

"In Pursuit of Justice"

Series: "Lessons for Living: A Christian Walk through the Torah"

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47 Shoftim | שופטים | "*Judges*" Torah: Deuteronomy 16:18-21:9



Approximately 2750 years ago, the Jewish Prophet Micah restated Torah principles when he told his audience how to live. He tells them and us God's will for men on earth. "He has shown you oh man what is good, and what does the Lord require of thee, but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8) At Mount Sinai God called the Jewish people to be holy and set apart. They were to work in partnership with God creating justice for all in this new Promised Land. The Israelites are now sitting on the banks of the Jordan looking over into the Promised Land. In this portion God tells them to appoint judges and police officers so that

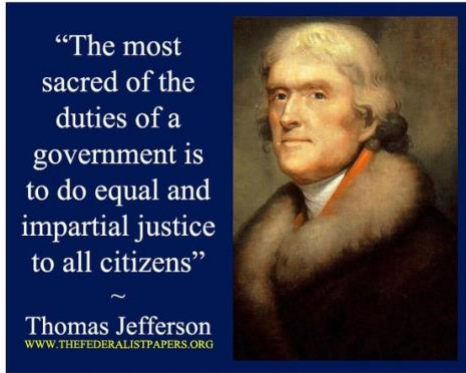
they'll be able to administer justice when they've crossed over into the land. The entire portion deals with judges, officers, legal decisions, limits on royal authority, cities of refuge (for involuntary manslaughter), laws concerning witnesses, rules of warfare, and pre-meditated murder. Why is justice so near to the heart of God? What is justice and how do we pursue justice in society as well as in our individual lives? Open your Bibles this morning to Deuteronomy 16:18 and let's read through verse 20.

- 18 "You shall appoint for yourself judges and officers in all your towns which the LORD your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment.
- 19 "You shall not distort justice; you shall not be partial, and you shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous.
- 20 "Justice, *and only* justice, you shall pursue, that you may live and possess the land which the LORD your God is giving you.¹

God's final words in this brief introduction are "*Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof* – which we have rendered in English to be "Justice, justice you shall pursue, that you may live, and inherit the land which the Lord your God gave you." (Deuteronomy 16:18)."

¹ *New American Standard Bible: 1995 update.* (1995). (Dt 16:18–20). LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

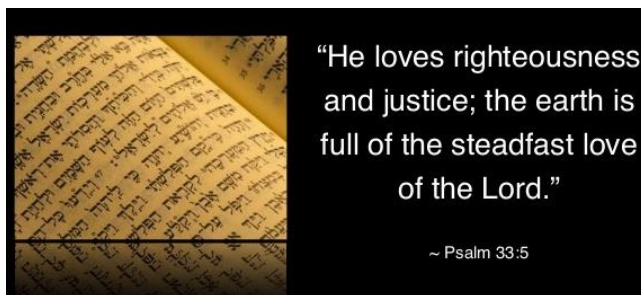
The text demands that “You shall not distort justice; you shall not be partial, and you shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous.” God is saying that a real judge, a godly judge must not be partial. We often call that "blind justice" A judge must not give face *panayim* one over another. In today's context this would mean that a righteous judge must not give preference to one in front of him that he or she might know. If a judge is close friends for example with one of the two attorneys presenting a dispute before him, that judge must not favor the friend. If he or she does, they are in violation of God's order of justice.



Furthermore, the judge must not allow himself or herself to be "bought off" by not only money, but by anything (campaign support, status, familiarity, friendship) in such a way to rule in favor of the person providing something of value (often not material things) to that judge. If that judge favors the one he or she knows, that judge rules in a distorted way. It is unjust and unrighteous in God's eyes. The last part of the verse tells us the problem. ANY influence will cause that judge to be **blinded** in wisdom and **perveted** in their

words. It will color the outcome and will be prejudicial denying true justice.

We now get to verse 20 which says in English "Justice Justice you shall pursue, so that you might dwell in the land. This is where English translations fail the reader. "Justice" is phrased with differing words in Hebrew. This is why it is so important to understand just a little bit of Hebrew. It is the language that God created and that He used to express what He wants to say. We struggle with English because it is a new language and we lose much when we fail to look at the underlying text. I do not want to make this a grammar lesson, but I want to explain a little of what I'm talking about so that you and I might be able to better understand what God expects of society and each of us concerning "justice".



The word "justice" occurs in the Old Testament many more times than in the New Testament. However, there are two Hebrew words that are translated as "justice" but they actually have slightly different meanings. One word is *mishpat* which means a "judgment". In other

words, it is a judgment like a decision or a verdict in a courtroom. However the other word used in Hebrew that is translated in English as "justice" is the word *tzedek*. You know this word for example in the name "Melchizedek" which means *melek tzedek* or "Righteous King". Some of the older folks in here will remember the Jewish singer named Neil Sedaka whose name also meant "righteous". So you might be wondering at this point why this word study matters.

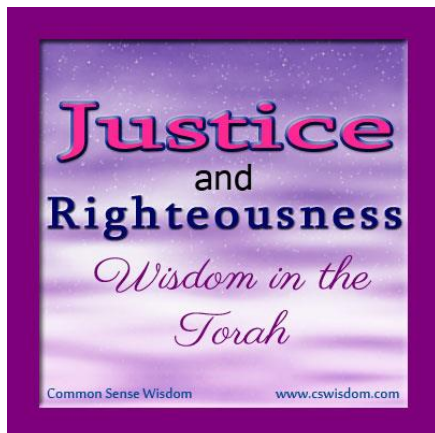
I believe it matters because real justice cannot be achieved without righteousness. They fit together like a hand in a glove. In fact when Moses sums it all up in verse twenty what he is really saying in Hebrew is, "**RIGHTEOUSNESS RIGHTEOUSNESS PURSUE IT!**" He explains that the society to be established there in the Promised Land must have this component "that you may live and possess the land which the LORD your God is giving you." So what does this really look like and how do we achieve it.



My father used to tell me that "justice had little to do with what goes on in a courtroom". He told me that "Justice" in the Greek sense simply means "doing right by others". Jesus boiled it down for us in what my generation and generations before me called THE GOLDEN RULE. Unfortunately most of the young people hearing this sermon this morning have never even

heard of the Golden Rule. In the Gospel of Luke Chapter 6, Jesus gave a powerful sermon that we now call "The Sermon on the Mount". In the sermon He said, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." (Luke 6:31) Maybe it's easier to understand it as it's translated in the NASB, "³¹Treat others the same way you want them to treat you." This is not a suggestion. These are the words of Jesus instructing us how to live. Wouldn't the current world be a better place if folks would just listen to what Jesus says and do it?

In these passages in the New Testament we don't of course have those Hebrew words, but the words *dikaos* and *dikaosune* are used. Once again, just like in Hebrew, these two words end up being translated as either justice or righteous. So in the same Sermon on the Mount, Jesus could be saying, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness & justice, for they will be filled.*" "*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of justice & righteousness for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" So what is God trying to tell us through these seemingly confusing dual translations of words? How do we apply this to our lives?



I think that when understood fully, *righteousness* and *justice* mean something very similar. If we are living "right by others" (as my father explained the meaning of justice) that will lead us to the pursuit of real justice. The pursuit of justice must be accompanied by righteous living and by righteousness, or justice cannot exist. They both are reflective of the character of God, and they are both dependent on each other. Jesus has come to make us righteous before God (2 Cor 2:15), and Jesus has come to call us to righteous living. Jesus has come to satisfy the justice of God, and Jesus has come to call us to do our part in trying our best to bring

about a just society. As I said before the two go hand in hand.³ So how do we summarize all of this Torah portion this morning? How do we apply it to our lives?

- 1 Realize **Good** and **Evil** exist in the world. (Romans 12:21)
- 2 Civil authority is established by **God**. Start with the presumption that civil authority (judges, police, etc) are on the side of **good**.
- 3 If civil authority deviates from the side of good we must each do our part to hold civil authority **accountable**. This means we vote and/or speak out against bad government. Wrong-doing would include: partiality in courts, police brutality, bribes, etc
- 4 Understand that just because there are **two sides** to a civil conflict it **doesn't necessarily mean** there is a **good** side and a **bad** side. They both may be bad (ex. Nazism, KKK, and Antifa/Anarchists) as we saw in Charlottesville, Virginia last week.
- 5 Anarchists recognize no legitimate civil authority. Hence they are **anti-Torah; they are anti God**. (ex. Antifa espouses communistic ideals that have historically proven to deprive citizenry of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.) Anarchists never spell out what system would replace what they protest against.
- 6 **Practice Justice and Righteousness in your own life. Do right** by others. **Obey the 10 Commandments**. Practice the **Golden Rule**: Treat others like you want to be treated. In doing so, you'll come very near to the heart of God.

Remember the words of Micah the Prophet? He has shown you oh man what is good, and what does the Lord require of you? To **do justice**, to **love mercy**, and to **walk humbly** with your God." It can all be summed up by what we read in the Gospel account of St. Matthew:



Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

— [Matthew 22:35-40](#)

Let us Pray

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³ <https://pastordanielhill.com/2014/08/12/the-biblical-confusion-between-the-words-justice-and-righteousness/>