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The King

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Text

“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. ¹⁹ You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. ²⁰ Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

²¹ “You shall not plant any tree as an Asherah beside the altar of the LORD your God that you shall make. ²² And you shall not set up a pillar, which the LORD your God hates.

17 “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.

² “If there is found among you, within any of your towns that the LORD your God is giving you, a man or woman who does what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God, in transgressing his covenant, ³ and has gone and served other gods and worshiped them, or the sun or the moon or any of the host of heaven, which I have forbidden, ⁴ and it is 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, ⁵ then you shall bring out to your gates that man or woman who has done this evil thing, and you shall stone that man or woman to death with stones. ⁶ On the evidence of two witnesses or of 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. ⁷ The hand of the witnesses 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.

⁸ “If any case arises requiring decision between one kind of homicide and another, one kind of legal right and another, or 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. ⁹ 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 shall declare to you the decision. 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. ¹¹ According to the instructions that they give you, and according to the decision which they pronounce to you, you shall do. You shall not turn aside from the verdict that they declare to you, either to the right hand or to the left. ¹² 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. ¹³ And all the people shall hear and fear and not act presumptuously again.

¹⁴ “When you come to the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you possess it and dwell in it and then say, ‘I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me,’ ¹⁵ you may indeed set a king over you whom the LORD your God will choose. One from among your brothers you shall set as king over you. You may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother. ¹⁶ Only he must not acquire many horses for himself or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, since the LORD has said to you, ‘You shall never return that way again.’ ¹⁷ And he shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold.

¹⁸ “And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. ¹⁹ And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life,

that he may learn to fear the LORD his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them,²⁰ that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel.

Introduction

One reason why we gather every first day of the week and go through what's called a liturgy – a recognizable and thought-out order of service that includes such things as reciting the Apostle's Creed – is that such practices, when done repeatedly, can shape us. They point us and orient us in the right direction.

Jamie Smith, a contemporary Christian philosopher, has shown convincingly that everyone is participating in various liturgies all the time. One example is the reciting of the Pledge of Allegiance at the beginning of school days in public schools. Smith writes: "Millions of young students begin each day with [this] ritual.... Standing, in unison, as when a congregation together confesses the Apostle's Creed, these students are united in a pledge of *allegiance*. For those familiar with the Creed, there is lilt and rhythm to the Pledge of Allegiance that has an analogous sacred feel about it:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America,
and to the Republic for which it stands:
one Nation under God, indivisible,
With Liberty and Justice for all."¹

So clearly, our government is trying to form and shape loyal citizens... which isn't altogether wrong, but notice the claims, the promises it is making – "with Liberty and Justice for all." Smith points out that this "clause must have stuck in the throat of young black Americans in the Jim Crow South and, indeed, must still."² Indeed.

There's a basic human acknowledgement of a need for justice – for things to be right and fair. Cornel West, a contemporary non-Christian philosopher has said, rightly I believe, that "justice is what love looks like in public." Love should lead to justice – rightness, fairness, society being the way it should be. We yearn for this. We want this. But alas, we don't have it. Governments in different times and places have succeeded or failed at various levels at approximating this, but no country, no king, no administration has been able to usher in "Justice for all."

That's why what we really need and yearn for is the kingdom of God. That's what today's text in Deuteronomy points us towards. And so that's what we're going to ultimately be talking about today – the kingdom of God and how to get into it. The kingdom of God is the place of perfect justice. And so in short, what we're going to see today is just this: **God's people care about justice.**

Let's pray...

The 5th Commandment

So what is Deuteronomy again? It's three sermons given by Moses at the end of his life to the second generation of Israelites after the Exodus before they go into the Promised Land. The second sermon starts off with the Ten Commandments in ch. 5. And those Ten Commandments are a loose outline of the rest of the sermon. Moses is

unpacking what each of those commandments is to look like in their life in the land. So last week Randle was talking about the annual feasts and that fits well under the 4th Commandment – the Sabbath command – because it’s a calendar issue.

Well today starting in 16:18 we’re getting into an exposition of the 5th Commandment that will run through ch. 18. What is the 5th Commandment? It is the one about honoring your father and mother. But what’s it really about? It’s an authority issue. It’s about submitting to the authority structures that God sets up, the most basic building block of society being the family structure, but this concept extends to other roles and offices.

But family – mother *and* father with kids – is foundational to any human society. Can I just say something about that really fast? I read something this week that made me think about this. Here’s what I read – “In 2012 in America, 53 percent of children were born out of wedlock. This new norm is a sure predictor of coming poverty for so many of those children.”³ So if we really love the poor we must work for the health of families! Families are the best social safety net.

So the 5th Commandment is about family structure, but it is more broadly about submission to authority. And there are other God-ordained social structures where this applies. And, on the flip-side, it’s not just about submission to authority but also about those in authority using their authority properly, in submission to God. And that’s what we’re looking at today – not specifically parental authority, but the principle of authority.

Authority is a good thing. Justice is not totally flattening out society so that there are no longer any differentiations. “*Like and equal* are not the same thing at all!”⁴ It’s good and beautiful to have variety and even, in some sense, hierarchy. Authority does not automatically mean oppression. We have to understand that again today.

Well, as we read the Bible there are three major offices that emerge. These three positions of authority played key functions in the life of Israel. They are the prophet, the priest, and the king. Over the next three weeks we’ll be looking at each of them in this section unpacking the 5th Commandment. But in dealing with these positions Moses “moves backwards through the line of authority which starts with God communicating his instructions to the people through the prophets. After this, the priests have the responsibility of instructing the people concerning the word of God, and then the kings have the responsibility of setting up and maintaining a system based on the instructions given by God.”⁵ So the order we’re going to go in is king, priest, prophet. And today we’re starting with the king.

Judges

Really, Deuteronomy starts off with the office of judge. But I’m lumping the judges in under the office of king because the judges had a kingly kind of function, just on a smaller scale. They were junior kings, you might say; below kings like mayors are below governors.

Verse 18 – Moses says, “You shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns that the LORD your God is giving you, according to your tribes.” Who were the officers that were appointed along with judges? Different proposals have been made: were they like lawyers or pages or police officers or the executioners...? We’re not exactly sure, but they were somehow part of the judicial system.

And what was the purpose of the judicial system? Look at the end of v. 18 – “they shall judge the people with righteous judgment.” They were to make sure that the right things were done. That love was practiced on a public scale. The Law was about Love, right? So they were to ensure that in Israelite society life was promoted, that sex was properly channeled, that private property was respected, and that truth was maintained. And then when murder, adultery, theft, or false witness tragically occurred that it was punished and dealt with appropriately. The judges and their officers were leaders that kept the peace, the shalom, the order and well-being of society.

Verse 19 – “You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous.” In other words, these judges were supposed to be impartial. No favoritism. No giving someone from his own tribe breaks that he wouldn’t give others. No giving someone from a different tribe a harder time. Everyone is equally bound to the law. And no allowing the rich to buy them off. The rich and powerful were held to the same standards as everyone else. These judges were to make sure that everybody was treated equal. Everyone – high and low, rich and poor alike – is created in the image of God. The rich don’t deserve preferential treatment. The prophet Isaiah says, “Woe to those who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of his right” (Is. 5:22-23)!

Verse 20 puts it memorably – “Justice, and only justice, you shall follow...” Justice and only justice. This is God’s standard. This was to be his people’s motto. No injustice. No exploitation of certain classes. The government of God’s people was supposed to be just, right. No one was to be taken advantage of. Wages were to be fair. Widows and orphans were to be taken care of. No bias. No one was to be targeted. People with power couldn’t bend the rules. People without power couldn’t be mistreated. Justice, only justice. **God’s people were to care about justice.**

Idolatry

Now the next section may seem to be out of place when we first read it. I’m prepared for this to be about caring for the poor and stuff like that. 16:21 – 17:7 seems to shift the conversation away from justice to religion. But it’s not a shift in the Bible’s way of thinking. Unrighteousness is not just legal inequality, but also spiritual idolatry. Stealing land and robbing God of his glory are both evil.

They are, in fact, intimately connected. You don’t murder unless your own sovereignty has become what you trust in more than God’s. You don’t commit adultery unless sex has become more satisfying to you than God. You don’t steal unless stuff has become more important to you than God. You don’t lie unless your own reputation has become what you value instead of God’s. So behind all unrighteousness and injustice is really idolatry – setting something else up as the object of your worship besides God.

And so we read next – “You shall not plant any tree as an Asherah beside the altar of the LORD your God that you shall make. And you shall not set up a pillar, which the LORD your God hates” (16:21-22). These were monuments of a sort that were associated with pagan spirituality, fertility religions. And it was absolutely forbidden in Israel. Israel was to trust the LORD alone for everything. God was their good Provider. But when crops and the material wealth that they brought became what they really

treasured, the way it looked back then would be to build an Asherah pole next to your Yahweh altar. What might that look like today?

17:1 – “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.” Again, pure worship of the LORD. No other gods. And if you are saving your best for something else besides God, you’re an idolater.

Now we get back to the topic of justice. If such idolatry occurred, then the judges were supposed to make sure that this was punished in a way that the punishment fit the crime. “If there is found among you, within any of your towns that the LORD your God is giving you, a man or 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 host of heaven, which I have forbidden, and it is told you and you hear of it, then you shall inquire diligently [here is the concept of due process, no summary executions; there needs to be a fair trial], and if it is true and certain that such an abomination has been done in Israel, then you shall bring out to your gates [the gates were the places where legal proceedings happened, kind of like a town square with a court house] that man or woman who has done this evil thing, and you shall stone that man or woman to death with stones” (17:2-5).

This couldn’t be done at home by a single person – that would be murder. It had to be done in the public arena, with the judges making sure that justice and only justice is taking place. And so towards that end we read – “On the evidence of two witnesses or of 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 [that would be too easy for it to be a personal vendetta or for a miscarriage of justice to happen]. The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death [a deterrent against false witnessing], and afterward the hand of all the people [which shows that this is a capital punishment on behalf of the community, not a personal grudge or vigilante justice]. So you shall purge the evil from your midst” (17:6-7).

Two things here: (1) We still know that there are certain crimes so heinous that in order for justice to be served there needs to be a trial, legal conviction, and then a public execution. An example would be the Nuremberg Trials after WWII where 10 Nazi war criminals were hanged for their roles in unspeakable atrocities. (2) The second thing to point out is that cosmic treason is one such crime. Idolatry deserves the death penalty. If we really want to talk about justice, then in God’s court the highest crime is worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:25), rebelling against the God of the universe. It’s the worst form of evil.

Higher Court

Let’s continue through this passage. 17:8-13 describe a kind of court of appeals or higher courts. If lower judges could not determine what was right in certain cases, then it could be taken up at the Tabernacle where there was a kind of Supreme Court.

“If any case arises requiring decision between one kind of homicide and another [so there are different degrees of murder or manslaughter], one kind of legal right and another, or 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 shall declare to you the decision. 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. According to the instructions that they give you, and according to the decision which they pronounce to you, you shall do. 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” (17:8-13).

Here we’re continuing to see the concept of justice. We also see here clearly this concept of submitting to authority (the 5th Commandment), assuming that the authority is acting on behalf of God. Here we are also introduced to the priest. I said this was about the kingly office, but the kings worked in conjunction with the priests.

The King

But wait a minute. Actually, the text hasn’t even mentioned a king yet. Where am I getting that from? Well, that’s what vv. 14-20 are about. God was Israel’s King, but there is anticipated in the Law that one day there would be a human king of Israel. This office holder would incorporate in one man for all Israel the role of the judge. And this section lays out specific guidelines for that king.

“When you come to the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you possess it and dwell in it and then say, ‘I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me,’ you may indeed set a king over you” (17:14-15a). But he can’t be a king like the kings of this world. He must be a righteous king. Let’s look at the specifications. They paint a different picture than kingship as understood in the ancient world.

First, he must be chosen by God – “whom the LORD your God will choose.” God must make clear that this is his anointed one.

Next, he must be one of them. “One from among your brothers you shall set as king over you. You may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother” (17:15b). Monarchies throughout history are notorious for drawing from “royal” blood from other countries to try to legitimize the reign. Here it wasn’t to be the case, presumably to protect the spiritual purity of the people because foreign royalty meant foreign deity.

Then in v. 16 we read, “Only he must not acquire many horses for himself or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, since the LORD has said to you, ‘You shall never return that way again.’” In other words, he shall not seek power and protection through military machinery, but trust in the LORD. “The war horse is a false hope for salvation, and by its great might it cannot rescue” (Ps. 33:17; cf. Is. 31:1).

Verse 17 makes clear that the righteous king “shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away.” Royal marriages were political alliances and inevitably would mean religious syncretism. Foreign wives introduced foreign gods. Think Jezebel (cf. 1Kngs 21:25).

Verse 17 also adds – “nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold.” This would be an indication of a power-hungry, money-grabbing monarch that was not in it for the good of the people but for his own good. He would oppress the people, force

them into heavy labor to pad the coffers of the crown. But a good king should make everyone prosper.

Then in the last section of this chapter we see that the king must not set himself above the Law but put himself in submission to it. He would be a man who doesn't just put his hand on a Bible at his inauguration, but reads it regularly. It says, "And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law [by the way, have you ever tried copying Scripture for yourself? writing something out is a great way to internalize it], approved by the Levitical priests. [it's unclear whether this is referring to this section of Deuteronomy 17, or all of Deuteronomy or some other portion of the Pentateuch or what; cf. 2Kings 11:12] And it shall be with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel" (17:18-20). A dynasty here is envisioned, but a righteous, humble one. Not a dictator, with absolute power, but a servant, submitted to God's Word.

Now, what do we see in the subsequent history of Israel? Well, after Moses died, Joshua led them into the land the LORD their God gave them. They settled there. After Joshua died there was what we call the period of the judges. There's a whole book of the Bible by that title. But if you read you see it cycling and devolving into utter wickedness. Progressively these judges become less and less righteous. And the priests they worked with become more and more corrupt. And "justice, only justice" becomes a fading dream. The judges "took bribes and perverted justice" (1Sam. 8:4).

Then the people clamor for a king to judge them like all the nations that surrounded them (1Sam. 8:5). God gives them Saul, who becomes a failure and a foil for King David. David in many ways was an archetypal king, a model that God would use to heighten people's desire for a good and righteous king. We read in 2 Kings 8:15 – "So David reigned over all Israel. And David administered justice and equity to all his people." David loved the Law and the Lord, but if you read the story closely you see so many ways that David failed. And then his son, Solomon, broke all of these rules laid out in Dt. 17. He acquired many horses and many wives and much silver and gold and his heart turned away from the LORD. And then after him everything went downhill. The kings of Israel and Judah did not promote justice, only justice. This is a major theme of the prophets towards the end of the OT – God's people did not care about justice.

Jesus

So what's the answer? Donald Trump? Hilary Clinton? Don't be silly. Don't put your hope in any candidate. Some may be more just than others... or our society may be cycling and devolving to a place of utter wickedness where all the candidates are deplorable. Friends, the Bible and all of human history shows us very clearly that no king has ever been perfectly righteous and ushered in a land of liberty and justice for all!

Look: there is one and only one Righteous King, the hope of all the nations. His name is Jesus, the Christ. He is God's chosen one, anointed. He is truly one of us; he is like us in all ways, yet without sin; he understands us; he's one of us. And he didn't ride into Jerusalem on a war horse, but a donkey; he leaned fully on God's power. And he doesn't have many wives, but one – his Bride, the Church to whom he is utterly devoted.

And he was not power-hungry or money-grabbing, but laid aside his rights and became utterly poor with no place to lay his head. And he completely and totally internalized the Word of God, it was his meditation day and night. He kept every single one of God's laws perfectly. He was in complete submission to the Father, he fulfilled all righteousness. He is the only Righteous King.

Jesus Christ is the Eternal Ruler of the Kingdom of God. And he will reign forever and judge righteously (i.e. Is. 9:6-7). He will put everything to rights. Perfect justice for all. He will fairly and accurately with the keenest insight and wisdom try every case. There will be no more injustice. Everything will be right and fair. There will finally be full human flourishing and peace. No oppression. No poverty. No systemic injustice. It sounds nice...

Until you realize that *everyone* must appear before his judgment seat. And before his perfect bar of justice you stand condemned. If Jesus came as Judge right off the bat, then nobody would survive. His kingdom would be unpopulated. This is why he came as Savior. He came to die on the Cross. He came to take the justice we deserved – the death penalty in our place – so that we could be justified, declared righteous, and God could still be righteous, not acquitting the guilty. Our sins, our idolatry had to be paid for. And that is what Jesus was doing on the cross. Taking the penalty for his people. But even more. In his life he was earning the perfect record of righteousness, of justice, that is required for entrance into his kingdom.

What a king! He is what you are longing for. His kingdom is the only solution. And you can be part of it, if you confess your sins and throw yourself on his mercy.

Conclusion

So then how do we apply this passage that shows that **God's people care about justice**, but ultimately points forward to Jesus and his kingdom as the only way true justice will happen? It no doubt means that Christians should be concerned about matters of justice in this world (*all* matters of justice, not just the ones that are hip this decade). We must stand up and say in the public square – *That's not right!*

But there's only a right and a wrong because we live in God's world. He is the standard of what's right and wrong. And before him we're all not right. We're rebels. We're unrighteous. We deserve justice and that's not good news in and of itself. And so our main message in the world has to be telling people how they can be justified. It's not by reducing their carbon footprint or voting for a certain party or working to get lead testing in low income schools. It's by repenting of their sins and putting their trust in Christ alone.

So the first application of this text must be to make sure you are justified by the Judge of all the earth.

But there is more. Justified people will of all people want to love their neighbors, which means working for justice in your worldly vocations – teachers, lawyers, planners, accountants, etc...

But don't miss that individual justification puts you into a corporate people. And the most clear application of OT laws for Israel in the NT era is to the Church, not society at large. Those who don't understand that the Church is the new Israel and that idolatry is the greatest evil will simply take this passage and turn it into a mere manifesto for their

favorite forms of social justice. The gospel of justification will be minimized or lost. The church will be sidelined. And people will get more excited about causes than Christ.

The kingdom of God exists for now among the kingdoms of this world and it's seen in Christ's Church. The Church is the people of God, redeemed by Jesus, and now learning to live for him. The Church is to be the place that the world looks into and sees what justice looks like, love on a large scale. So if you care about justice you live that out in the local church. It's in the Church where we practice for the New Creation, where we will reign with Christ (cf. Mt. 19:28).

That's why we see in 1 Corinthians 5 that Paul is adamant that believers in the church judge well and "Purge the evil person from among you." And he's outraged in ch. 6 that those within the church would "dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints" (1Cor. 6:1). He says, "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life!

"So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers?

"Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were *justified* in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1Cor. 6:2-6, 9-11).

The Lord's Table

Let's celebrate now together as a Church that we who were unrighteous and undeserving of being in God's Kingdom have been justified. Let's sing to the King as we gather around his Table...

Benediction

In light of your justification may you "do justice, and... love kindness, and... walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8).

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Immanuel Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, by Pastor Nathan Carter on Sunday morning, September 25, 2016. It is not meant to be a polished essay, but was written to be delivered orally. The mission of Immanuel is to be a multiplying community that enjoys and proclaims the Good News of Christ in the great city of Chicago.

¹ James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 108.

² *Ibid.*, 109.

³ David F. Wells, *God in the Whirlwind: How the Holy-love of God Reorients Our World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 22.

⁴ Madeleine L'Engle, *A Wrinkle in Time* (New York: Dell, 1962), 146.

⁵ J.H. Walton, "Deuteronomy: An Exposition of the Spirit of the Law," in *Grace Theological Journal* 8:2 (1987), 217.