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Making Peace with a God of Vengeance

Abstract

"We cannot ignore our avenging God; we must make peace with Him, and He has come to bring us a message of peace and reconciliation in His Son."

Posting about God's justice and the world's justice from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Donald Roth

God, as He reveals Himself in the Old Testament, can feel alien to us at times. The injustice of fallen human institutions can cause us to recoil in shame and disgust. The tyranny of rulers can cause us to reject the legitimacy of the use of force, and the ease with which human anger exceeds proper bounds can cause us to reject the emotion altogether. Indeed, many Christians run in this direction, taking up political theories rooted in philosophers like Rene Girard, who saw the New Testament as completing the separation of the sacred from the violent that still plagues the Old Testament. Ultimately, there is a move among many Christians to embrace the mercy and grace reflected in restorative justice while rejecting or minimizing the importance of punishment and retributive notions of justice.

However, if our response to the very real injustices of today is to delegitimize retribution, to remember the astounding mercy of God outside of the confines of the depth of our sin and misery, we run the risk of refusing to truly encounter the God of the Bible. If our ethic is built on the social injustice of Jesus' execution, we abandon the theological reality of why He submitted to such a death in the first place.

The Wages of Sin

From the very beginning, the price of humanity's rebellion against God was the death penalty.¹ Our God is a holy God, and He set up a good and holy creation, ordaining it to be ruled by His created representatives: the sun and moon over light, and mankind over life.² When Adam sinned, he brought corruption into perfection. Charged with God's own authority in the dominion he held over living things, Adam failed to reflect the holiness of the God he imaged. Just as when any representative fundamentally misuses

their power, justice requires that that power be stripped away. Instead, God chose to delay that justice, even though it put all of creation into a state of tension, so that rather than unmaking humanity He might enter His creation and, in so doing, redeem it.

Now, I would expect that most Christians would be in accord with what is essentially a summary of the gospel promise, but this summary contains several crucial points that we can too easily overlook. First, in setting Israel apart, we know that God set up a religious system meant to mirror heavenly realities.³ While we rightly don't consider the judicial structure set up for Israel as directly applicable today, the myriad of capital crimes included in the Old Testament make it hard to miss the lesson: our God is Holy, and He cannot tolerate corruption. The entire sacrificial system was meant to highlight the fact that humanity deserved death for their sins. Someone would have to pay for them.

This brings us to the central issue here: the hand that passed judgment on Jesus was God's, not the Roman government; and it was our sin, not iron nails, that held Him there. The point of the crucifixion was not the injustice of death but its justice. The substitution of Christ as atonement for our sins is part of the very bedrock of the protestant recovery of Augustinian, biblical Christianity.

The consequences of this are significant: they mean that the God that we serve remains a consuming fire, and the wages of sin are still death. In the last day, all those who do not cling to Christ in fact still face the eternal death penalty. Yes, death is an enemy of humanity because we were not made for it, but we wed ourselves to it. Our God is holy, and He is just. He is not a God who is deaf to Abel's blood crying out from the earth. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

Provisional Authority and Broken Mirrors

So what are the implications of what I have said so far? Well, if we ended on a quote from Romans 12, we can progress naturally on to Romans 13, the famous passage which speaks of the government "bearing the sword." The thing is, while Romans 12 calls Christians to personally surrender their desire to seek vengeance, this is not because the desire for vindication is ungodly. Instead, Christians are called to patience and forbearance considering the gospel, trusting God to vindicate His own name and that of His people.

However, this vindication is not reserved solely for the end of days; Romans 13 explicitly refers to the government as serving as God's "minister of vengeance," charged with vindicating the victimized and punishing the evildoer in this age. As ministers, the governing authorities are meant to both deliver God's justice and to reflect the Author

of justice in how they go about doing so. The sword-arm of the government is a reflection of God's wrath, a facet of God's justice that very much includes the potential for the death penalty—even if God Himself restrained His hand from this judgment at times (cf. Genesis 4).

This may all sound a bit fire-and-brimstone. Sure, God is a God of justice, even vengeance, perhaps, but we are sinful people. We get things wrong. Do we really want a corrupt government wielding the sword?

The thing that the Bible pushes us face to face with, however, is that Paul is speaking in the context of a Roman government far more corrupt than the administration of justice that we see in America today. God uses even weak vessels to achieve His purposes—whether that be Pharaoh or Babylon, Nero or American courts. Even these broken mirrors reflect His justice, so beyond a question of whether we *can* seek justice in a broken system, we know that God *does* accomplish it, however provisionally or partially.

Application and Conclusion

Where does this leave us? Firstly, this does not mean that I think that we should uncritically embrace retribution and the death penalty. As much as God uses Babylon to achieve His justice, He *judges her* for the ways that she fails to do justice and the malicious purposes that Babylon sought to achieve. So too, we should not give the American criminal justice system a pass where it executes innocent people or where it serves as an instrument of oppression, not justice.

Sadly, in this polarized age, supporters of the death penalty feel pressure to turn a blind eye to legitimate questions about the practice, and opponents can find themselves inclined to view everyone on death row as a victim, turning a too credulous ear to sob stories of innocence and administrative malfeasance. Neither inclination is healthy.

The death penalty is rightly reserved for only the most heinous of cases, and it should be applied only where it meets the highest measure of what the justice system can be. It should be a model of how the system *should* work, with utmost regard for both the pursuit of truth and respect for the rights of all parties. Where that standard is not met, it should be rightly criticized.

At the same time, when the perpetrator of a heinous crime is executed, Christians should not treat this as an injustice. God may take no delight in the death of the wicked, but He will still carry out the judgment that the wicked bring upon themselves.⁴ Even though we repent, we still face the first death, fulfilling the judgment God rendered in the Garden.

This brings us full circle: although there are many problems with our current justice system that Christians should rightly stand up against, the God who we encounter in Scripture is a God of justice, a God whose justice includes retribution and punishment, and a God who works that justice out even through fallen and corrupt people. We cannot ignore our avenging God; we must make peace with Him, and He has come to bring us a message of peace and reconciliation in His Son. In embracing the latter, we should not cast out the former.

FOOTNOTES

1. **Gen 2: 16-17**“And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.’”
2. This is a theme picked up on by the Apostle John, who characterizes Jesus as Lord of light and life in his gospel, even noting in the last days that the New Jerusalem would have no need of a sun or temple because the incarnate God now dwells with His people. **Revelation 21: 22-27**
3. **Hebrews 8**
4. cf. **Ezekiel 18**