

What Is Biblical Justice?

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | November 16, 2017



Have you ever longed for justice?

Perhaps a burglar broke out your car window and stole the newly installed radio from your car. Or maybe somebody cruelly harmed your loved one. Whatever happened, you hoped that the perp would be found so that he could “face the courts of justice.”

Of course, you often hear politicians talk about pursuing terrorists to “bring them to justice” for their murderous acts. And former prosecutors seeking public office often campaign on the number of criminals they “brought to justice” during their tenure. In each case, they view justice as a karma-like punishment—evildoers “get justice” through an act of legal retribution.

However, this common way of viewing “justice” is, well, not biblical. Yet it has become ingrained in our culture and, sadly, it has infected the way Christians view justice. While Jesus said to Pilate that His government was not like this world’s governments, many Christians mistakenly represent God’s methods as being no different than those of the world. (See John 18:36.)

What Is Justice?

Justice is doing what is right, which is determined by the laws of a given society or entity. For instance, it is quite just in our culture to punch someone in the face during a boxing match, but it's quite unjust to do so in a game of baseball.

Biblical justice is determined by God's laws, which are design laws—the protocols upon which reality is designed to function, much like the laws of physics, health, and love. Deviations from His laws are damaging and require Him to heal and restore, lest death ensue.

Humans, on the other hand, cannot make space, time, life, nor the laws upon which reality operates, so we make up arbitrary rules that we must then actively enforce by threats of punishment.

God's Justice

Now, with this in mind, let's set the record straight about God's justice, which is an expression of His character of selfless love. God is love—His nature, His character, His being is love! And love operates by always seeking to heal and restore. Deviations with God's design laws will always result in death if God does not intervene to heal and restore. Therefore, biblical justice is exactly opposite of that of the justice of the world. And for that, we can be thankful.

Take a close look at these passages:

- “Defend the poor and fatherless; do justice to the afflicted and needy” (Psalm 82:3).
- “Wash yourselves clean. Stop all this evil that I see you doing. Yes, stop doing evil and learn to do right. See that justice is done—help those who are oppressed, give orphans their rights, and defend widows” (Isaiah 1:16, 17 GN)
- “The LORD is waiting to be kind to you. He rises to have compassion on you. The LORD is a God of justice” (Isaiah 30:18).
- “This is what the LORD says to the dynasty of David: ‘Give justice each morning to the people you judge! Help those who have been robbed; rescue them from their oppressors’ ” (Jeremiah 21:12 NLT).

What do you see? Is justice punishing the oppressors—or delivering the oppressed? In Psalm 82:3, it's clear that justice is done to the afflicted and the needy. Justice is defending the poor and fatherless. In Isaiah 30:18, justice is linked to God's kindness and compassion, which is the outflow of His good self, the source of life, and that healing intervention is always the right and just action for God to take.

Thus, biblical justice is delivering the oppressed—*not* punishing the oppressor.

What Went Wrong?

So where did the idea originate that justice is about punishing the oppressor—rather than about delivering the oppressed, as the Bible models it?

When Constantine converted centuries ago, Christianity became infected with Imperial Rome's view of law. For them, God's law is like Rome's law, imposed by a powerful ruler over his subjects to control behavior and test obedience.

Christianity lost the truth that God's law is the law upon which life is built: the law of love. God's law is the design principle upon which life is constructed to operate. It works like the law of respiration—if you break this law by refusing to breathe, you will die.

Consider these two ideas of God's law closely—the design protocol upon which life is built or an imposed set of arbitrary laws. Then consider what justice looks like: What is the just action when either type of law is broken?

If you saw a loved one, depressed and suicidal, jump off a building, and you had the opportunity to intervene, what would be the “just” or “right” action for you to take? Would you grab a gun and shoot them as they fall in order to inflict punishment for breaking the law of good health? Or would you inflate a large air mattress to save them?

What if you walked into a room and saw a suicidal stranger who had just hanged himself, now dangling from a rope, thereby breaking the law of respiration—what would be the “just” or “right” action to take? Would it be “right” or “just” to pour gasoline on them and burn them to punish them for breaking the law of respiration?

Or would it be “just” or “right” to cut the rope in order to save them?

According to the Bible, this is justice—to deliver or save the oppressed! Breaking God's law automatically results in death, unless the Designer intervenes to heal and restore. Thus we find God, working through Christ, not to punish sinners, but to deliver those oppressed by sin!

Freedom in Justice

When we accept Imperial Rome's version of God's law as nothing more than a set of imposed laws, we actually distort the Divine character and teach that when the law gets broken, God must use His power to inflict punishment upon lawbreakers. God's justice is no longer seen as delivering the oppressed, but as hunting down and destroying the oppressors. And this causes people to seek protection from God rather than healing from sin.

God is love – His nature, His law, is love. Don't be fooled by the values of a sinful world. Return to a God of genuine justice, a God who loved the world so much He sent His only Son, not to condemn the world, but to deliver the oppressed through Him! (See John 3:16, 17.)