

Judges

But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. (Judges 2:19 ESV)

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. (Judges 21:25 ESV)

No King, No Justice

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Judges 20

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Introduction:

Thank you, Derek. Good morning, church! If you haven't already, please turn with me in your Bibles to Judges chapter 20.

Our passage for this morning invites us to think deeply about justice. There's something inside of all of us that CRIES OUT for justice, isn't there? Maybe it shows up in your heart in the little things, like when you see someone driving recklessly on the highway and you just want so badly for there to be a cop car under the overpass. Maybe it shows up in your relationships when you just can't seem to forgive the person that wronged you. Maybe it shows up when you watch the news and you see a small Canadian town devastated by a school shooting.

Where is the justice?

Now, as Christians we believe that perfect justice will come when each of us stands before the throne of judgement. Every sin will be held to account by our holy, righteous God.

And yet, if we're honest, we still LONG for justice in the here and now. But why is it that what this world calls 'justice' so often seems to miss the mark? That's the question that we are confronted with in this passage.

Before we go any further, I want to remind you that we are in the conclusion of the book of Judges. Throughout the book, the author has been making his case for why we need a king, and in these concluding chapters he is hammering home his point with stories that vividly illustrate how BAD life was when there was no king. Today, he reminds us that if there is no king there can be no justice. Everyone will simply do what is right in their own eyes.

Our passage this morning is a continuation of the story that began in chapter 19. Last week we heard about one of the darkest moments in Israel's history. The men of Gibeah tried to sexually assault a man from the tribe of Levi but settled instead for his concubine. The gang of men mistreated her all night and left her for dead.

The next day, in his anger, the Levite chopped up her body and sent her remains to each of the tribes of Israel. This gruesome act was his way of crying out for justice. That's where we are picking up this morning. As we make our way through the story, we're going to ask the question:

What Does Justice Look Like When Everyone Does What Is Right In Their Own Eyes?

The author of Judges was not merely a *historian* – he was a *theologian!* Meaning, his goal was not simply to recount an unbiased recollection of the history of the judges. His goal was to retell Israel's history *so as to teach us about God and how we are to live in relation to Him*. This story is *instructive*. So, what is the lesson here? First, the author clearly means for us to see that:

1. When everyone does what is right in their own eyes, justice is selective

As the various tribes open up their packages and find the gruesome remains of this girl, they are furious! They assemble as one man at the city of Mizpah to plan their justice.

But there is one tribe that is notably absent from the assembly. In fact, after the meeting, delegates were sent to speak with the missing tribe. Look again at verse 12:

And the tribes of Israel sent men through all the tribe of Benjamin, saying, “What evil is this that has taken place among you? (Judges 20:12 ESV)

As it turns out, the tribe of Benjamin did not show up to Mizpah. Do you know why they didn't come? Because Gibeah is a Benjaminite city. Faced with the undeniable facts of a horrific crime, the tribe of Benjamin chose to cover their eyes. Not only that, they even chose to fight in DEFENCE of Gibeah! Look at verses 13-14:

But the Benjaminites would not listen to the voice of their brothers, the people of Israel. ¹⁴ Then the people of Benjamin came together out of the cities to Gibeah to go out to battle against the people of Israel. (Judges 20:13b-14 ESV)

That's the kind of thing that happens when everyone does what is right in their own eyes. When we determine that there is no ultimate authority over us – that there is no King whose righteous standard we must uphold – then we distort justice in order to protect *our tribe*.

We close our eyes. We plug our ears. And we rally around *our people*.

In their self-preservation, the tribe of Benjamin became the kind of people who protect known rapists.

Terrible as that is, it pales in comparison to being a people who protect known pedophiles.

But that's what happens when everyone does what is right in their own eyes. Rather than being fair and indiscriminate, justice becomes *selective*. The guilty rapist walks free because of his wealth while the impoverished victim goes bankrupt in the court proceedings.

Bitterness and cynicism take root as people begin to realize that our societies standard of 'justice' doesn't apply to people in power. Which is one of the reasons why the Apostle Paul commands us:

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ² **for kings and all who are in high positions**, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. (1 Timothy 2:2 ESV)

Living as we do in a fallen world, we need to pray for the authorities who are over us – that they would lead with a healthy fear of the Lord and that they would uphold righteousness as God's ministers of justice in our society.

This lesson applies to our nation, but it applies to the church, doesn't it? God's word consistently calls us to hold one another to account. Paul says exactly that to the church in Corinth:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? **Let him who has done this be removed from among you.** (1 Corinthians 5:1-2 ESV)

This is what 'justice' is supposed to look like in the community of faith. If a member of this church says, 'Yes, I know that Jesus demands that I TURN AWAY from this sin. But I LOVE this sin! So I'm going to KEEP this sin.' Then justice requires that we put that person *out of fellowship*. Woe to a church that is selective in justice.

This is what the tribe of Benjamin failed to do in our passage. Rather than holding Gibeah to account for their sin, Benjamin rallied around them and said, 'They're still US.' Up until this moment, Benjamin was not culpable for Gibeah's sin. But when they saw it and chose not to address it, they BECAME culpable.

Hear that warning brothers and sisters. Hear that as it relates to our nation. Hear that as it relates to our church. Hear that as it relates to our parenting. When we choose not to discipline, we choose to become culpable for the pain that is caused as a result¹.

When everyone does what is right in their own eyes, justice is selective. That's what we learn as we look at Benjamin.

But the other 11 tribes fare no better. As we turn our attention to their response, we learn that:

2. When everyone does what is right in their own eyes, justice is unbridled

Our passage for this morning is long, so permit me to give you a very brief summary of the second half of the story.

¹ See Exodus 21:35-36.

When Benjamin chooses to side with the people of Gibeah a civil war begins. The other 11 tribes of Israel rally together against Benjamin.

In the first two skirmishes Benjamin appears to have the upper hand. 40,000 Israelites are struck down. But, on Israel's third assault on the city of Gibeah, they adopt a new strategy. Recognizing that Benjamin is becoming overconfident, Israel pretends to flee. Benjamin recklessly pursues and – as a result – the city of Gibeah is left defenceless.

With the army out of sight, a separate flank takes the city, and they send it up in flames. When the Benjaminites look back, they see smoke billowing from their home. Justice has been served!

But Israel is not satisfied.

They continue in pursuit of the remaining Benjaminites. 25,000 are struck down on the first day. Another 25,000 are struck down the next. By the end of the chapter, we read:

And the men of Israel turned back against the people of Benjamin and struck them with the edge of the sword, the city, men and beasts and all that they found. And all the towns that they found they set on fire. (Judges 20:48 ESV)

Israel's 'justice' went so far that they nearly annihilated the ENTIRE tribe of Benjamin! In fact, the entirety of the next chapter is devoted to the explanation of how Israel scrambled to try to undo the destruction that they brought about in their rage. But we will pick that up next week.

This morning, I want to draw your attention to the way in which – when we are left to follow our own desires – justice can so quickly become unbridled.

Justice says, 'You committed the crime of X, and now you should suffer the appropriate consequence for X.'

Unbridled justice says, 'You committed the crime of X, and now I won't rest until you are *utterly destroyed*.'

In the Mosaic Law, God called His people to deal firmly and honestly with sin, but to do so with an appropriate measure. He said:

“Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death.¹⁸ Whoever takes an animal's life shall make it good, life for life. ¹⁹ If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him,²⁰ fracture for fracture, **eye for eye**, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him. (Leviticus 24:17-20 ESV)

Life for life. Eye for eye. Tooth for tooth. God gave this commandment to restrain *retaliation* and *escalation* in the administering of justice. The punishment should fit the crime. No more, and no less. But in this story, Israel threw that principle right out the window! Tim Keller observes:

What justification was there for the slaughter of the whole Benjamite society? This is the work of bitterness — which demands not one eye, but two, in revenge for every one eye lost.²

As the young Robert Murray McCheyne wisely wrote:

The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.³

Somewhere along the way the Israelites lost sight of this. A desire for justice transformed into hatred. And that hatred didn't know when to stop.

Do you see any of that in our world today?

I may be off in my assessment, but in an age of cancel culture, does the punishment *ever* fit the crime? Accountability is good, but how often have we seen entire lives destroyed for the sin of one tone-deaf tweet?

It seems to me that we live in a day and age where overreaction is encouraged; forgiveness is labelled as weakness; and grudges are carried to the grave.

² Timothy Keller, *Judges For You* (The Good Book Company, 2013), 191.

³ Robert Murray McCheyne as quoted in Warren Wiersbe, *Treasury of the World's Great Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1979), 383.

But is *that* justice?

The problem with a society where everyone does what is right in their eyes is that we can't agree on what justice looks like! Some of us turn a blind eye and extend leniency like Benjamin. Others of us drop the hammer and search for blood like Israel. But, at the end of the day, is there anyone who can finally and ultimately define justice for us and teach us how to live?

That question brings us to the main lesson of our story. Beneath this warning, the author means for us to see that:

There Will Never Be Perfect Justice Until We Live Under The Reign Of The Righteous King

Remember, throughout the entire conclusion the author continually repeats the refrain:

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.
(Judges 21:25 ESV)

Most bible scholars agree that the first readers of this story were living in the very early days of Israel's monarchy. Saul was still king at the time this book was written, but he had begun his descent into sin. God had rejected Saul as king and anointed David as his successor.

So, the author wanted the first readers to see that they absolutely NEEDED a king to lead them. But he also wanted them to recognize that they couldn't simply settle for any king. They needed a righteous king.

The two options at the time were Saul or David, and it is not hard to discern which king the author was backing. It is not an accident that he chose to conclude this book with the story of the fall of Benjamin and – particularly – the wicked city of Gibeah.

King Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin. And, not only was he a Benjaminite, but guess where he grew up?

Saul also went to **his home at Gibeah** (1 Samuel 10:26a ESV)

Through these stories, then, the author is clearly and unapologetically saying, ‘We need a King! But if we want to be ruled with justice then we can’t settle for a sinful king like Saul. We need a RIGHTEOUS king!’

For the first readers, they heard in this concluding story a clear call to align with king David – the man after God’s own heart.

But, neither the author nor the first readers fully understood the deeper meaning. YES, we do need a righteous king to lead us, but the righteousness that we need will never truly be found from amongst ourselves. A ‘good’ king simply won’t cut it. We’re thankful for good kings – don’t get me wrong – but a good king can’t fix what is wrong with this world.

We saw that with David. We saw that with Solomon. We saw that with Josiah. We see that with every president, every prime minister and every pastor in human history. The BEST leaders that we could find among us STILL failed to usher in true and lasting justice.

We need someone who sees every single detail and who is willing to exercise judgement impartially every single time.

We need someone who is blameless in every way who will never be susceptible to corruption.

We need a King with perfect wisdom who administers justice in such a way that every tongue will be silenced because no one can deny his goodness. God spoke through the prophet Isaiah and declared that such a King was coming:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

² He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;

³ a bruised reed he will not break,
and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.

⁴ **He will not grow faint or be discouraged**

till he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his law. (Isaiah 42:1-4 ESV)

We need more than a good king. We the need the God King. And the King has come.

For as long as everyone continues doing what is right in their own eyes, this world will continue in perpetual chaos. If we place our trust in human leaders to set things right, then our longing for justice and righteousness will never be satisfied.

But, when we bow our knee and surrender our lives to the perfect reign of the King of Kings, then and only then can we have peace. There IS such a thing as true justice. And Jesus will see to it that perfect justice is served. Every single sin will be answered for. Either we will stand condemned before the King and pay the penalty for every sin that we have ever committed. Or we will turn our gaze to the cross and look in faith to Jesus who bore the wrath of God in our place for our sin.

Either way, in spite of the chaos, and the corruption, and the collusion that surrounds us, we can know for certain that justice will prevail. That enables us to forgive those who hurt us. It enables us to love our enemies. It enables us to pray for our persecutors. We can lay our longing for justice at the foot of the cross. We can trust the King.

To that end, let's pray together.