the present period of “night” (v. 12); in the “day” which “is at hand” a new order of government will be introduced, when “the saints will judge the world” (I Cor. 6:2). The state is to wither away (on this Paul and Karl Marx agree); “the city of God remaineth”.

[For more information on this subject see the commentaries on Matthew and Romans recommended in Vol. 4 Issue 3, Fall 1998 of *The Unity of the Spirit*]