

Justice and Judgment in Israel

HN 12/02/06 pm

Reading: Deuteronomy 16:18-17:13, Titus 1

Study Text: Deuteronomy 16:18-17:13

Sing Psalms: 97:1-7, 26:8-12, 89:1-4, 89:13-16

Our press of late has been filled with news of kickbacks and bribery. This is not something we are used to in our nation, but no doubt we will hear more of in the future – especially when learned men say that bribery is part of doing business, and that if we don't pay bribes we will not get the business. The press in some nations carries stories of bribery and corruption every day. Indeed people who live in such places are faced with bribery at every turn – to get a job, to get into school or college, to get the phone connected, to get a licence, and sometimes to avoid fines or conviction.

The Lord called for his people to tithe of their produce and to share this with the poor, because God desires equality. They were not to be hardhearted or tight fisted towards their brother who is poor. Certainly they were not to exploit the poor and needy, or to deny them justice! They were to have compassion as the Lord has compassion, and to help the poor from the bounty the Lord had given them.

The gracious and compassionate Lord is also the God of truth and justice. *Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Mercy and truth go before his face* (Psalms 89:14, 97:2). God hates injustice in any and every form. It follows that he demands truth and justice from his covenant people.

In the fifth commandment the people were told to honour their father and mother, that their days may be long in the land (5:16 *cf.* 16:20). In its broadest sense this commandment is about respect for divinely appointed authority, which is what this passage is about. It is about the authority and the administration of justice within the covenant community.

Israel was a theocracy at this time – God was king. He remained King even when they later chose a king from among them to rule over them (17:15) and became a monarchy. Moses was the appointed leader and judge at this time. On the advice of Jethro he appointed other elders to assist him in judging cases (Exodus 18). Moses reminded them of that time as he began to explain the law while they camped by the Jordan (1:9f).

When the people of God entered Canaan, they were to appoint judges and officers in each town (16:18). The officers probably assisted the judges in investigation and enforcement. Just as in the wilderness difficult cases were referred to Moses (Exodus 18) so in Canaan difficult cases were referred to a panel of priests, Levites and judges at the central sanctuary (17:8f).

This justice system appears not to have been implemented as commanded – at least not for long. As with other commands, the people disobeyed and everyone started to 'do what was right in his own eyes' (Judges 21:25). After many years one king called Jehoshaphat sought to re-establish this justice system prescribed by Moses (II Chronicles 19). But a century later the land was again groaning because justice had been abandoned (Amos 5:6f).

Judges and Justice

Judges were appointed to administer justice. This may seem obvious, but more often than not, even today, money, politics and power can distort their judgment. Moses was aware of this as he commanded them act fairly and not pervert justice. In particular he commanded:

You shall not show partiality: a young man I know was being interviewed for the police force. He was asked what he would do if he found that the car he pulled over for speeding was being driven by his best friend. How would you answer? He said he would treat his friend just like any other person – he would act according to the law. But to avoid any accusation of partiality, he was told he should call another officer and hand the case over to him.

Partiality leads to acquitting the guilty or condemning the innocent. No matter what influence or pressure is applied to the judge he must remain impartial. The rich and powerful will seek to get judgments in their favour, but the judge must stand firm. *You shall hear the small as well as the great, and you shall not be afraid in any man's presence, for the judgment is God's* (1:17). How many judges today need to hear these words afresh?

You shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous (16:19). As mentioned we are hearing a lot about bribery these days, but it is nothing new. It is rife in many societies that do not have the Christian heritage we have.

A bribe is a payment given to influence someone unfairly. With a bribe you can jump ahead in the queue. As your bribe goes into the pocket of the official he is blinded to what the rules say, and blind to others waiting in the queue. The poor find themselves going backwards in the queue and never able to get what is rightly theirs. They groan under the weight of injustice – they cannot pay so do not get heard. Jesus described an unjust or corrupt judge who refused to hear the case of a poor widow (Luke 18).

What should we do about bribery? Many take the way of expediency – ‘if I don't pay then I will not get the sale, the job, the certificate or whatever’. Many justify payment, blaming the one asking for a bribe. Those who pay bribes soon say ‘well I want my money back’ and they start demanding bribes and soon corruption is spiralling out of control. God condemns bribery absolutely. Flee from bribery. Pray don't pay. *You shall follow what is altogether just that you may live* (16:20).

Judges and Worship

The reference to idolatry and worship in this passage about justice may seem out of place (16:21f). But it was important that purity of worship be maintained if justice was to be maintained. Remember, the Lord himself was the ultimate judge. Hard decisions were taken to his sanctuary where priests who knew the law would make just judgment.

The authority of the Lord must not be replaced by any idolatrous source of supposed revelation. *My people ask counsel from their wooden idols and their staff (or diviners rod) informs them* writes Hosea (Hosea 4:12). This is what happens when worship is corrupted – judgement is also corrupted.

Pagans make decisions in all sorts of ways. On Malta the people said Paul must be a murderer (Acts 28). How did they make this judgment? Because a snake latched onto his arm! Such is the way of judgment by superstitious people who worship idols.

It is no small thing that we have Bibles in our courts. Our justice system is founded upon the Scriptures. We are not to go looking to the stars or to the trees for counsel; we are not to go looking to the pagan people for counsel. God has given his people his Word – his word is truth – and his Spirit, the Counsellor. Do not run to the pagans for judgment. *Do you not know that the saints of God will judge the world said Paul* (I Corinthians 6:2).

Judge and Commitment

Moses goes on to describe how a case brought before a judge should be decided. This case concerned a man or woman who acted wickedly by worshipping other gods – in this case the sun, moon or other heavenly body. Such worship may seem more sophisticated than worshipping man made idols – is this the reason we see such worship proliferating around us today? But worship of any created thing is offensive to God and he will judge such people.

The judge is commanded to *inquire diligently* into the matter brought before him (17:4). He must look at the witnesses and their testimony. There must be two or three witnesses – *he shall not be put to death on the testimony of one witness* (17:6). The judge was invested with great responsibility. He must be committed to undertaking a thorough investigation and not rely on hearsay or false witnesses.

The judge was also to ensure that his judgment, or what was in effect the judgment of the Lord, was carried out in the manner prescribed by the Lord. The witnesses who gave testimony against the accused must be the first to lead in the punishment – in this case death by stoning. Laws are meant to be obeyed and judgments are meant to be carried out. Where in this is the so called suspended sentence?

We have embedded in this passage a principle that continues into the New Testament and is still valid today – two or three witnesses who agree – not one. At the trial of Jesus witness were brought but they could not agree so their testimony was thrown out. Jesus endorsed this principle for the church (Matthew 18:16) as did the apostle Paul (I Timothy 5:19).

Judges and Authority

Difficult cases, such as those involving bloodshed, were referred to the ‘supreme court’ as it were (17:8f). There the priests, Levites and judges *shall pronounce upon you sentence of judgment* and that judgment was to be respected as being from the Lord. Anyone who presumed to disregard their judgment, anyone who showed contempt for the decision of this court was to face capital punishment. The people *shall hear and fear*. This evil was to be put away from Israel.

The Lord God of Israel, the same God who we worship, is a God of truth and justice. He demands that his covenant people be people of truth and justice. Through his servant Moses he commanded that qualified judges be appointed in all the towns, men who were incorruptible and impartial, men who would carefully investigate matters and ensure justice was done and seen to be done.

Fathers, mothers, teachers, leaders – let each one of us be just and faithful judges and let us pray for our judges and magistrates that they would always judge justly and in the fear of the Lord.

Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon