

## Justice, redux

One of the really great Western films is “Lawman,” starring Burt Lancaster. It’s an oldie, from the early 1970’s. If you never saw it or can’t remember it, it’s worth finding and watching. It’s the story of a town marshal who needs to take seven bad guys into custody to stand trial for murder. The bad guys don’t want to surrender to the lawman but, instead, to kill him. In the end, all the bad guys get killed.

The lesson of that movie, according to the film critics at the time, was that the only hired killers in the old West were the lawmen, and it was they who caused most of the violence. The movie’s story, they claimed, was one of terrible injustice. True justice, the critics alleged, should not involve taking life in the name of the law. Well, those critics have no understanding of justice. My concern is, most people today don’t either.

The true character of a person is only evident when confronted with a deeply moral issue. There’d have been no loss of life in this film’s scenario if all the persons on that lawman’s wanted list went to trial to defend their actions. Submission to the justice system was the right thing to do. But refusing to submit, they revealed themselves to be killers at heart and only wanted their culpability to disappear. So in the end, they lost their lives. People who want to live by killing, get killed. The Lawman wasn’t a killer, but he had to kill when confronted by killers. Yes, Justice has a heavy hand, and it, sadly, doesn’t cut as neatly and cleanly as we’d like or wish it would. In this sin-saturated world, our justice system is the best we can do, while we hope and wait for a better world to come. I mention this film because it highlights the importance of correctly (and fully) understanding justice.

We empower lawmen to enforce laws because God has set rules and (although we can’t see it) He enforces them. Laws are necessary for sinful people to live together in society, and someone, somehow has to enforce those laws. The alternative is unthinkable: chaos, revenge killings and all manner of other harms. Mexico (and Honduras, and other countries as well) today is a lawless society because the lawmen are themselves corrupt and the people know nothing of transcendent justice, that is, God’s justice. Only if there’s a sense of transcendence in a governing authority can any system of justice be truly just.

Today’s America has a grotesquely perverted understanding of justice. A tsunami of injustice is currently sweeping across our land. Reading any newspaper or certain news websites will instantly reveal the truth of this assertion. The problem is our sinful hearts and the fact that we’re susceptible to demonic influences. A truly just system serves to restrain the evil that we’re capable of committing. If God removes that restraint, or if He allows us to willfully abandon enstructured restraints, our society will be plunged into a hideous morass of wickedness. Perverting our understanding of justice is the deliberate removal of restraints.

In the film, the bad guys had contempt for justice. Even the town’s people repudiated justice. Except for very few individuals who are aware of the issue, I suspect that in real life *everyone* has contempt for justice. Why? Because we don’t really understand what justice is. In a previous S.S. lesson, we discussed justice as being equivalent to righteousness. We said that justice is being rewarded for doing what is right and being punished for doing what is wrong. Justice has to do with our right relations with other people. That’s all very true. But that’s not the whole of it; that’s a narrow understanding of justice. Justice is a very great issue in the Bible. Justice also has to do with honoring those to whom honor is due. Justice is wrapped up in our understanding of love and of wrath. Indeed, they are expressions of each other, they’re so intricately linked. We need to reflect deeply on this matter of justice because if we don’t understand it, we may be guilty of contempt for God’s justice.

In Scripture, we’re commanded to honor our Creator. Having bestowed His image in us, we’re under obligation to reflect His glory, thereby honoring Him. That is just. He has given us life, so it is just that we respond by honoring Him. He also has providentially and lovingly cared for us, and He has done everything necessary to rescue us from the judgment we deserve because of our sins and instead to offer us abundant blessing and joy. For all these reasons, we owe God great honor. That is justice. To refuse to honor Him is injustice, worthy of condemnation. Furthermore, He has commanded us to obey His Word, and because of who He is, He has the right to demand obedience of us. Refusing to obey Him likewise is injustice. We’re to honor God by how we live our lives, what we think, the choices we make, the values we hold and the sacrifices we make for Him. And we’re to honor God by serving Him as He has revealed we’re to serve Him. Worship isn’t sitting passively listening to a sermon. Worship really is honoring God by how we live, for that expresses how exceedingly precious He is to us.

To be sure, we also are commanded to love God. Loving God is honoring Him, and vice versa, honoring Him is loving Him. We also are commanded to know God, because to know Him is to love Him. Knowing God, and loving

God, and honoring God are also justice being expressed. Justice is inextricably linked to knowing, loving and honoring God. God is infinitely just and He demands justice in His creation. The message of the New Testament is that we honor God by honoring the Son (John 5:23; 12:26). Becoming incarnate, the Son fully revealed the perfections and exquisite beauty of God, so that we all can honor God. Honoring the Son is the epitome of justice. (But we must be careful not to honor Him with our lips only and not with our hearts, as Jesus warned in Matthew 15:8). Jesus' life honored the Father (John 8:49), so by imitating Jesus' Person and work, we honor in truth God. Refusing to honor Christ is to repudiate justice. Even the tolerance of evil is itself an injustice.

We also are to honor our parents. That too is justice. But it's even deeper: We're also to honor *each other*! That's because we all are made in the same image of God. So we honor others as honoring God himself. Therefore, it's just to honor other people. In other words, justice totally envelops us; it affects our relationship to God and to others around us. We cannot escape this issue of justice. We're immersed in a world that's pervaded by justice (or, sadly, injustice).

**"Ascribe to the Lord the honor due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness"** (Ps 29:2). And, **"Honor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary"** (Ps 96:6).

**"Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever"** (1 Timothy 1:17).

**"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being"** (Revelation 4:11). And this: **"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever"** (Rev. 5:13).

**"Therefore the Lord, the God of Israel declares . . . Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained"** (1 Samuel 2:30).

**"A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? Where is the respect due me?" Says the Lord Almighty . . . 'If you do not set your heart to honor my name,' says the Lord Almighty, 'I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings'"** (Malachi 1:6, 2:1).

**"Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves"** (Romans 12:10).

These verses are compelling. As dependent, fallen creatures whom God has called to Himself, we owe God great honor. And we owe honor equally to one another because we're joined together in community in Christ. To honor One to whom honor is due is just. To withhold that honor is unjust. Idolatry flaunts injustice.

If we pause to think about it, it should be obvious that justice affects much of life. It has to be that way, because God has constructed His cosmos, in particular the world we live in, to reveal His justice. **"All his ways are justice . . . upright and just is he"** (Deuteronomy 32:4). Our role in life is to uphold God's justice. So, for example, to express gratitude for a gift expresses justice. To receive a gift without a sense of gratitude or an expression of gratitude is terribly unjust. Similarly, to be humbly aware of our mortality, weaknesses and fallibility is just; to be proud and independently minded is unjust. Generosity toward those in need is just; selfishness is unjust. To live according to God's Word places God's infinitely perfect justice on display, whereas to ignore His Word and live according to our own lights would be an extreme injustice. It is justice to live a life of love. That may seem at first incongruous, but it's not. That's because love fulfills God's just commands, and love imitates a just God.

Justice assures us that any sacrifice we make for God, any loss we suffer, even if it's surrendering our lives to persecutors, will be rewarded. Sharing Christ with others and interceding for others are acts of justice. Justice promises that a good and holy God will eventually deal with evil. Justice also requires that all the precious promises in Scripture will be fulfilled; they *must* be fulfilled.

Scripture warns us to fear God. Why? Because of justice. God will not, indeed cannot, be mocked by our indifference to His demands or to the responsibilities He's given us. Like sin, all injustice is not only a violation of God's Creation order, it's a direct, personal offense to a holy, good and just God. Yes, God is love. But love doesn't supplant justice. In fact, it's in love that God disciplines His own errant people (Hebrews 12). The discipline may be painful, and it may even be lethal. (Recall the episodes with Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10, Achan in Joshua 7, and Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. And note Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 11:30.) But God's justice demands it.

All Scripture reflects justice. How we live likewise should reflect justice, which is why we're to imitate Jesus, the living Word. A deep awareness of justice should control our thinking, our interactions with others, indeed, our very lives. We need to meditate often on this supremely important attribute of our Creator God.