

# JUSTICE

THE LAW OF GOD AND PUBLIC POLICY: PART 3



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A REVISION STUDY FROM  
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Justice  
The Law of God and Public Policy: Part 3  
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*Justice*

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Welcome to *Justice*

Public policies are aimed at establishing justice in society. Everyone wants justice. Who would sign-up to live in an unjust society? Or vote for a candidate running on an anti-justice platform?

But what is justice? More specifically, how does God define justice? For believers can only act in public life, as in all of life, in ways consistent with the revealed will of God. And God has plenty to teach us about justice.

We do well to listen.

*ReVision* studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore  
Principal

## 1 Justice: The Goal of Public Policy

*For the word of the LORD is right,  
And all His work is done in truth.  
He loves righteousness and justice;  
The earth is full of the goodness of the LORD.* Psalm 33.4, 5

*Learn to do good;  
Seek justice...* Isaiah 1.17

*Public policy watchwords*  
Word. Right. Truth. Righteousness. Justice. Goodness.

What would this country be like if these were the watchwords of all public policymaking?

God has appointed civil government as His servant for good. When the Law of God—and all His Word—informs and shapes public policy, lawmakers will make right decisions; they will ensure that truth pervades the public square; and they will oversee a society increasingly familiar with righteousness, justice, and goodness.

Which makes the Christian's participation in matters of public policy just that much more important.

Public policies are not to be made because they favor one group over another to the advantage or aggrandizement of policymakers. Any public policy that is tainted by partiality, favoritism, whim, or catering to special interests does not conform to the requirements of God's Law and cannot expect the blessings of God. The goal of public policy is not the satisfaction of various interest groups. If we could boil all these glorious watch words down to one, my choice would be justice.

The goal of public policy is justice—based on Scripture, productive of righteousness, ensuring goodness as servants of the Lord should.

*Is justice possible?*

Can we achieve justice? Yes—at least a greater measure of justice—if we are willing to guard the policymaking process. Since justice is a function of the decisions of men, the best solution to overcoming the sinfulness and partiality inherent in the American public policy system is to elect people to office who understand and embody the principles and practices of 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 practices of lobbyists. This can help to ensure that policymakers 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- or special interest should be regarded as perversions. They should be challenged in conversations, publication, and the courts and corrected according to the terms and demands of justice.

But this assumes that the public has a taste for true justice and disdains all special-interest politics. It's clear we have a long way to go in this area as well.

And it assumes that we as believers understand the nature of justice and the many ways justice operates to

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bring goodness to a society.

### *The nature of justice*

But what is justice? In brief, justice can be seen in those policies and practices which embody the character and purpose of God. Since, as Paul insists, God is both just and One Who justifies others, justice must be intimately associated with and defined by the being and character of God (Rom. 3.26). A society is just when its laws and ways reflect the righteousness, goodness, wisdom, compassion, and honor of God.

Our text relates justice to right, truth, righteousness, and goodness. Each of these qualities, in turn, has its origin in the character of God. 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, right, truth, righteousness, goodness, and love always obtain, and evidence a Being full of glory and abounding in blessings for all who know Him.

God intends people to live in ways that reflect His own goodness and redound to His glory and honor. A government is good and a society is just to the extent it does this.

Again, achieving such justice does not bring salvation to society. But it can help to create a social and cultural environment in which the prospects are enhanced for salvation to reach many people.

How can we achieve a just society, one which reflects the very being of God? By obedience to God's Law and attendance on all His counsel and ways. We cannot expect to have just public policies if the Law of God is ignored or despised. Only people can introduce the Law of God into the public policy arenas of our society. Each believer bears a responsibility for seeking to affect public policy, as we have seen (the *loci* of public policy). We should encourage our political representatives to consider the teaching, promises, and record of the holy and righteous and good Law of God.

And we must be ready to assist policymakers by every means to make policies that are agreeable to the requirements of justice, being careful to use the *language* of public policy as we do.

But what are the requirements of justice? What does justice promise? What forms does justice take in the Law of God? As we shall see, justice is a five-faceted jewel, radiant with the promise of truth, right, righteousness, goodness, and flourishing.

### *For reflection*

1. How would you define "justice"? Can you give an example or two of a just policy current in place in our society?
2. Why must we as Christians work for "justice" defined in Biblical terms? What happens when "justice" becomes the plaything of changing social attitudes?
3. What kinds of things interfere with achieving justice in public policy? How can we use the language of public policymaking to address these things?

*Next steps—Demonstration: What can you do to make sure the people in your Personal Mission Field see the justice of God in you?*

## 2 Obligatory Justice

*Then the LORD said in His heart, "I will never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done.*

*"While the earth remains,*

*Seedtime and harvest,*

*Cold and heat,*

*Winter and summer,*

*And day and night*

*Shall not cease."* Genesis 8.21, 22

*"When you make your neighbor a loan of any sort, you shall not go into his house to collect his pledge. You shall stand outside, and the man to whom you make the loan shall bring the pledge out to you."* Deuteronomy 24.10, 11

*Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law.* Romans 13.8

### *Justice and the character of God*

We said that justice, in Biblical terms, is an expression of the very character of God. God is just; and men act justly when, in their actions, they reflect His being and attributes as revealed in His Word, beginning with His Law. When our view of justice is anchored in the character and purpose of God, we may establish public policies that are reliable and sure from one generation to the next, policies that do not favor one group or individual over another but consider all alike as unto God.

Our responsibility, in seeking to apply the Law of God to public policy, is to understand the nature of justice, as revealed in the Scriptures, and to think through the application of the ancient canons of God's Law to our contemporary situation.

### *Justice as neighbor-love*

In His covenant with the earth, God *obligated* Himself to continue His grace to His creation for as long as that creation continues. He chose to do this; He was under no compulsion to do so. But in so obligating Himself to His creation, He shows us an aspect of His character that we should reflect in the justice we seek.

The first and most basic facet of justice is *obligatory* justice. In the exercise of obligatory justice, we acknowledge in others the dignity, respect, and love they are due by virtue of their being image-bearers of God. All people bear the image of God, even though many deny or are ignorant of this. We who know God and His truth know this, and knowing this obligates us to our fellow image-bearers in certain ways.

Obligatory justice is thus foundational to all other forms of justice. Unless obligatory justice is learned and practiced, from early on in life, it will be difficult to achieve justice according to any other of the facets of a Biblical view.

Deuteronomy 24.10, 11 gives an example of obligatory justice at work. Loans were not encouraged in ancient Israel, but neither were they forbidden. God understood that people could come upon hard times, and at such times it might be necessary to borrow from one's neighbor. But coming into the debt of another person did not mean forfeiting one's integrity.

Making a loan to someone did not give the one who made the loan the right to violate the privacy or integrity of the one who was the recipient of the loan. If the terms of the loan included a pledge, the one making the loan was expected to trust the good intentions, as well as the word, of the one receiving the loan, and wait for him to bring the pledge out to him. Justice—neighbor-love—*obligated* the one making the loan to honor the

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word and property of the borrower.

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; the protections of justice; and the truth of God. 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, but to *assume* it. The institutions of society—beginning in the family and the church—must *inculcate* such love for there to be a foundation of it on which to build a just society. Much of what constitutes obligatory justice will be practiced out of a sense of gratitude to God, devotion to His Law, or common courtesy, quite apart from any statutory obligations.

### *Redress*

In ancient Israel, a man would have come under judgment who did, in fact, enter his neighbor's home and rifle through it to find the pledge his loan required, while his neighbor stood by, humiliated. Physical punishment might not have been out of the question. At the very least, the violator would have been required to put his neighbor's home back in order and to recompense him for any damage.

Every breach of obligatory justice would have to come before the judges and officials of the community for a ruling (cf. Ruth 4). We can only speculate as to how they might have corrected the injustice—the slight done to a neighbor's dignity—such an unlawful action would have incurred.

But that judges had the power to correct for failings of obligatory justice, through one or another form of restorative or retributive justice, was certainly the case, as we shall see.

Learning to do justice is not, therefore, in the first instance a role for government. It is a role for parents—and by extension, churches and schools—as they raise children to love and respect them and their siblings and to treat others as image-bearers of God. Were the practice of obligatory justice, understood in terms of neighbor-love, more faithfully taught the children of the land, ours would be a society more given to justice in all its forms.

### *For reflection*

1. How would you like people to be “obligated” to treat you? What does this suggest about how you should treat them?
2. Why must obligatory justice—the sense of what we owe others, rather than what we think we are due from others—provide the foundation for all other justice?
3. In your experience, where have you learned about the Biblical principles of obligatory justice? Where might you teach them to others?

*Next steps—Demonstration: Make a list of five things you would like others to do for you today. Then go and do those five things, as often as you can, for others.*



### 3 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

*“Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.”* Genesis 11.7

#### *Learning justice at home*

The Biblical view of justice is a jewel of five facets. The first of these, obligatory justice, relates to what we owe our neighbors in the way of love and respect as fellow image-bearers of God. Obligatory justice must be learned at home, not first in the courts and legislatures of the land. And unless we learn obligatory justice at home—and church and school—we shall be unable to achieve much more in the way of justice in other sectors of society.

It might surprise us how quick children can be to grasp the wisdom, beauty, and justice of the Law of God. Not long ago, I was reading from the Law to three of our grandchildren. The passage we were discussing was Deuteronomy 22.8: “When you build a new house, then you shall make a parapet for your roof, that you may not bring guilt of bloodshed on your household if anyone falls from it.” I asked Reagan to consider whether, because we did not have a railing around our roof—though we had not built this house—we were in violation of the Law. She quickly answered, “No, no one ever goes up there.” Then I asked, “But what if I put a swimming pool in my back yard.” She replied, “Then you would need to put a fence around it, so that no one fell in accidentally.”

We were conversing about *preventive* justice, those actions we take with forethought to care for the wellbeing of our neighbors. It was by an act of preventive justice that God confused the languages of the people and scattered them throughout the earth, thus decreasing the likelihood of their committing greater injustice than they already had (cf. Acts 17.22-28).

#### *Thinking ahead*

The second facet of the jewel of justice as revealed in the Law of God is preventive justice. God instructed His people to take precautions in certain of their activities so that they did not jeopardize the property or wellbeing of their neighbors. They were expected to *prevent injustice* by thinking ahead and taking actions appropriate to ensure that neighbor love would not be interrupted or compromised.

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).

Public policy should provide laws and statutes that help to ensure that people will always keep the interests and wellbeing of their neighbors in mind. People cannot be permitted to undertake endeavors which have the potential to 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.

These various statutes serve primarily to remind people to consider the interests and wellbeing of their neighbor to prevent any injustice arising from negligence or indifference. As with obligatory justice,

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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 today*

In the community where Susie and I used to live, we were required by our neighborhood association to remove the snow from our sidewalks within 48 hours. This was to protect the safety and ensure the wellbeing of delivery persons and neighbors who may be out on a stroll. There was no penalty for not removing the snow. However, if we did not remove it, and someone was injured or could show that he had been unduly inconvenienced by our neglect, he may have had grounds to collect damages from us.

The neighborly thing to do was to keep the sidewalks clean in front of our homes and thus bear witness to all who may enter our neighborhoods that here we love our neighbors as ourselves.

Further, in that same neighborhood the members of the community covenanted together not to use certain kinds of chemical fertilizers on our lawns, as our drainage and runoff ultimately found its way into the Chesapeake Bay. This was not a statute of our town but simply an agreement in our neighborhood covenant, so that we would be doing our part to prevent injustice to the environment.

The community in which our neighborhood was located depended for its water on seven wells. To ensure that our water was as good as it could be, a local statute prohibited the use of certain kinds of fertilizers or other outdoor chemical treatments. During summer months, signs would appear in various places in the community advising us that the town council had determined that “Voluntary Water Usage Restrictions” were in effect. The policy of our elected officials was to discourage neighbors from committing injustice against one another by failing to exercise appropriate regard for the water supply.

### *Welcome statutes*

Such policies and statutes reflect the preventive justice facet of God’s Law, and are to be welcomed, not begrudged. While it is possible to go overboard on such matters—ask any small businessperson who must conform to certain OSHA regulations—we still require such laws to keep us thinking about our neighbors and working to maintain justice within our communities.

Cut back your bushes if they block a driver’s view of traffic. Keep you dogs from roaming free and possibly harming a neighbor or a neighbor’s property or pets. Follow the speed limits and other rules of the road. Don’t leave your toys—especially Legos™—lying about in walkways.

These are all welcome rules and statutes, and they demonstrate the importance of understanding preventive justice, the second facet of the five-faceted jewel of Biblical justice.

### *For reflection*

1. How do “rules of the road” work as forms of preventive justice?
2. Preventive justice takes forethought, and forethought is a form of neighbor-love. Explain.
3. In your experience, where have you learned about the Biblical principles of preventive justice? Where might you teach them to others?

*Next steps—Demonstration: Pay attention throughout the day for examples of preventive justice at work in your community. At the end of the day, thank God that He has written such laws on the hearts of people (Rom. 2.14, 15).*

## 4 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

They desired *only that we should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do.* Galatians 2.10

*For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat.* 2 Thessalonians 3.10

### *Justice and love*

Justice reflects the being and character of God. It is a gem with five facets. Each facet lends color to all the others, and each blends with the others to create a gem radiant as God Himself.

Justice defines God’s will for how human beings can live together in society based on mutual love and respect. Justice, as explained in the Scriptures, is a source of wisdom, comity, peace, respect, and wellbeing in any society. It has no saving merit; however, it can be a powerful means for spreading the grace of God throughout a community or nation and for providing the kind of social soil in which the Gospel can flourish.

The Law of God outlines the demands and promises of justice and represents justice as taking various forms, among these *obligatory* and *preventive* justice. We have already seen that people and societies tend to recognize the validity of these forms of justice and establish covenants, rules, statutes, and common-sense practices to make sure these forms of justice are working among them.

But how does a just society relate to those in its midst who are not flourishing, but rather, are barely able to contribute to the wellbeing of the community because of their being poor? What does justice for the poor entail, according to the Law of God?

### *The Scriptures and the poor*

The Bible does not teach a *preference* for the poor, as though merely being poor were some virtue in itself. Indeed, some may be poor because they are simply unwilling to work (Prov. 29.7). The apostle Paul explained that such people deserve the fruit of their lethargy and are not to be cared for by the community. All who are able are expected to work, not just so that they can provide for themselves, but so that they may have wealth and possessions to share with those who are truly in need (Eph. 4.28). This is true of the poor as well, as we shall see in subsequent installments.

Thus we see in the New Testament, in the Kingdom of God, the embrace and continuation of the third facet of Biblical justice, *distributive* justice that is, recognition of and concern for the poor and others in need. Distributive justice derives from our *obligation* to love our neighbors and serves to *prevent* injustice against those who are in need. Thus, with *distributive* justice—a third facet of the gem of God’s Law—we begin to see how the entire Law works together to bring the beauty of justice to a community or nation.

The Old Testament 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 trees—allowed the poor in Israel 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 regularly provided.

It is the responsibility of the people in a local community to distribute freely of their goods to those who are in need among them. Whether such people have become poor through some unforeseeable exigency or emergency, or are proper immigrants or disabled, or otherwise poor through no fault of their own, justice requires that they be provided for, according to their need, by the community in which they live. Local

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communities recognize this responsibility and typically offer a variety of ways to meet this need—second-hand shops, food kitchens and stores, charitable contributions, and so forth. Christians and churches have, to their credit, been among the most consistent in creating and supporting such efforts.

### *Beyond the poor*

The practice of caring for the poor was the responsibility of families (Deut. 15.7, 8), in the first instance, and of the communities in which poor people lived. Distributive justice is thus a concern of local government.

Distributive justice intersects with obligatory justice in various ways. We can see this with respect to religious workers. Priests and Levites, who did not own property in ancient Israel, and whose working life was devoted not to creating material wealth but to nurturing spiritual health and wellbeing, did not have the time to provide for their own needs. This was the responsibility of the community served by such people, through their tithes and offerings.

The apostle Paul applied this statute to a church's responsibility to provide for its pastor (1 Cor. 9. 13, 14). He quoted "the law of Moses" to chasten the people who had failed in their obligation to support him (1 Cor. 9.8-11; cf. Deut. 25.4). In Galatians 6 he broadened this application: "Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches" (Gal. 6.6). And in Romans 15.27, citing the financial gifts of Greek Christians to the suffering believers in Judea: "It pleased them indeed, and they are their debtors. For if the Gentiles have been partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister to them in material things."

In ancient Israel, distributive justice also worked to make sure that inheritances were kept intact and could be passed on to legitimate heirs without interference or loss. Government intervention to seize part of one's inheritance was unthinkable.

The timely payment of wages also falls under this facet of Biblical justice. Workers and employers were expected to reach agreement on compensation, worker by worker. And employers were required to distribute those wages in a fair and timely manner. The apostle James invoked the Old Testament Law—a combining of its obligatory and distributive facets—against those believers who were not adhering to it: "Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth" (Jms. 5.4; cf. Lev. 19.13).

It is important to remember that the various facets of God's Law are not separate but overlapping, interconnecting, and mutually reinforcing. We see this clearly in the matter of distributive justice. This makes the Law a strong resource for establishing public policies that reflect the goodness, fairness, righteousness, truth, and justice of God.

### *For reflection*

1. How would you explain distributive justice to a fellow believer?
2. How can we see the various facets of justice beginning to overlap and interconnect in distributive justice?
3. How can you see, in your own community, that the sense of distributive justice is active?

*Next steps—Preparation: What Christian entities exist in your community for helping the poor? How are they supported? Does your church support any of these? How can such entities help you in fulfilling your commitment to distributive justice?*

## 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

*“So I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten,  
The crawling locust,  
The consuming locust,  
And the chewing locust,  
My great army which I sent among you.  
You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,  
And praise the name of the LORD your God,  
Who has dealt wondrously with you...”* Joel 2.25, 26

*Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold.” And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham...”* Luke 19.8, 9

*God, justice, love*

This statute in Exodus 21.35, 36 reflects both the character of God, Who works to restore goodness to His world, and the fourth facet of the Biblical teaching on justice, *restorative* justice. When injustice has occurred, and some loss has been experienced by the person wronged, whoever is responsible for that injustice must be held responsible for setting things right again.

We’ve seen thus far that justice reflects the character of God in human society. Justice is love in a variety of forms, beginning with *obligatory* justice, or, what we owe one another in terms of love simply because we are all beings made in the image of God. Beyond that, justice requires careful forethought in certain actions, lest those actions upset the balance of justice and bring harm to our neighbor or his property. We call this facet of the jewel of justice *preventive* justice. In *distributive* justice neighbor-love leads us to share of our wealth and possessions with those in need, whether poor, clergy, workers, or heirs.

In *restorative* justice, the fourth facet of justice, actions are taken, under the direction of proper officials, to restore the balance of justice occasioned by some failure of neighbor-love. Let’s look more closely.

*Three facets in one*

The statute cited above shows how the practice of restorative justice was nuanced to encourage both obligatory and 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. Since we *owe* our neighbors due respect for their property, we should take whatever *preventive* measures as will keep us from bringing injustice against them.

However, if the goring ox was known to do this, and the owner did not keep it in—did not honor the requirements of obligatory and preventive justice—then a greater injustice would have been committed requiring a greater act of *restoration*. 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.

People who are responsible for damage to the persons or property of their neighbors cannot simply be excused, whether for political or personal reasons. When injustice is committed, justice requires restoration at

the very least.

*The beauty of restoration*

There is true beauty in the *restorative* practice of justice. Whenever someone was injured by the neglect, indifference, or ill intentions of a neighbor, restoration was required to right the balance of love in 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); the restoration of borrowed things that become broken or lost (Ex. 22.14, 15); or even lost items that one might find (Deut. 22.1-4).

Jesus affirmed the restorative character of justice and all the Law of God as being entirely consistent with the promises made to Abraham as well as with being saved. Zacchaeus, under conviction by the character of Jesus and His kindly disposition toward a measly taxman, repented of the ill he had done and resolved to make things right with his neighbors. He was not even sure that he had done anything wrong, but he resolved that, if he had, he would restore it to his neighbors fourfold. Here he was putting himself under Leviticus 22.1 and Leviticus 6.5, which clearly spell out the duty to restore plus some whatever was taken falsely from another.

And notice Jesus' response: "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham..." Jesus saw true faith at work here. Zacchaeus was not earning his salvation by keeping the Law. He was demonstrating it, showing that he was a true child of Abraham whose righteousness was connected to his faith.

Justice is so important because it reflects the character and Presence of God within a community. Public policies should exist which promote the practice of restorative justice according to the spirit and not merely—or even primarily—the letter of the Law of God. The implementation of such policies in the public arena begins in individual believers and their believing communities, who understand that the promises of God, which are all "Yes" and "Amen" in Jesus, are expressed in obedience to the Law of God.

Restorative justice will either be grossly overused or simply ignored unless it is embodied in the people who know their God and take justice seriously.

*For reflection*

1. What is restorative justice and when is it necessary?
2. Sins that demand restorative justice include gossip, backbiting, false accusations, and fraud. Explain.
3. How can you see, in your own community, that the sense of restorative justice is active?

*Next steps—Preparation: Of course, forms of restorative justice already operate in the law of the land. Can you think of some examples? Can you think of examples where restorative justice is ignored, say, for political reasons?*

## 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*

*“Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny.” Matthew 5.25, 26*

### *The jewel of justice*

We have seen that justice is a jewel of many facets. In its *obligatory* facet, justice requires that we love our neighbors simply because they are made in the image of God. We must regard them, and do with them, as we wish to be regarded and done with ourselves. In its *preventive* facet, justice demands that we use forethought in all our actions to make sure, as far as possible, that our neighbor or his property is not injured by what we do. *Distributive* justice encourages us to share generously with our neighbors and others in need. *Restorative* justice comes into play when the balance of neighbor love has become disturbed and the one guilty of disturbing it is required to set things right again.

Each of these forms of justice, grounded in the Law of God, is very much a part of life in our society today. It is simply mindless or prejudicial to insist that we should have no input from Scripture or the Law of God, either in the public square or in the making of public policy. Our nation was founded on Biblical principles of justice, and to deny this is to rewrite history past and to put in jeopardy history to come.

But if those principles are to remain and be reinforced, we who know and love them must be active in seeking to shape public policy according to its proper logic, in all available loci, and with the language of prayer, grace, and truth.

And this includes even when justice requires punishment to set the scales right.

### *Justice as punishment*

When the peace of justice is intentionally or maliciously violated, the final facet of justice—*retributive* justice—is 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, are punished in ways appropriate to the offense. The pain of punishment is directed toward the heart of the offender, to discourage any future such acts, and to the community, to instill fear of transgressing against their neighbors’ peace.

Punishment. Fear. To some of us, that may not sound very “Christian.” But they are Biblical ideas, and if our Christianity is based on Scripture, we will see the value of these as aspects of this final facet of justice.

Jesus affirmed the legitimacy of retribution when He warned those who have offended to do whatever they could to avoid punishment by civil magistrates. Paul did as well by warning that governments “bear the sword” against evil—a clear reference to punishment (Rom. 13.4, 5). In ancient Israel retribution could include restoration or payment in kind (two oxen for one stolen), recompense in money or other goods, or even by 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.

Retribution was reserved for crimes so malicious and heinous that the perpetrator must be severely rebuked

## *Justice*

and the community warned against committing any similar transgressions.

Thus it is clear that one purpose of the use of retribution, besides setting the balance of justice to right again, was to convict the hearts of the entire community, to remind everyone of the high value God places on the practice of neighbor-love: “So all Israel shall hear and fear, and not again do such wickedness as this among you” (Deut. 13.11). “And all the people shall hear and fear, and no longer act presumptuously” (Deut. 17.13).

### *Ruling on matters of justice*

It is important to notice one thing more about the text cited at the beginning of this study. Whenever a complaint of injustice was lodged, a case would be brought “before God.” What 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 were not actions taken merely for the sake of revenge or partisan interest; the honor, Presence, and truth of God were at stake whenever injustice was present. God Himself must be vindicated, and He entrusted this duty to public servants, that they might do what was 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. Public *policy* should reflect a determination to “wield the sword” against all evil, so that transgressors will be punished, victims will be relieved, and people will fear to violate the bounds of justice and instead will train their hearts to do what is right and good.

We may not like the idea of retribution as part of the process of maintaining justice. However, God Himself will exercise retribution against all who willfully sin against Him and refuse to repent. Since retribution is part of the very character and will of God, we must not fear to include it in our work of public policymaking.

Thus five facets of justice are presented in the Law of God, and we shall 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 before we go there, we need to see how God has taken His norm for justice seriously in the extreme, and what this means for us as the beneficiaries of His justice.

### *For reflection*

1. Increasingly, the idea of retribution as part of the justice process is looked at askance. Why do you think this is so?
2. Have you ever experienced retribution? Ever had to be punished for a willful transgression? Was it helpful?
3. It makes sense that, since governments are empowered to bear the sword against evildoers, we should fear doing evil. Why is fear a necessary component of justice?

*Next steps—Preparation: What are some crimes that our society deems worthy of retribution? What forms does that retribution take?*



## 7 Justice and Redemption

*But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; or all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Romans 3.21-26*

### *Justice and redemption*

As God is just, it is His nature to pursue justice and to desire it for His creatures. We have been arguing that the Law of God reveals the justice of God in at least five ways. At the same time, we have insisted that keeping the Law does not justify or save anyone. The best that sinful people can realize from public policies based on the Law of God is a measure of peace, safety, decency, and abundance that characterizes a good society.

But God is not content with this. He wants people to be saved, and standing in the way of our being saved is our inability to satisfy the demands of God's justice. Indeed, as can be readily observed in myriad ways, sinful people, rather than embrace justice will distort, ignore, flout, or deny it if it suits their ends to do so. We may—and should—work to realize public policies that match up with the character of God, as revealed in His Law and all His Word. But such policies are no guarantee that we will achieve some form of utopia. There will always be people—and we will frequently find ourselves among them—who prefer their own views, ideas, and goals to those of the Lord.

For true justice to be realized, God must act. He is just, as Paul explained. But He is also the Justifier of all who have faith in Jesus. All who believe in Jesus Christ are declared righteous—just: the word is the same in Greek—in Him. Declared, but not actually. All who are declared to be justified—the result of redemption and faith—begin a life of increasing righteousness and justice. All who are thus justified will, in an infinite debt of gratitude and out of a heart overflowing with love, work out their salvation for increasing justice and righteousness (Phil. 2.13; 2 Cor. 3.12-18).

Thus, while God has established the Law as our moral compass (Rom. 3.31; 7.12), we understand that the Law can do only so much to bring justice to the world. For justice to flourish, people must be justified; and only God can justify them. He does this through the Gospel, as we bear witness to the work of Jesus in fulfilling all righteousness so that we might be made righteous and just in Him (2 Cor. 5.21).

And it is with this in mind that we take up the calling of justice as part of our Kingdom lifestyle.

### *Streaming up?*

Micah 4.1-8 is a passage of such great importance that it was also preached by his contemporary, Isaiah (cf. Is. 2.1-4). To encourage us in the practice and pursuit of justice, let's take a closer look.

*Now it shall come to pass in the latter days...* That is, the days, according to Peter, in which the Spirit has been poured out, the Gospel is going forward, and the Kingdom is coming on earth as it is in heaven (cf. Acts 2.14-17).

*That the mountain of the LORD's house  
Shall be established on the top of the mountains,  
And shall be exalted above the hills...*

The "LORD's house"—which we are—will be highly exalted, visible, influential, admired, and even feared (cf.

Ps. 48.1-7) in the last days.

*And peoples shall flow to it.  
Many nations shall come and say,  
“Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
To the house of the God of Jacob;  
He will teach us His ways,  
And we shall walk in His paths.”*

People from every nation and tribe will be drawn to the LORD’s house, like an unending flow uphill—contrary to natural expectations—with an eager desire to learn the ways of God so that they might “walk in His paths.”

This is an extraordinary vision, but it matches many of the other visions of the coming of God’s Kingdom which we find in the Old and New Testaments. Think only of the parables of Jesus: of the mustard seed, the wheat and the tares, the leaven in the loaf, and more. What Micah and Isaiah foresaw has happened before in human history, in periods when churches were a place to which people flocked as unto a Good Shepherd. There is no reason to think it cannot happen again.

But why does this happen? How can it be so?

*For out of Zion the law shall go forth,  
And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.*

The Law of God, lived out by the people of God and accompanied by the proclamation of Good News in Jesus Christ, becomes the catalyzing agent for many people to find their way to the Lord and His redemption. When God’s people are faithful in living according to God’s Law, proclaiming justification in Jesus Christ, and working to bring the righteousness, holiness, and goodness of God’s Law to their communities, people will see, and people will respond.

*For a good society*

We do not expect our obedience to the Law and our working for public policies based on that Law to bring salvation to our world. But we do expect our good works to be so consistently seen, and ourselves to be so persuasive in working for good public policies, that people will know the grace of God as the Law works its way, like leaven, into the loaf of the public square (Ps. 66.1-3; 81.15)—that is, as we who are justified and understand the nature of justice, by our holy and righteous and good lives and our patient persuasion, work to bring the goodness of God to light in the land of the living through policies and practices based on the Law of God (Ps. 27.13, 14).

We can have a good society without everyone being saved. But we cannot have a good society unless those who *are* saved go forth with the Word of God, living and speaking it into every aspect of life.

*For reflection*

1. How is the Gospel related to justice?
2. Righteousness and justice are the same word in Paul’s mind. What are the implications of this for your walk with and work for the Lord?
3. Keeping the Law will save no one. But living in a society based on principles from God’s Law can provide fertile soil for the Gospel to save many. Why is this so?

*Next steps—Preparation: To what extent does your vision of the Christian life match up with Micah’s? How might you enlarge your vision to be more like his?*

*Justice*

*For reflection or discussion*

1. Why do we say that justice expresses the character of God?
2. Summarize the five “facets” of Biblical justice?
3. How can you see any of these facets currently at work in our society?
4. The Law, and public policies based on the Law, will save no one. Does that mean that working for public policies more in line with God’s Law is a waste of time? Explain.
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this part of our study in “The Law of God and Public Policy”?

*For prayer:*

## The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.