

BIBLICAL JUSTICE
THE KINGDOM ECONOMY 8



T. M. Moore

The Fellowship of Ailbe

A REVISION STUDY

Biblical Justice
The Kingdom Economy Part 8
Copyright 2016 T. M. Moore
Susie Moore, Editor and Finisher

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Except as indicated, Scripture taken from the New King James Version. © Copyright 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Contents

Welcome to <i>Biblical Justice</i>	4
1 Public Policy in the Kingdom Economy	5
2 The Nature of Justice	7
3 Obligatory Justice	9
4 Preventive Justice	11
5 Restorative Justice	13
6 Retributive Justice	15
7 Distributive Justice	17
Questions for Reflection or Discussion	19

Welcome to *Biblical Justice*

In the Kingdom economy, that administration by which, in these last days, Christ continues the work of advancing His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, the followers of Christ devote their time and work as channels of grace in a world of unbelief, darkness, and sin. We look to the Law of God, and all His Word, to guide our interactions with the people around us, including all our activities in relationships, commerce, culture, and social issues and concerns.

In the Kingdom economy, grace is the currency we spend in seeking the Kingdom and righteousness of God, and justice is the result we achieve. A major theme of the Law of God, and an important pillar of any economy, is the idea of justice. To this point in our studies in *The Kingdom Economy*, we have *touched* on aspects of a Biblical view of justice, as these emerge in the Law of God. In this series we want to look more pointedly at how the Law of God leads us to pursue and practice justice – love for God and neighbors – within the Kingdom economy.

Biblical justice is a gem with five facets. The practice of justice is not confined to courts and other aspects of the criminal justice system. Instead, justice must be the concern of every citizen of the Kingdom of God, so that grace can prevail in all our relationships, roles, and responsibilities.

By pursuing justice we may realize the primary objective of all our endeavors in the Kingdom economy, that of glorifying God in everything we do.

These studies are designed for individual or group use. While you may derive much benefit from studying on your own, that benefit can be greatly enhanced by joining with a friend or a group to read, discuss, share, challenge, and pray for one another.

If you're in a group, make sure you prepare for each study by reading through the lesson in advance and answering the questions in writing. Take turns leading your group. Let every member share in the privilege and responsibility of facilitating discussions. Group leaders should not feel like they have to "have all the answers." Their task is simply to lead the group through the readings and questions, and to help everyone participate.

Visit our website, www.ailbe.org, to subscribe to our free instructional newsletters, including *ReVision*, *Scriptorium*, *The Week*, and *Crosfjgell*, featuring insights from Scripture and our Celtic Christian forebears.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Public Policy in the Kingdom Economy

“You shall not pervert justice; you shall not show partiality, nor take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous. You shall follow what is altogether just, that you may live and inherit the land which the LORD your God is giving you.” Deuteronomy 16.19, 20

A political football

We have been discussing various aspects of economic life, comparing *grace* economics, where God’s Law and Word play the primary shaping role, with the *greed* economics of getting and spending that characterizes much of life today.

The aspects of economic life we have been considering – government, taxes, property, commerce, borrowing and debt, inheritances, and so forth – all fall under the category of public policy. *Public policy* describes the terms, conditions, ends, and ground rules by which people conduct their lives in community and in the larger society. As we might expect, public policy in an economy of grace and truth will differ from what we find in an economy of getting and spending.

At times it can seem as if public policy in America is little more than a political football to be kicked toward one goal or another, depending on which outcomes the electorate will cheer. In the American political arena today, public policy is often used as a tool of political power, rather than as a means to advance the common weal. But shouldn’t public policy have the interests and wellbeing of the *public* as its primary focus? If public policy is to escape the grip of political power, it must have a focus and goal that transcend politics. And these must be agreed to by all who are concerned with the common weal.

As we know, however, achieving consensus on public policy objectives can be very difficult where political ends cloud the conversation.

So what is, or rather, what *should be* the goal of public policy? That is, what should they who have been entrusted with making public policy seek as its proper outcome?

We can find some help in thinking about this question by turning to the teaching of the Bible. Our text forbids making public policy the tool of special interests by warning against partiality and bribes. Public policies are not to be made because they favor one group over another, to the advantage or aggrandizement of policy-makers. It is only because of the common grace of God that public policy, which is *always* tainted by partiality, favoritism, or catering to special interests, is able to serve the public good to the extent it does.

Justice

The goal of public policy, according to the Law of God, is justice, not the satisfaction of various interest groups and their political puppets. It is precisely this objective that must guide social and cultural life within the Kingdom economy.

This is easy to say, yet it can be difficult to achieve within the framework of those who are seeking the Kingdom economy, much less among those whose policy positions are influenced by self- or party-interests.

It’s difficult to see how policy-makers in American government can keep from bending policies to special interests when (a) lobbyists take up so much time and demand so much of the attention of policy-makers, and (b) corporations and other moneyed interests play such a significant role in political campaign funding. These two institutions – the lobby and political campaign contributions – invite policy-making according to interests, if not outright bribes. Partiality is the order of the day in American politics.

Achieving justice

Can we achieve justice nonetheless? Yes, if we are willing to guard the policy-making process. Since justice is a function of the decisions of people, the best solution to overcoming the sinfulness which has become entrenched in the American public-policy system is to elect people to office who understand and embody the principles and practices of Biblical justice, and who can show a credible record of justice in all aspects of their lives.

At the same time, we must work for reforms in campaign financing and the work of lobbyists, that can help to ensure that policy-makers are swayed neither by the interests of their supporters or their own interests, but by the requirements of justice, first and always.

Any practices that transgress the boundaries of justice and can be demonstrated to be motivated primarily by self-interest, party agendas, or special interests should be regarded as perversions. They should be challenged publicly and in the courts where possible, and corrected according to the terms and demands of justice – which may include the exercise of justice against those who have perverted the public-policy process.

But all this talk of justice only begs the question: What *is* justice?

For reflection or discussion

1. How would you define justice? What are the sources of your definition?
2. Would you say that ours is a just or an unjust society? Explain.
3. What are some factors that make it difficult to improve the work of justice in our society? Should Christians be trying to mitigate these factors? In what ways?

Next steps – Conversation: Do your Christian friends understand what justice is? Why not ask a few of them? See how many definitions of justice you can gather. Do they agree? Disagree? Can the people you interview support those definitions from the Word of God (2 Tim. 3.15-17)? Based on this exercise, what's your take on the state of justice among the members of the Christian community?

2 The Nature of Justice

“You shall not pervert justice; you shall not show partiality, nor take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous. You shall follow what is altogether just, that you may live and inherit the land which the LORD your God is giving you.” Deuteronomy 16.19, 20

A changeable idea?

We have said that public policy-making in America can only avoid the pitfalls and corruption of mere self-interest by focusing on justice as its overarching objective and goal.

But what is justice? Is justice defined by social whims or the squeaky wheel of outspoken interest groups? Does justice have a fixed basis, or is it merely something to define and adjust as we see fit? Is it only possible to understand justice, or to work for just public policies, by prefixing various adjectives to the subject: racial justice, economic justice, social justice, and so forth?

For many people today, justice is like fashion: You can change the meaning of justice to suit the temper of the times. In such a situation, justice is defined by those who pipe the worldview tunes of the day – media, pop culture, politicians, academics, and so forth. We know how changeable such pipers can be.

But this is not the way the Bible teaches us to think about justice; nor is it the way our Founding Fathers regarded this important virtue. According to the Biblical worldview, justice takes the form of policies and practices which embody the character and purpose of God. For those who are pursuing the *Kingdom* economy, a society is just when its laws and ways reflect the goodness, wisdom, compassion, and honor of God.

The source of justice

Our text relates justice to honesty, fairness, wisdom, and righteousness. Each of these qualities, in turn, has its origin in the character of God.

It’s instructive to compare our text with another passage, Deuteronomy 10.17, 18. Here God describes Himself by saying, “For the LORD your God *is* God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality nor takes a bribe. He administers justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing.” Here we can see how the idea of justice flows from the character and work of God. God does not show partiality. He loves those who are in need of justice. God cannot lie and does not deceive. He is all wisdom and understanding and knowledge. And God is righteous in all His ways.

In the Trinitarian relationship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, honesty, wisdom, righteousness, goodness, and love obtain at all times, and evidence a Being full of glory and abounding in blessings. God Himself is the embodiment of justice; the Word He proclaims to His people encodes His character and defines the terms of justice by which we must live.

God intends people to live in a way that reflects His own character, imitates His own works, and redounds to His glory and honor. A society is just to the extent that it manages to do this.

But how can a just society, one which reflects the very being of God, be achieved? By obedience to God’s Law and attendance on all His counsel and ways. Our text (Deut. 16.19, 20) follows the command to appoint judges and officers in all the towns of Israel (v. 18). These men were responsible to see to it that the holy and righteous and good Law of God (Rom. 7.12) provided the policies and guided the practices by which their

communities existed. These officers would assemble in the gates of the city to consider how best to bring the requirements of justice to bear on particular situations or circumstances affecting the wellbeing of their community (cf. Ruth 4).

By turning to the Law of God, seeking principles to guide them as they thought through situations according to the demands of love for God and neighbor-love, the judges and officers worked together to make just decisions and enact just policies for their community.

Justice and God's Law

We cannot have just public policies as long as the Law of God is ignored or despised. Understanding God's Law and discerning principles for applying it today is not easy work. It requires people committed to the Law as holy and righteous and good – people who, like Ezra (Ez. 7.10), are devoted to studying, living, and teaching the gracious, liberating, and just precepts of God's Law to the people they are called to serve.

Only people can introduce the Law of God into the public-policy arenas of our society. Each believer bears a responsibility for seeking to influence the shape of public policy. It's part of what we owe to Caesar in a free society. Believers should encourage their political representatives to consider the holy and righteous and good Law of God, and should be ready to assist them by every means to make policies that are agreeable to the requirements of justice.

But what are the requirements of justice? What forms does justice take in the Law of God?

For reflection or discussion

1. Why is it dangerous to have justice rooted in anything other than unchanging truth?
2. What do many people look to today as sources for justice?
3. Suggest some passages of Scripture that speak to the nature of justice:

Next steps – Transformation: What is the role of the Law of God in the life of faith? Meditate on Psalm 1; Ezekiel 36.26, 27; Matthew 5.17-19; Romans 3.31 and 7.12; and 1 John 2.1-6. Put all this together into a succinct statement regarding how believers should relate to the Law of God. Share this with some friends, and see what they say.

3 Obligatory Justice

“When you lend your brother anything, you shall not go into his house to get his pledge. You shall stand outside, and the man to whom you lend shall bring the pledge out to you.” Deuteronomy 24.10, 11

A jewel of five facets

In Biblical terms, justice is simply the character and works of God lived out within human communities. A just society is one that reflects in its public policies and personal practices the wisdom, beauty, goodness, truth, and love of God.

We might think it strange to turn to the Law of God for insight to the practice of justice. However, the Founders of this country did not think so. Many of the law codes of the American colonies included excerpts from the Law of God, copied verbatim or paraphrased as needed. Our forebears understood that God’s Law points the way to justice. If we would understand justice, therefore, we need to look a little more closely at the Law of God.

Justice as encoded in the Law of God is a jewel of five facets. The first and most basic of these we may refer to as *obligatory* justice. In the exercise of obligatory justice, we give to others the dignity, respect, and love they deserve by virtue of their being human beings and the image-bearers of God.

Paul summarized this sense of obligatory justice nicely when he wrote, “Owe no one anything except to love on another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13.8).

Respect and love

Our text (Deut. 24.10, 11) offers an example. The specific situation may not apply in our day, but remember, we’re looking for *principles* of justice which we can use for all kinds of grace exchanges in the Kingdom economy.

In ancient Israel, making a loan to someone did not give the one who made the loan the right to violate the privacy, threaten the dignity, or impugn the honesty of the borrower. If the terms of the loan included a pledge, the one making the loan was expected to trust the good and honest intentions, as well as the word, of the one receiving the loan, and to wait outside his home for him to bring the pledge out to him.

We owe a good many things to all our fellow human beings. Together, these make up the various obligations of neighbor-love. We owe them honesty, truth, and fairness in contracts, wages, and communications; respect and care for their persons and property; due process in civil matters; and the demands of grace and the protections of justice at all times. We are our neighbors’ keepers, and whatever love requires of us, we must be ready to perform.

It is not the place of public policy to *require* neighbor-love. Much of what constitutes obligatory justice will be practiced as civility, out of a sense of gratitude to God, obedience to His Law, and compassionate concern for our neighbors. All true justice flows from a heart transformed by grace. So while we cannot require justice by law, we can prescribe it. And, whenever clear transgressions of obligatory justice are committed, it is the role of public policy to redress the injustice.

Enforcing justice

How would a man be judged in ancient Israel who did, in fact, enter his neighbor’s home and search all through it to find the pledge his loan required, while his neighbor stood by, humiliated? It’s not clear. Certainly such a violation of the dignity of one in need would have been looked upon with concern. The

person who openly flouted this basic requirement of justice might find himself reproached or shunned for his behavior. Moreover, it's possible that such a breach of obligatory justice would have come before the judges and officials of the community for a ruling. We would only be speculating to describe how local judges might have corrected the injustice – the slight of a neighbor's dignity – such an unlawful action would have created.

But that local judges had the power to do so, as well as the responsibility, is certainly the case. Would some punitive action have repaired the hard heart of the offender? Perhaps. Would it have served notice to the rest of the community that God and His representatives take seriously the defense of the rights and dignity of every member of the community? We can be sure.

When injustice comes to light, even at such a seemingly small and insignificant level, other facets of the practice of justice begin to come into play. For when *obligatory* justice is violated, *restorative* and *retributive* justice may be required.

But first let's see if these might be avoided through the practice of *preventive* justice.

For reflection or discussion

1. Why do we say that love is something we owe to others?
2. Think about your day yesterday. What opportunities for practicing *obligatory* justice were presented to you? On a scale of 1 to 10, how did you do?
3. Suggest some ways that Christians might become more mindful about the practice of obligatory justice.

Next steps – Demonstration: Make a list of all the people you typically encounter each week – at home, at work or church, throughout the community. What do you owe these people by way of obligatory justice? What does it mean for you to love these people with the kind of love which is characteristic of God (cf. Phil. 2:1-11)? Jot down some ideas, then begin acting toward the people in your life with a more consistent practice of obligatory justice.

4 Preventive Justice

“If fire breaks out and catches in thorns, so that stacked grain, standing grain, or the field is consumed, he who kindled the fire shall surely make restitution.” Exodus 22.6

Guarding against injustice

Justice, we have said, refracts the character and will of God into the human situation. The Kingdom economy is thus concerned with justice as the objective of every grace exchange – all the ways we use our time, pursue our work, relate to others, make and use culture, and participate in society. Justice is a jewel with five facets – at least, according to the Biblical worldview. We are acting justly when we love our neighbors in the same way God loves them. Thus, the first facet of justice is what we may refer to as *obligatory* justice, and it is a kind of catch-all category for whatever love requires.

The second facet of the jewel of justice we may refer to as *preventive* justice. Public policy should provide laws and statutes that help to ensure that people will keep the interests and wellbeing of their neighbors in mind at all times. People cannot be permitted to undertake endeavors which may endanger their neighbors or their property without taking appropriate precautions. By keeping watch over a fire one has started, one may ensure that only what *should* be burned *is* burned, thus *preventing* injustice from occurring against one’s neighbor.

While it’s possible to see each of the Ten Commandments as containing some aspect of preventive justice, the practice of preventive justice is exemplified in the Law of God in various ways, designed to suggest a variety of situations and circumstances. One must guard against his flocks or cattle grazing in a neighbor’s fields (Deut. 22.1-4). Open pits should be covered (Ex. 21.33, 34). Homes must be built to guard against injury to people (Deut. 22.8). Dangerous animals must be kept in (Ex. 21.35, 36). Inheritances are to be protected (Num. 27.8-11). And so forth. Even animals and the creation itself are protected by the Law from being treated unjustly by human beings (cf. Deut. 25.4; 22.6, 7).

Considering others

These various statutes serve primarily to remind people to consider the interests and wellbeing of their neighbor so as to *prevent* any injustice arising from negligence or indifference. As with obligatory justice, preventive justice is backed up by other forms of justice. These statutes and precepts are intended to guide people in loving their neighbors so that no *unintended harm* may come from any of our actions.

Preventive justice, like obligatory justice, describes the practice of grace economics on the part of all members of a society. We do not require courts of law to balance the scales of preventive and obligatory justice; each of us must study and learn to practice the obligations of these basic forms of justice as part of our everyday lives.

The Golden Rule is simply the best way of encapsulating the demands of obligatory and preventive justice: Think about what you’d want others to do in order to show grace to you. Then do that for others. Prepare to do it, plan for it, and practice it consistently.

Preventive justice at work

More formally, many examples of preventive justice, written into civil statutes, exist in our own society. In many communities, people are required by their neighborhood association to remove the snow from their sidewalks as soon as possible. This is to protect the safety and ensure the wellbeing of delivery persons and neighbors who may be out on a stroll. There is no penalty for not removing the snow. However, if people do not remove it, neighbors may look askance at them, and someone who is injured or can show that he has been unduly inconvenienced by our neglect, may have grounds to collect damages. The neighborly thing to

do is to keep the sidewalks clean in front of your home, and thus bear witness to all who may enter your neighborhood that here we love our neighbors as ourselves.

Other communities may pass laws to protect their water supplies – wells, rivers, or reservoirs. In order to ensure that water is as good as it can be, local statutes may prohibit the use of certain kinds of fertilizers or other outdoor chemical treatments. During summer months, signs may appear in the community advising people that the town council has determined that “Voluntary Water Usage Restrictions” are in effect. The policies put in place by elected officials are designed to discourage and, hopefully, *prevent* neighbors from committing injustice against one another by failing to exercise appropriate regard for the water supply of their neighbors.

Such policies and statutes reflect the preventive justice facet of God’s Law, and are to be welcomed, not begrudged. They help us to see that the Law of God can and should – and, indeed, already does – inform our public policies and our personal practice when it comes to living out the requirements of justice.

For reflection or discussion

1. Explain the difference between obligatory justice and preventive justice. Is there overlap here?
2. Can you think of any other kinds of laws today which would be examples of preventive justice (for example, speed limits)?
3. Do you think it’s possible for a government to go too far in trying to prevent injustice? Can you give an example of what that might look like?

Next steps – Conversation: Review the Biblical examples of preventive justice cited in this article. How many of these have some parallel in the laws we follow today? Meditate on Romans 2.14, 15. People may cringe at the idea of obeying God’s Law, but can we – should we – avoid doing so? Why or why not? Share your observations and thoughts with a Christian friend.

5 Restorative Justice

“If one man’s ox hurts another’s, so that it dies, then they shall sell the live ox and divide the money from it; and the dead ox they shall also divide. Or if it was known that the ox tended to thrust in time past, and its owner has not kept it confined, he shall surely pay ox for ox, and the dead animal shall be his own.” Exodus 21.35, 36

Practicing God’s Law

We are continuing to seek principles of justice from the Law of God, which is holy and righteous and good, and which the New Testament establishes as the ground for all Christian ethics (Rom. 3.31; 1 Jn. 2.1-6). We recognize that the Law, as originally given, was for a specific people in a specific place and time; we are not urging a literal, word-for-word application of Biblical Law to contemporary society. We’re seeking to understand the *spirit* of the Law in order to discern those principles of life, liberty, and love which can help us in seeking justice as the objective of public policy.

It might sound a little scary suggesting that the Law of God should be consulted when it comes to matters of justice. But, as we’ve seen, we do it all the time.

We just don’t recognize that when we shovel our sidewalks, sign a contract for a loan, keep watch over burning leaves, walk our pets on a leash, and keep watch over our neighbor’s home while he’s on vacation, that we’re simply acting out the requirements of love and justice outlined in the Law of God.

We are *obligated* to live justly toward our neighbors, and, in part, that requires that we take appropriate *preventive* steps to guard his wellbeing and property.

The statute cited in our text reflects the third facet of the Biblical teaching on justice, which we may refer to as *restorative* justice. According to the Law of God, when *injustice* has occurred, whoever is responsible for it must take steps to set things right again. The balance of justice must be restored for grace to obtain.

Making things right

The statute encoded in Exodus 21.35, 36 shows how the practice of *restorative* justice was nuanced in order to encourage the practice of *preventive* justice. If the ox simply, without warning or provocation, killed a neighbor’s ox, the owner of the goring ox had to sell it and share the proceeds with the owner of the dead ox. Also, the two would share the dead ox, whether the proceeds of its sale or its meat.

However, if the goring ox was *known* to attack, and the owner did not *keep it in*, then a greater injustice would have been committed, requiring a greater act of restoration. By failing in the area of *preventive* justice, the negligent owner incurs a greater burden of *restorative* justice. In this case the owner of the goring ox comes away with only the dead ox, while the owner of the gored ox receives a new beast from the owner of the offending ox.

In ancient Israel, whenever someone was injured by the neglect or indifference of a neighbor, restoration was required in order to return justice to the community. Once restoration was made the injured party was satisfied and the guilty party was exonerated. Neighbors could quickly get on with being neighbors without grudges building up against one another. No prison time was involved, and no revenge was needed. Restoration could include money paid to return an injured person to health or for lost opportunity costs (Ex. 21.18, 19), borrowed things replaced that were broken or lost (Ex. 22.14, 15), or even lost items that one might find returned to their owner (Deut. 22.1-4).

Jesus agrees

As Jesus made clear in the situation involving Zacchaeus, these Old Testament provisions for restorative justice are to be considered still in effect (Lk. 19.11-10). Zacchaeus, convicted of his sin and now devoted to Jesus as Lord (v. 8), determined to make things right with his neighbors.

But rather than abide by the mere *letter* of the Old Testament laws, Zacchaeus showed his true heart of repentance and love by going *beyond* the letter into the *spirit* of the Law (2 Cor. 3.4-6), in order to show proper love for the neighbors he had wronged. Jesus, upon hearing his confession and plan, commended his action and confirmed that he was, indeed, a child of Abraham.

Justice, which Zacchaeus had violated, was about to be restored, and neighbor-love would once again obtain in the community.

Justice is so important because it reflects the character and presence of God within a community. Living justly thus honors God and manifests His glory. Public policies should exist which promote the practice of restorative justice according to the spirit and not merely the letter of the Law of God.

For reflection or discussion

1. Why does restorative justice simply make sense? For the offended? For the offender?
2. What are some ways parents could begin to teach children about the practice of restorative justice?
3. In a way, requiring automobile insurance of drivers is a form of restorative justice. Explain:

Next steps – Demonstration: See what you can find out about the practice of restorative justice in your community. How does your community work with offenders to restore justice to those they have wronged? Share what you discover with some Christian friends.

6 Retributive Justice

“For any kind of trespass, whether it concerns an ox, a donkey, a sheep, or clothing, or for any kind of lost thing which another claims to be his, the cause of both parties shall come before the judges; and whomever the judges condemn shall pay double to his neighbor.” Exodus 22.9

Restoration plus

When the peace of justice is intentionally or maliciously violated, the fourth facet of justice – *retributive* justice – may be invoked.

Under the practice of retributive justice those who have *deliberately* disturbed the peace and brought injury or damage to their neighbors, in addition to being required to *restore* the balance of justice, could be punished in ways appropriate to the offense. The pain of punishment was directed toward the heart of the offender, to discourage any future such acts.

At the same time, the practice of retributive justice was designed to deter other community members from unjust actions.

In ancient Israel retribution could take the form of payment in kind (two oxen returned for one stolen), or as money or other goods, or even bodily harm – beating, as well as the well-known practice of *lex talionis* (an eye for an eye). In extreme cases, banishment from the altar and community of God, and even capital punishment could be inflicted.

Thus it is clear that one purpose of the use of retribution was to punish the offender, as well as to convict the hearts of the entire community and to remind everyone of the high value God places on justice.

Retribution in an age of grace

In this age of grace, we no longer practice retribution in the same way they did in ancient Israel. These days, imprisonment is considered more humane, and it provides the opportunity for rehabilitating the offender. Imprisonment is a form of retribution. Some studies exist, however, which indicate that some offenders, given the choice between physical retribution – that is, a beating – and going to prison, would prefer the former. Beating is the *normal* form of retribution in certain countries.

Don’t look for a return to such practices in this country any time soon, however.

In the case of capital punishment, the influence of grace is evident in two ways. First, a complicated and lengthy system of appeals is typically followed in a capital case, in order to make sure every opportunity is afforded the guilty party to clear his name. Second, where the death penalty is required, law insists that it be carried out humanely and publicly.

So retributive justice continues in our day, but it is tempered by the common grace of God which He extends through the community of humankind. The more such grace flows within a community, the more we might expect the justice of God to obtain.

The role of public servants

It is important to notice one thing more about our text. When a complaint of injustice was lodged, a case would be brought “before God”, as the Hebrew literally has it. No one was allowed to take matters into his own hands when restorative or retributive justice was required. What actually happened, as we see in Deuteronomy 1.16-18 and Ruth 4, was that the contending parties would come before the rulers of the city,

assembled in the gates of the city, and argue their positions relative to the accusation. It would be up to the judges to hear the arguments and determine which man was in the right. The phrase, before God, is intended to remind us of the solemnity of such proceedings. These are not actions taken merely for the sake of human wellbeing; the honor, presence, and truth of God are at stake whenever injustice has occurred.

God Himself must be vindicated, and He has entrusted this duty to public servants, that they might do what is right and good before Him (Rom. 13.1-4).

A healthy *polis*, one where justice and all its benefits obtain, will not shy away from the use of retribution when it is appropriate. It will do so in a patient, careful, and humane manner, and without cruelty. But it will not abandon this fourth facet of justice.

Public policy should reflect a determination to wield the sword against all evil, so that people will fear to transgress the bounds of justice and train their hearts to do what is right and good.

For reflection or discussion

1. What is the difference between restorative and retributive justice? Is there overlap?
2. Should parents teach their children about retributive justice? How?
3. Church discipline is the church's use of restorative and retributive justice within its own community. Explain:

Next steps – Conversation: Is imprisonment a more humane form of retribution than lex talionis? Would justice be better served in our society if, as in some countries, lex talionis were still part of public policy? Talk with some church leaders about this matter.

7 Distributive Justice

“For the poor will never cease from the land; therefore I command you, saying, ‘You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and your needy, in your land.’” Deuteronomy 15:11

With us always

The Bible does not teach a *preference* for the poor, as though merely being poor were some virtue in itself. People can become poor for many reasons, not all of them deserving of public assistance. Indeed, some may be poor because they are simply unwilling to work. The Apostle Paul explained that such people deserve the fruit of their lethargy and are not to be cared for by the community (2 Thess. 3:10).

All who are able, are expected to work, for, as we have seen, by the work we’ve been given to do we may expect to glorify God in the Kingdom economy. But we work not just so that we can provide for ourselves, but so that we may have wealth and possessions to share with those who are truly in need (Eph. 4:28). The New Testament, following the lead of the Law of God, teaches that consideration of and care for the poor should be a part of the Kingdom agenda of the followers of Jesus Christ.

And this introduces us to the final facet of the Biblical view of justice.

The final facet of the Biblical teaching on justice is what we may call *distributive* justice. In ancient Israel, it was the responsibility of a local community to distribute freely of its goods to those who were in need among them. Whether such people became poor through some unforeseeable exigency, or whether they were immigrants or disabled, justice required that they be provided for, according to their need, by the community in which they lived.

The poor and the priests

But this did not entail free handouts to any who wished them. As we have seen, the poor generally had to work for their keep, thus retaining a measure of dignity and keeping their work habits intact. The statutes requiring landowners not to harvest all their produce – to leave grain and dropped bundles of harvest, as well as grapes on the vine and olives in the tree – allowed the poor to have something to glean and thus, through honest labor, to provide for their needs. The land, after all, belonged to the Lord, as did all the harvest He provided.

Communities were also required to care for those who ministered the Word of God. Since these men were devoted to priestly duties, they did not have the time to provide for all their needs by the work of their own hands. By various kinds of tithes and offerings, local people distributed of their wealth to care for the physical needs of those who cared for their souls. The Apostle Paul insisted that this requirement is still in force in these last days, as an aspect of justice in the Kingdom economy (1 Cor. 9:13, 14).

A local obligation

As with meeting the needs of priests, the practice of caring for the poor was a local responsibility, in the first instance, of families (Deut. 15:7, 8). Heads of households were expected to meet the needs of those who had become poor from among their brothers or sisters, even to the extent of taking poor relatives into their own homes.

At the next level, the communities in which poor people lived became involved. Distributive justice is thus, in the first instance, a responsibility of charitable initiative and local government. In the Kingdom economy of these last days, caring for the poor provides a unique opportunity for churches to demonstrate the reality and beauty of grace, and to demonstrate the power of God’s Law to express His love within a community.

Distributive justice also worked to make sure that inheritances were kept intact and could be passed on to legitimate heirs without interference or theft on the part of government. Contracts were established and wages were paid according to precepts of distributive justice. Jesus confirmed the validity of these precepts in the parable of the workers (Matt. 20.1-16). Workers and employers were expected to reach agreement on compensation, worker by worker. And employers were expected to distribute wages in a fair and timely manner. The Apostle James scolded those wealthy believers in his day who, following the practice of the world rather than of the Law of God, kept back workers' wages, thus defrauding them (Jms. 5.1-4).

Distributive justice thus completes the jewel of justice described in and commended by the Law of God. Taken together, practicing obligatory, preventive, restorative, retributive, and distributive justice encourages the flow of grace in a society so that neighbor-love will provide the prevailing social and economic motif of a society (cf. Matt. 14.12).

The five facets of justice are all addressed in the Law of God, and it's not difficult to see how, working together, the commandments, statutes, precepts, and rules of God's Law can help us in our day to see our way through to sustaining a more just, peaceable, dignified, and productive society.

But we must be very careful that we understand the role of God's Law in the Kingdom economy, and how to make proper use of it, if we are to gain the benefits the Law can provide in making grace rather than greed the defining mood of our society.

For reflection or discussion

1. What are some ways that your local community practices distributive justice? Could this be improved in any ways?
2. What dangers exist in taking distributive justice too far? Can you give some examples?
3. Suggest some ways in which Jesus Christ embodies all the various facets of justice:

Next steps – Demonstration: How should local churches work together to help meet the needs of poor people in their communities? Talk with some of your fellow church members and some of your church's leaders. What is your church presently doing in this regard? What opportunities exist for working together with other churches? How might you help?

For reflection or discussion

1. Why do we say that justice refracts the character and will of God?
2. What's the difference between obligatory justice and preventive justice?
3. What are some ways that our society might use restorative justice more effectively?
4. Explain retributive and distributive justice.
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study? How are you planning to implement that lesson in your walk with and work for the Lord?

Prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the contribute button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.