

Justice and the Gospel

Today I want to talk with you about everything. It's a big topic but I'm going to try to get through it in 45 minutes so that everyone else here today can have a chance to talk about everything as well. Now even though I get 45 minutes all to myself and the rest of you have to share the next 45 minutes, I still need to focus somewhat in order to get through everything in just 45 minutes. But I've been thinking about this for a while and I think we can condense everything down to just the topic of justice.

It seems to me that if you take the internet (which is pretty much everything) and remove the cat pictures the other nonsense, everything that remains is about justice. People talk about it in different ways—civil rights or human rights or constitutional rights or whatever; left, right, neither, both, at the bottom everybody's got some kind of opinion about justice.

Justice is still a pretty big topic, and I don't have time to go through parental rights and women's rights and all of the other rights that are being wronged. I really have been thinking about this for a while, though, and I think it's fair to say that the right to life is the most fundamental of all rights. If you're not alive, none of the other rights mean very much. So I thought about the right to life, and I thought about the Bible, and God showed me that everybody on the internet is wrong.

You don't have a right to life. Nobody has a right to life. There is of course that beautiful verse: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." But this is not a verse in our scripture. Is it actually true? Where in the Bible did God endow the right to life? I remember that "in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27 ESV); but I remember too that Jesus "is the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15 ESV). Which image is sacred, and conveys the sanctity of life? The crucified Christ or the first Adam? If we have a right to life merely by being human, what right does God have to kill us?

We don't usually think of God killing people, but he certainly has. Let's start with the story of Achan. Achan was an Israelite from the tribe of Judah who "took some of the devoted things" (Jos. 7:1 ESV), that is, some of the things that were devoted to destruction. All the possessions of the entire city of Jericho were to be burned with fire, but Achan kept some; so he, too, had to die. So where was the image of God in the inhabitants of Jericho? Were they not made in the image of God? Where was the image of God in Achan? Where was his right to life?

When Korah rebelled against Moses God intervened directly and opened up the earth under Korah and supernaturally buried him alive:

"Then Moses rose and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him. And he spoke to the congregation, saying, 'Depart, please, from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, lest you be swept away with all their sins.' So they got away from the dwelling of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. And Dathan and Abiram came out and stood at the door of their tents, together with their wives, their sons, and their little ones. And Moses said, 'Hereby you shall know that the Lord has sent me to do all these works, and that it has not been

of my own accord. If these men die as all men die, or if they are visited by the fate of all mankind, then the Lord has not sent me. But if the Lord creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised the Lord.'

And as soon as he had finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split apart. And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their goods. So they and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol, and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. And all Israel who were around them fled at their cry, for they said, 'Lest the earth swallow us up!' And fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men offering the incense. (Num. 16:25-35 ESV)

I've shortened the passage, but if you read all of Numbers 16 you'll find that the sons of Korah frame the issue as one of social justice: the equality of all Israelites and the better economic circumstances they had in Egypt. Moses responds by saying, "Hereby you shall know that the Lord has sent me to do all these works." God intervened to kill these men—and their wives, and their little ones—to show that it was he, God, leading Israel into the wilderness. God killed people just to make a point, not to maintain a common standard of justice. There are more examples of this in the Old Testament, some of which I will get to a bit later. But first I want to skip ahead to the New Testament for a minute, because we sometimes get so disgusted with this bloodthirsty Old Testament God that we ignore him and say that he must be different than the gentle, graceful New Testament God.

That would be unwise. In Acts chapter 5 God killed two Christians under the New Covenant for lying in church. Can you imagine what an epidemic we would have if God decided to apply that same punishment today, fairly, to everybody? We'd have non-stop funeral services. Which would only make the problem worse, of course.

But let's think about this for a minute. God killed two people for lying in church. Do you think that's the worst thing that's ever been done in a church? Why didn't he kill the pedophiles? I'd like to think there weren't any pedophiles in the church back then but Judas got in with the first twelve. And it was kind of the thing to do in ancient Greece. Maybe there weren't any in the particular church Peter was in at the time, but Paul had to write letters about incest so I'm sure something worse than lying happened in the New Testament churches. But God chose those two, just those two and no others that we have any record of.

Are you beginning to see the problem? God clearly gets involved in things down here on earth. I've picked the clearest examples where the Bible says God was directly involved in killing people, but the issue goes way beyond that. God let Peter out of jail. Stephen got stoned, by Paul. As a reward for killing Stephen God appeared to Paul in a supernatural vision to bring him the gospel. Later on God helps Paul survive stoning and a shipwreck. Was that fair to Stephen? Is that the kind of justice you are looking for from the New Testament God? "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Gen. 18:25 ESV).

Perhaps you're not comfortable thinking critically about God like this. You are perhaps more respectful than I am. Let me call to your attention three of the most troubling chapters in the Bible, Judges 19 – 21. I'll try to shorten for you. A man took a concubine (which as you know is like a wife, but without family rights). The Bible doesn't say how this man was treating her but it does say that she left him and went back to her father. So this guy goes to fetch her back and her Dad tries to stall him and get him to settle down at least in that town and not half across the country. He does this with lots of free food and wine. Eventually though the fellow decides he wants to take his wife with him back to his home and they set off.

It's a trip of more than one day and they need a place to stay. This guy decides that it's not a good idea to stay with foreigners and they'd better keep going and stay in an Israelite town, in the territory of Benjamin. They get a room with an old man in town who is nice enough to put them up for the night.

But the house gets surrounded by thugs, men who want to rape the travelling man. This is exactly the same situation as Lot's visitors in the infamous city of Sodom. Just as Lot did, the men in the house offer up the women to be raped in the place of the men. This time, however, there are no angels to intervene and strike the rapists blind. The concubine is raped and abused until by morning she is dead. This guy who chased her half across the country to get her back finds out she's dead when he opens the door in the morning and she's lying there and he says to her, "Get up, let's go."

This is a pretty sickening story, and if we were reading in Genesis about Sodom the next thing that would happen would be a bunch of fire out of heaven to burn them all up. But we're in Judges. So the guy takes his dead concubine and cuts her up into pieces and gets the pieces sent all over the country. Most of the country thinks that what happened to this woman is outrageous and they all go to the city and demand that the guilty men be handed over. That seems reasonable enough. But the people of the city refuse. In fact, a whole bunch of their fellow Benjaminites come to their aid and a civil war breaks out between the people trying to kill the rapists and the people protecting the rapists from outside interference.

Now, there is nothing in the text that says God told the man to chase down his concubine or drag her back home, or send her out to be raped, or cut her up and mail her across the country. And there is nothing in the text that says that God told the Israelites to start a war with the tribe of Benjamin. But once they are all there and they've sworn to fight it out the text does say that Israel asked how they should fight against Benjamin, and God answered them, and they were beaten. Not once but twice. Just to be clear, the ones who were trying to punish the rapists asked God how to fight, and God answered them, and they lost the battle twice. The third time around God gave them the victory.

When the rest of Israel finally beat the Benjaminites they beat them hard. They used a scorched-earth policy and slaughtered everyone and burned down the towns. That may seem harsh but it was the way God had told them to conquer the native Canaanites, and these Benjaminites were defending some pretty horrible rapists.

So after Israel finally punished the Benjaminites for the horrible rape, they felt sorry for the Benjaminites. Back when they were mad at the Benjaminites they promised to never let any of their

daughters marry a Benjaminite because of the wickedness they had done. So they found some people who didn't go to fight the Benjaminites and they killed all of the men because they hadn't fought the Benjaminites (yes, the same Benjaminites they were now feeling sorry for). So the Israelites killed the people who hadn't helped kill the bad people that the Israelites were feeling sorry for, and then took all the women and gave them to the Benjaminites, the bad people.

No, it doesn't make any sense. Now the text doesn't say that God told them to kill the men who wouldn't fight and give all their women to the bad men, and that's probably the most disturbing in this whole twisted story: it's not that clear what God thought about it on first glance. But it's not over yet: the Israelites couldn't get enough women for all of the surviving Benjaminites just by killing the men in one town. So they decided to have a big party and host a ladies' dance, and accidentally forget to guard it, and also let the Benjaminites know that all the ladies would be dancing without anyone guarding them. So the Benjaminites came and kidnapped a bunch more wives. Yes, the same Benjaminites who were just in trouble for defending rapists. Those Benjaminites were allowed to kidnap for themselves a bunch more wives.

The whole story is disgusting, and it's not really clear what God thought about anybody involved. The only time anything is attributed to God he's setting up the good guys to lose two bloody fights against the rapists. God could have done something – fire and brimstone like at Sodom, plagues like in Egypt, swallowing them up in the ground like Korah, just striking the dead like Ananias and Sapphira. When we stop reading these stories in the Bible like fairy tales, like timeless just-so stories, and actually think about them as real-time events where God could have done things differently, they become very strange and hard to understand.

Let's look at the same kind of issues in a more personal context. Let's consider David. David of course was the man after God's heart, the archetypal righteous King of Israel and a model Good Shepherd. Everyone knows that David killed Goliath the giant, rescuing Israel. Most people also know that David committed adultery. Most of you probably also know David's whole story, but let's look at it again, keeping in mind, if you would, your sense of justice.

David's son Amnon fell in love with David's daughter, Tamar. David's nephew helped Amnon come up with a scheme where he could rape his sister Tamar, which is what he did. Tamar was Amnon's half-sister, and he probably could have married her, like she suggested, but he threw her out afterward. Word got around about it, but David did nothing. A little reminder for you: David lived under the full effect of the Mosaic Law. According to that law Amnon should have been stoned to death. David did nothing.

So two years later Absalom hosted a party. You might remember Absalom as the one who rebelled against David, seized the throne, raped David's concubines and tried to kill David. You might remember that David didn't want Absalom killed despite all of that, and David was extremely upset when Absalom was in fact killed. Well, none of that has happened yet (especially that last part). Absalom was Tamar's brother. Absalom threw a big party, invited Amnon, and then had him killed to avenge the rape of his sister. This is kind of a legal gray area because there was some allowance in the Mosaic law for revenge,

so it is not completely clear whether Absalom was wrong in this case or not. What did David do about it? Nothing.

One of David's responsibilities as King was to uphold justice. In fact, the prophet who anointed David king, Samuel, had sons who were deemed unfit to lead Israel because they perverted justice. David had a strong sense of justice, for when the prophet Nathan told him about a rich man who stole a lamb from a poor man David was incensed and wanted the man dead. It turned out that Nathan was actually telling a parable about David and Bathsheba, and after that David decided not to execute the rich man after all. But David definitely had a sense of justice, and David also had a close relationship with God as the author of many psalms and the beneficiary of many miraculous victories. God and David were on a first-name basis, but in the case of all this horrible abuse and dysfunction in David's family, David did nothing to uphold justice and God is not on record rebuking him for it. Later when David took a census God rebuked David for that, and punished the whole nation with a plague (2 Sam. 24), but nothing ever comes up about these little family ordeals.

Many people have pointed out, rightly I think, that many of David's family problems can be related to David's own loose ways with women, but as such it needs to be pointed out that the people who got the worst of that were not David himself. It was Tamar who was raped, and later David's concubines; Amnon, Absalom, and Bathsheba's first baby who died; and many others close to David who bore the fallout of David's bad choices, including the plague after the census.

Let's wrap up David's story with a look at Uzzah (2 Sam. 6:1-10):

David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. And David arose and went with all the people who were with him from Baale-judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the Lord of hosts who sits enthroned on the cherubim. And they carried the ark of God on a new cart and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. And Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart, with the ark of God, and Ahio went before the ark.

And David and all the house of Israel were celebrating before the Lord, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals. And when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him down there because of his error, and he died there beside the ark of God. And David was angry because the Lord had broken out against Uzzah. [...] David was afraid of the Lord that day, and he said, 'How can the ark of the Lord come to me?' So David was not willing to take the ark of the Lord into the city of David. But David took it aside to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite.

Did you catch that? David thought it would be too dangerous to have the ark of the Lord nearby, so he dumped it off on some other guy. "Here, how about you get struck by lightning instead of me? Okay-thanks-bye." And more than that: David gets away with adultery and murder, and turning a blind eye to rape and murder in his own family; but this guy Uzzah puts one wrong finger on the ark—with good

intentions!—and whammo, he's dead. God strikes Uzzah dead. Even David didn't think it was fair, that's why he dropped off the unfair and dangerous God in some guy's front yard.

To be clear, the incident with Uzzah happened before most of that other stuff with David's family. But it doesn't seem like God's standards should have changed that much to go from blasting Uzzah with lightning to letting David get away with murder. And here's my point: this stuff still happens. There are still rich, respected men in the church who get away with abuse while some girl gets busted out for getting pregnant. This stuff still happens; these huge, gross injustices still occur. People ask, where's God? Right where he's always been, by the looks of things.

So why doesn't God do something? And some people say, well, he can't. They kicked him out of public school, you know, and that was just too much for him to take. But that's ridiculous. Go back and read the Old Testament. God used ten plagues on Egypt, fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah. Some people say that's why we keep having bad weather and school shootings today: that's our punishment. But even if we accept that as true—which I don't, but just say that we could—even if we accept that, it just underlines the point: why aren't there ever any pedophile shootings? Why doesn't the bad weather ever kill the crooked bankers? Why does David sin and Uzzah gets blasted with lightning?

Some people talk about free will. I don't want to get stuck in that debate and derail my main point, but somebody is going to bring it up. So let me try to simplify it somewhat. Forget about human free will, what about God's free will? God can kill people in an instant. God can heal people in an instant. We know that he's done both in the past. I've spent my time looking at the people who were killed, but it goes both ways. God steps in and breaks the normal rules and saves or destroys someone. He chooses when to do that. So why does he do it sometimes and not others?

The difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant is probably the largest example of this inconsistency. In the Old Covenant you are killed like Uzzah; in the New Covenant you are forgiven like David. But these generalizations ignore important details, like the fact that both David and Uzzah were under the Old Covenant; or the angelic bail-out Peter got but Stephen didn't, both under the New Covenant.

So how does God justify this? How does he explain the differences in how people are treated? Which of you can explain this with your theories about the sanctity of human life, or just war, or free will, or moral versus civil Law, or social justice, or covenants? Do any of those theories really explain how God can intervene directly and unstopably into human affairs in some cases but not others? Do these theories really explain what happened to different people under the same covenant for the same sin? Most of us have not yet heard a good explanation.

The key, I think, is that phrase that Moses used, "Hereby you shall know the Lord." We can see the same thing in event of Uzzah's death. God showed to David that his righteousness was uncompromising. This shocked and offended David because apparently David at that time thought he was a pretty good guy. God knew that he was not. He chose to use David anyway, and to use him as the preeminent type of Christ in the Old Testament. But at that particular time God wanted David to learn about his righteousness, and so he taught him a lesson. And we can see the same thing with Ananias and

Sapphira. God wanted to show that he was serious about this New Covenant, that it wasn't just the new cool diet or social network, so he killed two liars to make a point. "Hereby you shall know the Lord."

We really see the same thing with Jesus. Shortly before his crucifixion Jesus said,

"Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? "Father, save me from this hour"? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven: 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.' Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not mine.'" (John 12:27-30 ESV)

Jesus refers to his own crucifixion as glorifying the name of the Father. We tend to gloss over this because it's just the way the story goes. How many fathers would be proud to have their son die for a bunch of sinners – for those Benjaminites who raped the concubine? How many would say that the hour of Jesus' tribulation, his torture and death, glorified God? Surely his resurrection glorified God, and we just assume that's what God is talking about here. But Jesus refers to the hour he wishes to be saved from. And then he says that this voice, this explanation, is for our benefit, not his. John goes on to quote Isaiah: "Lord, who has believed our report?" Then Jesus cries aloud that he will not judge the one who does not believe, but the word that Jesus has spoken will judge the unbeliever. And finally, Jesus offers eternal life. So right here in John we have the two extremes of our puzzle, life and death, presented as a puzzle with an answer that few believe.

Remember that the Gospel of John is the gospel of the nice Jesus: he turns water to wine, he gets the adulteress out from under the death penalty, he raises Lazarus from the dead. But one thing Jesus does not say here or anywhere else is, "You have rights." Jesus doesn't talk about his rights or the rights of his disciples. He doesn't tell the disciples that they have inalienable rights from God that all governments are obligated to respect. He doesn't teach about the sanctity of human life. Quite the contrary, in his last hours Jesus told his disciples that they would be brutally treated and subject to all kinds of injustice. And rather than teaching that anyone has an inalienable right to life, Jesus passionately proclaims that all have been alienated from life and have no life at all unless they will come to him.

If we are looking to find the gospel in a society where women are not abused, where children are not killed, where rich men do not steal and lawmen uphold justice, we cannot find it in the past and you will not find it in the future. God himself kills some and lets others go free. Will we find more justice among the men of the earth?

I am not suggesting that we are free to practice injustice and let God fix it all hereafter. Preaching the gospel cannot rightly be separated from doing the gospel. In this people are right to point to the healing and feeding and rescuing that Jesus did when he walked among us; what Jesus did is our example to follow. But it is also in this that we need to take our warning. For all the healing Jesus did, he did not heal everyone. For all the thousands Jesus fed, he did not feed everyone. Whenever God touched history, he did not touch everyone equally.

The power of the gospel is the revelation of the work of God that extends beyond the grave and endures beyond all injustice. Jesus is our example, and he shows us what we ought to do ourselves; but he is not the example of what we should expect from others. If our gospel requires that other people behave rightly, we have lost the way. When we treat the widow with mercy we follow Jesus; when we demand justice for the widow we have joined the spirit of the crowds chanting at Pilate. We would never, of course, ask for a murdering thief instead of Jesus, but oddly enough that is exactly what we will get when we demand that the world be more good than God allows.

I think we most easily fall into this trap when lives are on the line. Whether it's unborn children, innocent girls, or just the land of the free and the home of the brave, our gospel becomes very elastic when it is time to save the lives of those we love. But when we call something good solely because lives will be saved, we have let death define our gospel. The fear of death, even if not our own death, should not change our message. Remember that God killed Uzzah when David moved the ark, and David's baby when David sinned with Bathsheba, and David's people when David sinned in taking the census. God is not afraid of death.

Now it would not be right for us to be careless about death. If we did not care at all who died, it would have no meaning at all for God to kill Uzzah, or Achan, or Ananias and Sapphira. Death is God's word for sin. It should disturb us. It should upset us. Death should fling us into the arms of Life, into the embrace of the risen Lord—but nowhere else! Who has a right to life? Christ. Who has a sacred life? Christ. Who has freedom? Christ. Who has happiness? Christ. Who has riches? Christ. Who has food? Christ. Anything else you can offer to anyone is not Christ and it is not life.

* * *

No Words

Dark and dark toward the bottom of the deep
 Dark and deep and silent; what word could make
 Better? Only silence answers music.
 Forbid a further word, spoken to abyss,
 To give life to death again. Rest in peace and
 Silence.
 O word of life, listen to the silence of your lambs!
 Sheol shall not praise you! Sorrow cannot sing!
 Return your fearful light and strengthen us to
 Tremble. Rightly call us cursed, and we shudder.
 Cease not judging, Grace! Suffer to let us hear you still
 Speaking!

12/26/2011

For A.R.T.